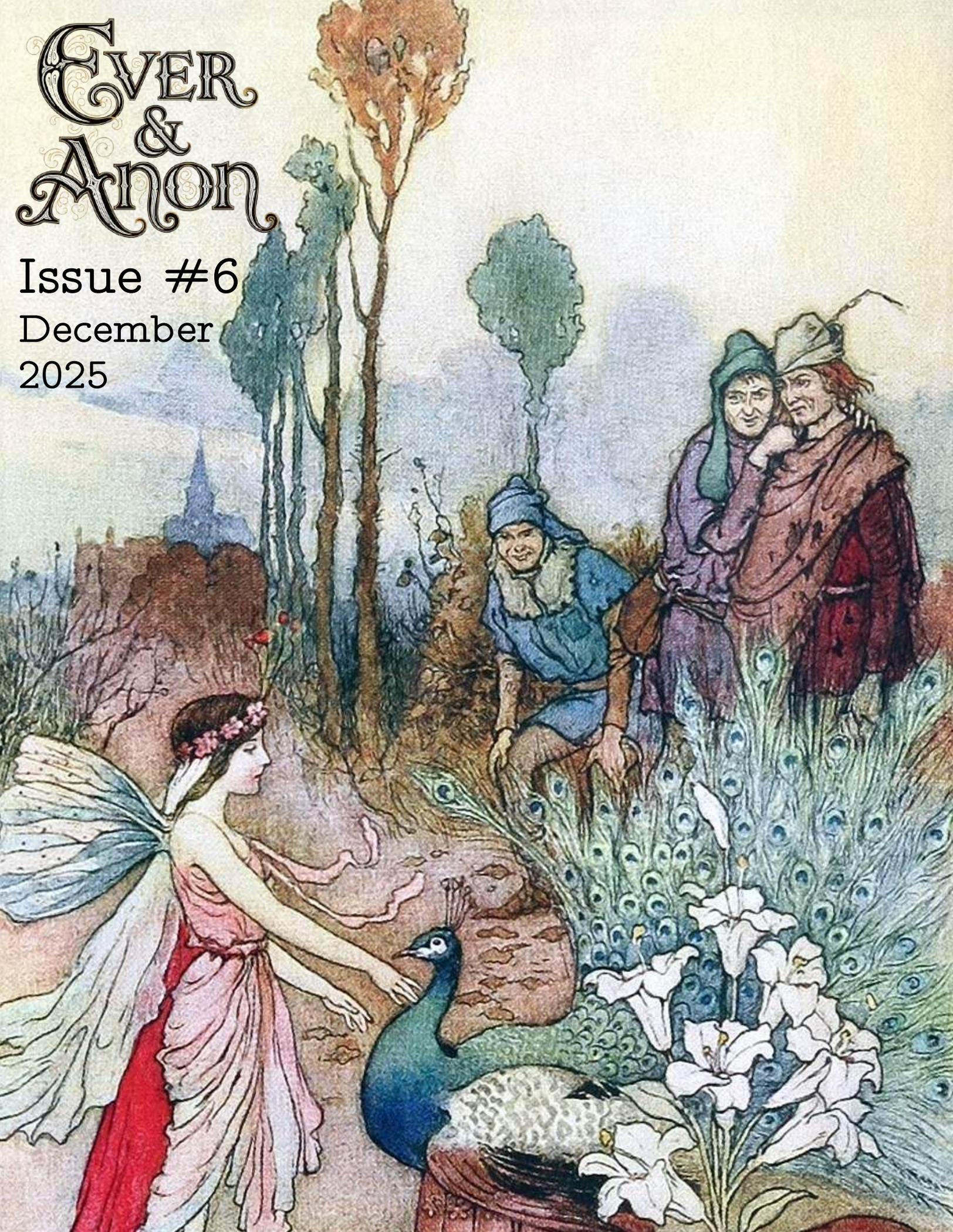


EVER & ANON

Issue #6
December
2025



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Contributors are expected to stay on topic and remain civil to each other. Ever & Anon will be available to the public for free, so matters you don't want publicly known should be discussed elsewhere. Please adhere to all the normal rules of public discourse: no libel, no inciting violence, no infringement of another's copyright or trademark, and no pornography. Zines should use page dimensions of 8.5" x 11" (portrait). Maximum zine length is 16 pages. Maximum length for fiction (other than campaign reports) is 6 pages. Discussion of contemporary politics is discouraged but permitted with a maximum length for political content set at 2 pages. AI-generated artwork is allowed, but AI-generated text is not. If you want to use an AI to help you edit your zine, you may do so. All artwork must be attributed to its creator, whether human or AI, unless it is in the public domain. When you submit your zine to Ever & Anon, you are granting the APA a perpetual, non-exclusive right to publish your zine in a single issue of the APA, meaning that you retain the copyright to your work, and so you can publish it elsewhere, but you cannot force Ever & Anon to unpublish your zine once it has been published.

Contributors may submit their PDF zines via email to apa@everanon.org.

Submission deadlines and Ignorable Themes for the next several issues are as follows:

Issue #7 – December 21st: The dumbest/silliest/craziest things the players ever did.

Issue #8 – January 21st: GMing tricks you've either "borrowed" from other GMs or figured out yourself.

Issue #9 – February 21st: City Building for Fun and Adventure: what do you need and where do you start?

Issue #10 – March 21st: The best/worst/funniest monster combat tactics.

Issue #11 – April 21st: RPG Setting Design: What makes a setting great, what are your preferred methods for setting design, and is there one you've created, want to create, or simply want to explore?

Ever & Anon emerged with the closing of [Alarums & Excursions](#), an Amateur Press Association run by Lee Gold for nearly fifty years. This community of APAers would not exist if not for her steadfast efforts.

Ever & Anon

Issue #6 (ver. 1) – December 2025

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This issue’s IgTheme is: *Game conventions: the good, the bad, and the weird.*

The cover art for this issue was downloaded from <https://www.oldbookillustrations.com/>. The picture on page 5 was generated and converted into a sketch by [Canva](#). The picture on page 180 was generated by [DeviantArt’s DreamUp](#).

What is This?

A Newbie's Guide to APAs

Q: What is this?

A: An APA.

Q: What's an APA?

A: An Amateur Press Association.

Q: What's that?

A: A collection of zines. It can also refer to the community of people writing the zines.

Q: What's a zine?

A: A fanzine. A small, amateur magazine usually distributed for free or at cost.

Q: So this is a collection of free fanzines written by amateurs?

A: Exactly.

Q: And each one has a separate author?

A: Right.

Q: But I see the same names appearing again and again throughout.

A: Those are comments. We comment on each others zines. When you see *Patrick Zoch: blah-blah-blah...*, if there are no quotes around the *blah-blah-blah*, that's probably a comment to Patrick.

Q: And everyone is doing all this for free?

A: Yes. It's like a cocktail party, but all written out. Come join us, if you like.

Amateur Press Associations date back to the late 1800s and started to become popular among fantasy and science fiction enthusiasts during the 1930s.¹ *Alarums & Excursions* was the first APA formed specifically to cover roleplaying games.²

*"Each contributor would send in their zine, and then Lee would edit, collate, and distribute. Contributors would often address each other in their contributions, thus creating a community. At the time when there were no blogs nor forums, this was huge."*³

Q: But now there are blogs and various online forums, so why do APAs still exist?

A: Because one type of forum isn't necessarily any better or worse than the others. One advantage of the APA model is longevity. Because they have multiple contributors and don't rely on making money, APAs are more durable than individual blogs or traditional magazines. Also, because websites come and go, whatever is posted online will probably eventually vanish into the electronic ether. But whatever is put into a publication that can be downloaded and archived is more likely to survive due to the sheer fact that multiple copies will exist. And the back issues become an indelible record of what people used to think. They provide insight into a world that used to be.

Referring to *Alarums & Excursions*, Mark Rein-Hagen writes, *"Each issue was a revelation—raw theory, wild invention, fierce debates on the soul of gaming—all stitched together by the indomitable Lee Gold, whose work made that scattered fellowship feel like a living conversation."*⁴

Q: Who is Lee Gold?

A: She founded *Alarums & Excursions*, creating a forum, perhaps the first forum, specifically for the discussion of roleplaying games. Then she continued to run A&E for nearly fifty years. It's an extraordinary legacy, and she's the reason this community of APAers exists.

1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amateur_press_association

2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alarums_and_Excursions

3 <https://atronarch.com/goodbye-to-alarums-and-excursions-apa>

4 <https://www.facebook.com/Reinhagen/posts/pfbid0nXr6bkZU8V28t2xMHvq5CKgpTGfLX35yU3VBAjuwTgQps8gX9CZDcbHZFc5VpYn6l>

I Want YOU!

to join our flippant fellowship



Send us a zine. Or some cover art. Or comments. Or a blurb.
Or just fart in our general direction.

Send your thoughts to apa@everanon.org, and provided they aren't laced with orcish profanity (or even if they are), we'll likely publish them for the enlightenment & edification of the entire APA. Please include your name, class, and level of experience, and be sure to save vs. spell to avoid being drawn in. Halflings and gnomes incur a -1 penalty. (Sorry, shorties.)

Abbreviations & Acronyms You Need to Know:

A&E: Alarums & Excursions
APA: Amateur Press Association
BBG: Big Bad Guy/Gal (a major villain)
BTW: By the way
d6: a six-sided die
2d6: two six-sided dice
d4: a caltrop (very dangerous)
E&A: Ever & Anon
Frex: For example
FTF: Face-to-face (aka TTRPG)
FWIW: For what it's worth
IgTheme: Ignorable theme
IIRC: If I recall correctly
IM(H)O: In my (humble) opinion

LARP: Live Action Role Playing
Nextish: Next issue
(N)PC: (Non-)Player Character
PBEM: Play-by-Email
RAE(BNC): Read and enjoyed (but no comment)
Re: Regarding
RHCT(M): Regarding his/her comment to (me)
RPG: Role-playing game
RYCT(M): Regarding your comment to (me)
RYQT(M): Regarding your question to (me)
TTRPG: Tabletop role-playing game (aka FTF)
WRT: With respect to / With regard to
YMMV: Your mileage may vary
Zine: A writer's contribution

Old City – Clark B. Timmins

I've been working on a large adventure site which I'm envisioning as having multiple related locations, something like the old canyon in *B2 – Keep on the Borderlands*. As these things go, my plans generally exceed my execution. But we shall see. As commented in earlier issues with Michael Cule, it's often very interesting to have a pre-history of an adventuring site to add flavor and complexity. This is my prehistory from something like the old fantasy trope of a thousand years ago.

The Old City Center

The old city has a population of about 10,000 individuals, primarily human. Most of the outlying buildings are comprised of less permanent construction that will not stand the test of time. The old city center is constructed of stone and includes political and religious structures, as well as associated buildings.

Numbering

The map indicates various structures' general size and shape, along with numbering for 28 specific sites. The numbering is non-consecutive, but has this meaning:

- ***Standard numeral*** – this is the oldest type of construction made from massive cut stones of a chalky color, usually painted with blues and reds, round arches, and decorated with bas relief geometric patterns.
- ***T numeral*** – these are middle-period construction made from smaller cut stones of a reddish color, with minor painted elements, pointed arches, and sometimes decorated with small cut inlays, mosaic tiles, and large colored glass windows.
- ***V numeral*** – these are the latest construction made from red brick, plastered and painted inside, high pointed arches, and richly decorated with bright colors, metals, and intricate ornamentation.

Map Color Coding

- ***White*** – the ground level. This consists primarily of packed gravel, well-trodden and groomed.
- ***Black*** – Structures made primarily of stone or brick.

- *Grey* – Raised platforms about three feet above ground level. These are made of cut stones around the perimeter, filled with crushed stone or cenotaphs, and topped with paving stones.
- *Green* – Raised platforms about two feet above ground level, covered with garden plants. These are made of cut stones around the perimeter, filled with loam, and full of plants. Two of the green areas (near building 4) have a symbol for a sacred tree. These areas contain more than just grasses – they are rich with flowers, bushes, and even smaller trees.
- *Dashed* lines represent a tunnel system that runs between buildings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 8. The tunnels are ten feet wide and about fifteen feet tall with a vaulted ceiling. They are lined entirely with cut stone and have a level, stone floor.

The enumerated buildings have these primary functions.

1	Primary government building, with public spaces for court proceedings, committee meetings, and similar functions. It includes a library.
2	The old royal palace.
3	The oracle and fortune-telling operations.
4	The old state temple.
5	Prison and guards.
8	Large kitchen area, stores, and private armory.
9	Semi-private armory.
14	Primary government office building, with offices, document storage, and similar functions. It is mostly semi-private in nature.
16	Arsenal.
18	Diplomatic housing.
20	Bathing and social meeting area.
27	Crematoria and housing for death priests.
30	Royal housing.
32	Money vault.
35	Royal housing.
37	Diplomatic housing.
38	Kitchen and food preparation area.
47	Housing for the oracle's scribes and functionaries.
T1	Housing for priests.
T2	Housing for guards.
T3	Royal bakery.
T4	Housing for visiting dignitaries.

T5	Stables, animal pens, blacksmiths, and associated functions.
T6	Goods and food storage.
T8	Guard housing.
V1	New royal palace.
V2	New state temple.
V3	Guard housing.

Religion

The state religion is based on two supreme deities, Alm and Elm. They are depicted as abstract humanoids with heads devoid of features. The two deities are considered a single *homoousios*, with two eternal *hypostases*—one male and one female. Neither is considered superior but each has separate spheres of influence.

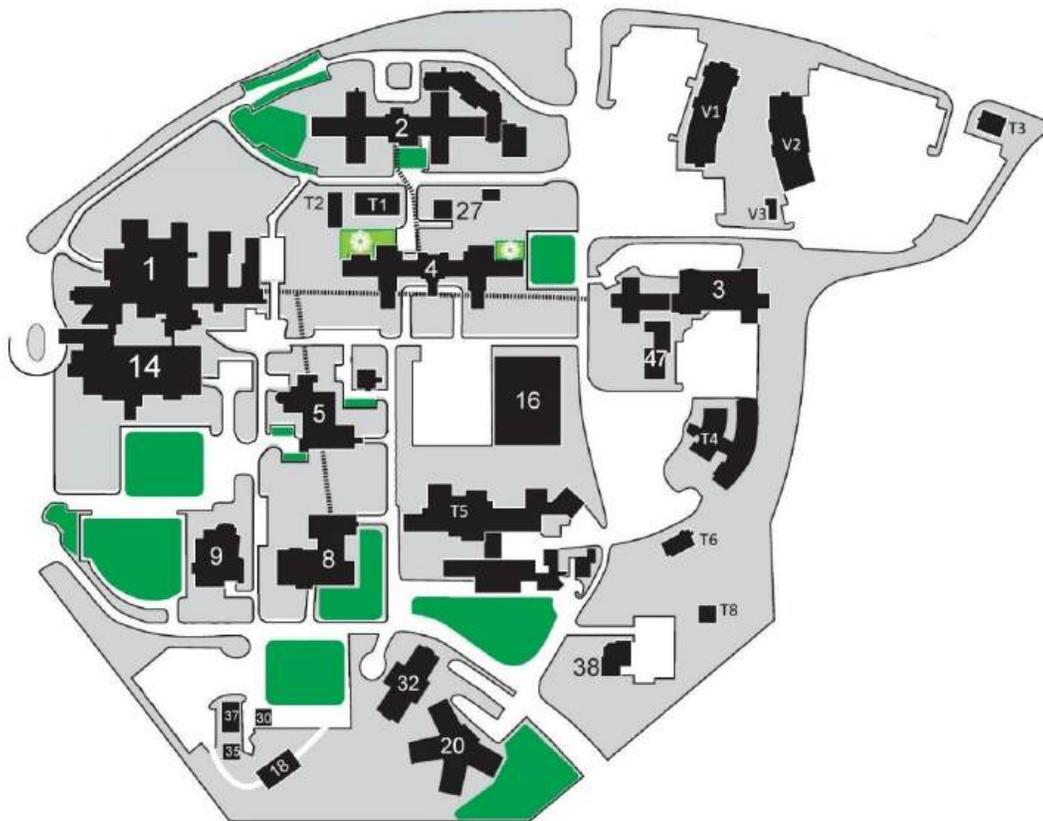
Alm represents the female, creative powers and is depicted as a female humanoid. Her statue is painted gold on the left and purple on the right. She points to the sky with her right hand and to the earth with her left hand.

Elm represents the male, destructive powers and is depicted as a male humanoid. His statue is painted gold on the right and purple on the left. He points to the sky with his right hand and to the earth with his left hand.

The Dead and Burial

Deceased persons (and sometimes animals) are taken to the death priests (an “untouchable” class). Bodies are placed into a tight fetal position and secured with cords. The mouth is secured closed with cord. Bodies are then pierced several times with a death spetum to prevent bloating from gasses and then placed into the crematorium on their backs, with the head turned toward the rising sun. On periodic cremation days (religiously determined by augury, about 7-10 days apart) all the corpses are cremated at once using magical fire, cut wood, and coal. These cremations are attended by friends and families of the deceased, who throw offerings (usually grains and fragrances) into the crematoria before it is set aflame. The fire burns for several hours. The bodies’ state of cremation differs, which is considered normal. The incompletely cremated remains are later extracted by the death priests, disjointed and partially crushed as minimally as necessary, and placed into funerary urns. The urns are stone or ceramic containers about six inches in diameter and two feet in length.

Wealthier decedents receive larger, heavy stone urns decorated with all manner of carvings and paints. Poorer decedents receive smaller ceramic urns. For the poorest classes, multiple decedents may be placed into a single familial urn. The urn may also include gifts for the afterlife (usually grains and baked clay tokens that are a type of symbolic funerary money). Royal, noble, priestly, and elite decedents have their stone urns interred somewhere in the ancient city center in one of the raised platforms. The paving stone covering the urn is inscribed with names, dates, and epitaphs and then replaced (royal and priestly paving stones occasionally are made of rare or distinctive materials). The more significant a decedent is, the closer their urn will be located near the sacred trees where the platforms are, essentially, columbaria.



Twisting the Rope #6

Myles Corcoran - 20 Brookfield Park, Cork T12 K7V7, Ireland

myles.corcoran@gmail.com - <https://mastodon.ie/@deetwelve>

No-one Ever Knows or Loves Another

I was back to work after a fortnight's stress leave, and everyone has been supportive. In particular, my team lead is checking in regularly and monitoring my workload with a view to avoiding any recurrence of the earlier stress. I also attended an occupational therapist as recommended by our People and Culture department (HR before the renaming). The therapist was good and at least somewhat helpful. I have to see if I can make changes to my sleep hygiene and working habits to improve things.

I did sleep better during my time off, but I'm not sleeping particularly well overall and have had a couple of really rough nights.

I will be travelling up to Dublin for my mother's 80th birthday celebrations at the end of the month and I'm looking forward to that. In some ways I regret settling in Cork as it's made it more difficult to see family regularly, but on the other hand, the housing and transport situation in Dublin would probably be horribly stressful. I feel extremely lucky to live a 10-15 minute walk from work in Cork.

IgTheme: Media

What media (novels, film, anime, etc.) have inspired you vis-à-vis RPGs?

I soak up media influences all the time. Sometimes I draw on a setting in a book for inspiration, as I did with my Wizard Worlds campaign back in 2008, which used Diana Wynne Jones's many worlds concept for a chain of worlds strung like pearls on a string that the PCs adventured through. Other times I'm inspired directly by a piece of media, and run a game close to the original material. The example I have in mind is The Archive campaign, which drew directly from the TV show *Warehouse 13*, and had the PCs as cataloguers and agents collecting weird and wonderful objects for their archive

very much as the agents of the Warehouse did in the show¹.

Obviously, some games are in their design and presentation inspired by particular media. Greg Stafford's *Pendragon* is a perfect example, drawing heavily as it does *Le Morte d'Arthur* by Thomas Malory and other sources.

In general however my longer running campaigns draw inspiration here and there from other media without a wholesale borrowing or mimicry. The Tudor Talents game of super-spies in the Elizabethan court, or Magical Monkey Mischief game of Chinese immortals in the vein of "The Journey to the West" were inspired by rather than copies of the media I drew on.

Mutterings

The staff gaming club had a Halloween-themed evening session recently attended by 9 players. I got to play *Fiesta de los Muertos*, an entertaining word game cross between *Just One* and the folk game, Telephone. Much confusion for all concerned.

After that, the group split into two to play *Sub Terra* (very on theme) and *Knarr* (vikings can be scary, apparently). My viking trading engine was weak, I'm afraid and I came last by some margin.

Still, a fun evening for everyone I think.

A Mausritter Campaign

This is the continuing write-up of the Mausritter campaign² started in July 2024. A band of brave mice work to defend their home, explore their world and become the heroes of Oak Home, their mouse town at the centre of the map.

The characters are:

¹ John Lennon's mummified penis never featured in the show, however, unlike *The Archive*.

² <https://mausritter.com>

Sky, a sparrow-rider with an aerial mount, Miss Clutterbuck, played by Sam.

Can-can, an ex-dancer and tin miner, played by Marie.

Gwedolene, an ale-brewer, sometimes accompanied by Vicent, a drunken porter-mouse, played by Kate.

Odette Snow, a foreign mouse and dam builder, played by Alai MacErc.

Ambrose, a scrawny wireworker, singed with electrical burns, played by Peter.

The two moon-carp fish in the pool approved of the mice and their proper respect for the Temple of the Moon and filled in some of the history of the place. "All was peaceful before Winter Ash. No mushrooms, no spores, and the woodfolk would come and give offerings to the Moon Goddess," said Wax.

"Tasty offerings," added Wane.

"But then something in the water changed, and the mushrooms grew. The old priestess was driven off by Winter Ash," said Wax.

"Or slain," suggested Wane.

The two fell silent, pondering the fate of the missing priestess.

The mice left the Temple of the Moon, and climbed out of the pool chamber to wash their faces and breathe clean air, before huddling down to talk about what they'd learned.

They spoke again to Boulder Face. "Of course I remember the old priestess. Miranda was a good sort, for an owl, and ran the Temple well. She left not long after the water changed, and the waterfall grew. You-know-who was only too pleased to give her the old heave-ho.

"I remember some of the rabbit-folk who visited saying there'd been a disturbance upstream of the waterfall. Some mannish work and a new wooden building had sprung up and a dam of sorts."

While the other mice were talking, CanCan decided to apply some brute force and ignorance to the problem and descended back into the pool chamber to hack at one of the mushrooms with her pickaxe. This released copious amounts of spores and drove the mouse miner back to the surface, coughing and weeping.

Sky elected to stay with CanCan and help her recover as the other three, Gwen, Ambrose, and Odette, set out up the cliff past the waterfall to search for this strange building and dam. Sky briefly provided directions from

the air after a sortie on Mrs. Clutterbuck revealed a pool and a clearing with a construction some ways upstream from the waterfall.

They arrived at last at a clearing in the woods, with a large, still pool feeding the stream to the waterfall. A sweet smell filled the air, and by a cluster of sunflowers stood a rickety, wooden shack. The drowsy buzzing of bees was to be heard³.

The pool was obviously artificial, perfectly circular in shape with a battered sluice-gate where the stream let in. The group approached the shack cautiously and paused to watch a sluggish bee emerge from a dislodged roof shingle to fly erratically to the tallest sunflower. This flower was a glossy black of petal and seed, and stood noticeably higher than its companions.

As they drew closer they heard a noise from a nearby fallen log as a badger shuffled its way out of the rotten trunk. "New mice, eh?" called the badger, looming like a juggernaut over the mice. "I'm Stig."

Tentatively the mice introduced themselves and asked about the bees and sunflowers. Gwen's offer of beer loosened the badger's tongue.

"Plenty of honey round here, true enough," said Stig, "but I'd avoid it if I were you. Them bees and the other mice are worse off for it, mark my words."

Gwen spied another mouse peeking through a gap in the planks of the shack, watching them. As she waved for its attention the mouse returned a rude gesture and disappeared into the dark of the building.

"Never mind them mice. Queen Esmerelda is the one to talk to," said Stig. "Queen and priest of the Sweet Cult."

The beer rapidly consumed, and concerned by the talk of cults and strange honey-addled mice, our mousey heroes retreated to examine the sluice on the pool up close.

Much hydrological discussion followed, none of it prepared for in advance by the GM⁴. Can they alter the stream? Will that kill the mushrooms? Will that harm Wax and Wane? Could Winter Ash change the fish into some form more portable? Or would blocking the outlet of the moon pool fill the chamber and drown the mushrooms?

³ I took the location from a mini-adventure for *Mausritter* called "Honey in the Rafters" by Isaac Williams, available at <https://losing-games.itch.io/mausritter-honey-in-the-rafters>.

⁴ Don't introduce a dam above a waterfall. It doesn't make sense and 'a wizard did it' doesn't work well outside of *D&D*.

Eventually the three mice returned to the waterfall and caught up with Sky and CanCan. The coughing mouse was feeling better but agreed that chopping down the mushrooms was a non-starter. As it was growing dark, they dug a temporary burrow to spend the night in. None was keen to sleep in the room with the owl feathers and bones. Boulder Face and CanCan stayed up to keep watch.

In the middle of the night an owl came. On silent wings Prospero came down from the moonlit sky to land by the top of the waterfall. In a moment Winter Ash was there.

CanCan was terrified, but stirred the others.

“We are literally as quiet as mice,” Ambrose remarked.

The conversation between the owl wizard and the winter witch was drowned by the sound of the waterfall. Simon Frog, Winter Ash’s frog assistant, emerged from the owl feather room and drew near. “She’s bartering frogs again,” he whispered. “The owl wizard has his uses for them, and she loves his gossip.”

He paused. “He’s also keen on mice.”

The brave mice tucked themselves deeper in their burrow. Sky and Gwen whispered to the Moon Goddess to aid them, and prayed before they fitfully slept.

Both mice dreamed of a second moon pool, surrounded by shrouded figures. In their dream a frog entered the inky water and emerged as a man. The man confronted the winter witch and slew her with a moon-bright sword.

On waking, Prospero the owl was gone. Simon Frog dozed nearby, leaning against Boulder Face. Sky woke him gently and asked about a second moon pool.

“The true moon pool lies above Winter Ash’s quarters,” replied the frog. “She avoids it, as the guardians view her presence as trespass.”

Philbert the changed man-frog overheard Sky’s description of the dream and pipes up. “That sounds like that’s the pool for me! Let’s go find it.”

Simon Frog hesitated. “Winter Ash will need new victims to replace the frogs she traded to Prospero. Do not draw her attention to yourselves or you’ll end up like this foolish Philbert.”

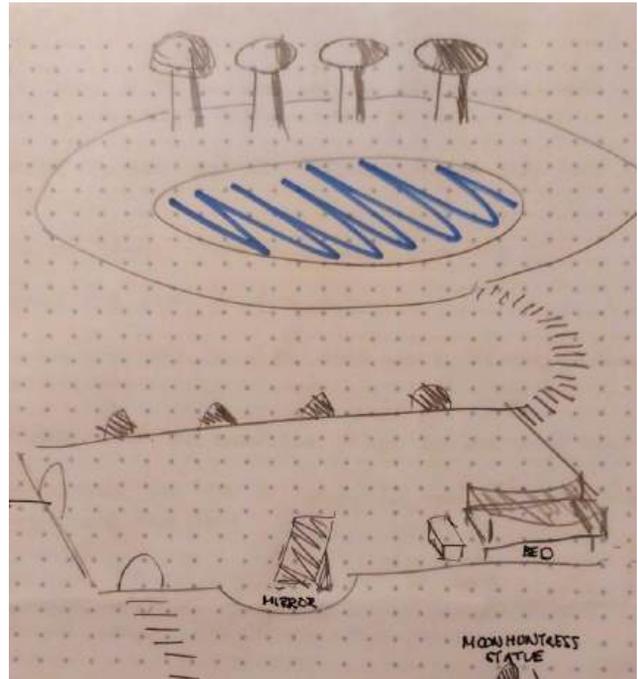
“I was more unlucky than foolish,” complains Philbert. “Shut up, Philbert,” chorus the mice.

The mice waited and observed. Gwen returned to the pool with Wax and Wane to ask them if they were happy

where they were, or if they wished to leave the pool. Both admit that while happy in the pool, the great wide rivers outside called to them.

CanCan fetched Gwen back. Ambrose and Odette watched Winter Ash leave her home and head into the forest. Now was their chance to get Philbert to the pool.

They sneaked up the steps from the owl feather room to Winter Ash’s chamber.



A long room lay before them. Along one side, several dark alcoves let onto the wide, stone-flagged floor. Near the stairs stood something rectangular, draped in a black silk cloth. A large four-poster bed with heavy fabric drapery stood at the far end of the room, across from another stairway, leading up.

“That must be the stairs to the second pool,” cried Philbert as he rushed into the room.

“No!” cried the mice, but too late. Four shiny black beetles each larger than a mouse, charged on skittering legs from the alcoves into the room and towards Philbert.

A scene of general chaos followed as the mice dodged and ran about, trying to get the foolhardy Philbert to safety. Sky threw one of her precious syrup-covered acorns to distract a beetle, who fell greedily to consuming the treat. Odette and Ambrose used one of Ambrose’s wires as a noose and trapped two more of the beetles as CanCan waded in, pick-axe swinging, to strike another beetle dead. In short order the insect guards were dealt with.

The mice tried to slow Philbert and his mad dash to the stairs at the end of the room, warning of traps and who knows what might be waiting but the impatient man-frog would not be delayed and mounted the stairs. The other prudently avoided Winter Ash's covered mirror and gingerly followed the frog up the stairs.

They stepped into a large oval chamber with an ink-black pool of water filling over half the floor area in the middle of the space. Lined up along one side were four statues. Figures of the moon goddess in phases of full, half, waning and new. Philbert hopped without a pause from the stairs straight into the pool and submerged.

A rushing of frosty air and a spray of snowflakes heralded the arrival of Winter Ash, gloriously furious. She grew to a great height and towered over the mice, who scattered in various directions. Sky, Ambrose and CanCan drew their weapons and prayed to the moon goddess for aid. Gwen ran and hid up the skirts of one of the statues. Odette scanned the pool, hoping for any sign of Philbert.

With bravery, Sky stabbed the faery witch in her foot with her fishhook, which so surprised the witch that she shrank to half her inflated height. Still towering over the mice she advanced just as a man emerged from the moon pool, a glistening white sword in his hand.

With a stroke of the blade, the witch was vanquished and disappeared from the place. Philbert waved and said something incomprehensible to the mice before trotting down the stairs and away.

In the aftermath, Gwen found a spell tablet hidden under the sculpture's skirts and was very pleased with herself, while Simon Mouse brought the 3 surviving beetles up the stairs to bathe in the pool. This returned them to their natural forms: a mouse, a vole and one was just a beetle to begin with.

Weary but happy to be alive, the mice gathered their belongings and made for home.

Kriegsmesser - Landau Before the War

Back in 2022 I ran a campaign of Kriegsmesser⁵, a game by Gregor Vuga, a love-letter to Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay by way of the Forged in the Dark mechanics and character generation from Troika. It's was an entry in #zinequest2021 and comes as a neat A5 pamphlet about 32 pages in length, beautifully illustrated with

⁵ <https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/357104/kriegsmesser> and <https://gregor-vuga.itch.io/kriegsmesser>

images taken from 16th Century woodcuts. I set the game in the German city of Landau in the summer of 1617 not long before the outbreak of the Thirty Years War. The characters were:

Jaroslav Furtwängler, starving artist with an ear for gossip (Alex)

Franzis Corbolini, Irish mercenary soldier masquerading as a man (Kate)

Alfonzo Meemo, pragmatic graverobber (Marie)

Lazaro Alamano, carriage driver and would-be duelist (Pete)

Udo von Liechtenstein, initiate and scholar also masquerading as a man (Sam)

Session 5 (2022-11-03)

The five redoubtables reconvene near the salary wagon, next to the site where Miglioresi and Weimer are carrying out their measurements. Jaroslav spies a scrap of paper the two men repeatedly refer to and moves closer to get a better look. He realises that they have a diagram of the fortifications of Landau, with accompanying geometric figures, mostly likely artillery calculations. Are the two men in fact spies, and not the fops they first appeared to be?

Weimer notices Jaroslav's interest and grows suspicious. The two men confer and then pack up their bags, instructing Lazaro to take them in his carriage to a new location. As they pack, Lazaro warns Jaroslav that Weimer was showing an unhealthy interest in the artist.

As the carriage leaves, the rest of the group decide to retire to the Golden Cock for the evening, and head back into Landau before sunset.

Later, several drinks in, Alfonzo notices a guttersnipe he knows from his dealings with the underworld of Landau talking with two burly gentlemen at the tavern door. Some money changes hands and the beggar points out the table the four fellows are drinking at. The two bravos make their way through the crowd towards them.

Discovering a previously unmentioned talent, Udo disappears into the background, and moves away from the table as Alfonzo and Franzis surreptitiously check their weapons in case a fight breaks out.

The two men introduce themselves as agents of a nobleman, Neimer, who is looking for an artist or architect to take up work and replace the previous architect. Their master has plans that need translating for the builders and workmen, and he heard that Jaroslav works cheap. Jaroslav gets the address near a bridge in

the west of the city, and a time for an appointment. The second, silent man seems anxious and a little confused by the exchange between the other man and Jaroslav.

The men leave and the others continue drinking. Udo finds himself at the table of Nicolaus Metzner, a surgeon and biblical scholar. The two are rapt in conversation for the better part of the evening, discussing Revelations, resurrection and eggs and Jesus. Or is exegesis? Udo is fascinated by the offer of access to Metzner's extensive library and promises to look him up.

As the night draws to a close, the innkeeper, Kellar, turfs the remaining clientele into the street. Jaroslav and Udo, well oiled, head off together towards their lodgings in the poorer part of town. Franzis and Alfonzo make their own ways home; the soldier to a boarding house, the gravedigger to his room above the family business.

While the moon is near full, the shadows are dark and deep as Udo and Jaroslav pick their way home through the dung strewn streets. The artist notices the sound of two sets of heavy boots following them, and assumes the worst.

He is not wrong. They duck down a inky-black alleyway as the two men from the inn appear at the end of the street. "Come on, Friar Udo!" calls the artist. "Friar? Friar! I've never been so insulted..."

Udo and Jaroslav find themselves trapped in a dead end, and hear the two men decide to split up to check down the side alleys. The divine and the artist hide themselves in the pitch black shadows as one man feels his way in the dark past them. Jaroslav strikes him with a length of wood he grabbed from the floor of the alleyway, but gets a nasty blow to his shin for his trouble. The man falls back and Udo, with a prayer, sacrifices his fine bottle of beer to crack his skull⁶ as the man stumbles.

They quickly leave, pleased to hear the second man on the losing end of an argument with a woman with a broom and an attitude.

Meanwhile, Franzis speaks to his landlady at the lodgings who tells him that he just missed a man who left him a note. Franzis reads the letter from Corporal Falsbender, his old campaign mate from the salary wagon at the fortifications, which warns him of a new Imperial campaign in the coming summer that will threaten Landau and many other towns of the Pfalz. Franzis is confused that a lowly corporal should be privy to such plans. Perhaps Falsbender is more than he seems?

At that time, Udo and Jaroslav stumble their way through the night to Franzis's dwelling, seeking a strong soldier to protect them should the villains give chase. They stumble literally however across the corpse of Corporal Falsbender, stabbed twice in the back and stuffed in a doorway near Franzis's boarding house.

Udo stays with the body and gives Last Rites as Jaroslav looks up Franzis and tells him the sorry news. In the lining of the man's military coat, Franzis finds a slim case with a variety of military orders, aimed at a rank far higher than Corporal, and a small purse of coin. The man was clearly not killed for his money.

"Let's move the body!" someone suggests. So many good plans start with such an utterance. They carry the body into the boarding house as Franzis goes to wake up Alfonzo the gravedigger. He'll know what to do with an extra corpse.

Session 6 (2022-11-17)

In Franzis's boarding house, they find a list of names in the papers uncovered on Corporal Falsbender's body, listing the odd fops, Miglioresi and Weimer and the artilleryman van der Gulvert.

Alfonzo examines the knife wounds on the body and declares both would have been fatal alone. The angle of entry suggests to him someone shorter than the corporal. The others discuss whether they should bury the body or hand him over to Captain Sforbeck of the Watch.

Deciding to dump the body outside the city graveyard is the best approach, they load poor Corporal Falsbender's corpse onto Alfonzo's cart and move stealthily across the city in the shadows. Udo and Jaroslav spend a good portion of the night at Alfonzo's kitchen table, copying and deciphering the encoded orders before returning them to Falsbender's hidden pocket.

The orders copied, Alfonzo leaves the body, with the orders restored, propped up by the graveyard gate to be 'found' in the morning.

The others get some sleep in Alfonzo's house near the graveyard.

"The candle is snuffed out by a breeze!"

"Sorry, it's my nerves."

In the small hours as Jaroslav gets up from the table to get some well-deserved sleep, he spies a cloaked figure by the graveyard gate, rifling through the pockets of the corpse. Before he can act, the figure finds what they are looking for and vanishes into the night.

⁶ I gave up counting head traumas at about this point. This campaign was worse than Raymond Chandler for beatings.

Shortly after dawn, Alfonzo goes out and ‘discovers’ the body. He pays an urchin to summon the Watch, and before long Captain Sforbeck arrives to question the gravedigger. The rest of the crew keep their heads down and remain out of sight. Sforbeck is suspicious of the gravedigger’s serendipitous discovery of the body, but allows that the knife wounds must have been dealt by someone shorter than Alfonzo. “Only enough in his pockets to pay for a burial,” the gravedigger offers, but the captain notices the slit lining of the corporal’s greatcoat and grows more suspicious. Finally, the captain leaves, warning Alfonzo to keep him up to date should any further information about the dead man come to light.

Jaroslav then heads out and about the town on the trail of gossip, looking for clues about the dead man and his dealings. He discovers that Miglioresi and Klepper were involved in the trade of gunpowder to the burghers of Landau for the supply of the fort.

Franzis and Lazaro stroll out in search of the murderer, starting with the inn closest to the city gates on the assumption that soldiers from the fortifications wouldn’t walk past the first tavern they saw on the way into the city. They are correct and find some colleagues of Falsbender, who describe a small, pinch-faced woman in black. Falsbender was seen drinking with on several occasions. They often met on a nearby public well on a platz by a meat-on-a-stick seller.

At the meat seller’s stall, they ask a few questions without much success. Franzis feels the hairs on the back of his neck rise and spies a woman watching them from across the plaza. As he makes his way towards her, she turns and hurries away down a busy street. Lazaro speeds up to try to work his way around to the other end of the street as Franzis bulls his way through the crowd but when they reach each other, there is no sign of the woman. They adjourn to a tavern on the street and ask the taverner some questions about Falsbender as they drink.

The corporal was here in the tavern, says the innkeeper. Yes, and with a woman matching their description. “Dutch, I think she was. Urzula was her name, if I remember right.” “They sat just there, and argued for some time,” he says, “only yesterday.”

Back at the graveyard, Alfonzo finished preparing the body and was interring Falsbender in a pauper’s grave when Udo, in Alfonzo’s kitchen, hears someone trying the front door. Udo gathers his papers and scarpers out the window as a woman in black, knife drawn, forces her way into the house. Alfonzo raises his spade and calls out, and the woman stops in the doorway, staring daggers at him before retreating.

Udo and Alfonzo meet in the graveyard, and check the house. Nothing taken, but they stoutly bar the door until the others return.

Together Jaroslav and Udo decide that the missing woodblock and the encoded plans refer to some sort of esoteric geometry built into the plans for the fortifications, based around the location of Gaius, Son of Gaius’s tomb. The Fama Fraternitas Rosae Crucis or Die Bruderschaft des Ordens der Rosenkreuzer are behind it. Bloody conspiracy!

The crew decide it is time to talk to Mister van der Gulvert, the artilleryist.

Session 7 (2022-11-24)

Alfonzo’s urchins return with information about Urzula’s whereabouts. She’s staying at a boarding house in the north of Landau. The crew decide to case her accommodation, stopping first for pies in case it’s their last meal.

In the event they need not have worried. The boarding house is on Sausage Street and a fine sausage seller has a stall across the street from the lodgings. Franzis excuses himself and clambers up onto the roof of a house on the street where he is afforded a fine view of comings and goings, as well as line of sight for his musket.

Udo, Jaroslav and Lazaro sample the sausages, while Alfonzo speaks to the landlady of Urzula’s lodgings in her kitchen. She is a friendly woman, though worried about rumours of impending war. Alfonzo feeds her a story about Corporal Falsbender’s parents visiting Landau to retrieve their poor, dead son, and needing a place to stay for a few days. As she talks, the landlady tells the gravedigger about Urzula, the quiet Dutch woman with the fancy visitors. “Silk pantaloons, no less,” she says, which puts Alfonzo in mind of Miglioresi and Weimer, the two fops from the fortifications.

Outside, Jaroslav finishes his sausage and ambles off to revisit the fortifications with a mind to investigating the esoteric geometry described in the coded notes he and Udo worked on overnight, before dropping in on Jan van der Gulvert, the artilleryist, to see what he knows about the plans.

From his vantage point on the roof opposite, Franzis spots Urzula with a large man in tow, as she enters Sausage Street. She spots Udo and Lazaro by the sausage cart and slips down a side alley round the back of the boarding house, followed by her large companion. Franzis descends from the roof and nips around the boarding house by another lane, gesturing to Lazaro to follow Urzula and the thug, hoping to catch their prey in the middle by the back of the lodgings.

As Franzis tries to make himself inconspicuous, Lazaro munches on a sausage and watches the back door of the boarding house. There is no sign of Urzula, but the large thug loiters by the door, and gives Lazaro a stern look of ‘walk on, pal’ when he catches the carriage driver watching him.

In front of the house, Udo and Alfonzo notice a twitching curtain on the upper storey, and decide to move on. Urzula gives chase, calling her thug to catch up. She emerges from the front of the house and he brushes past Franzis without comment to pursue. Franzis and Lazaro in turn give chase.

At the front of the procession are Udo and Alfonzo. Udo pretends to read from his book, a small mirror on the page reveals his actual interest: the duo of Urzula and thug hurrying along to catch up with the initiate and gravedigger. Some distance behind them follow Lazaro and Franzis.

Udo and Alfonzo duck down a side street and Urzula follows, stationing her thug companion at the junction to keep anyone from following. Franzis strolls past with a soldierly marching step, but Lazaro slows to engage the thug. "Don't I know you from somewhere?"

The thug threatens Lazaro and shoves the carriage driver down in the mud, not noticing that Franzis slips behind him into the lane. Urzula is already threatening Udo to hand over his book, a vicious knife in her hand. Franzis calls out to draw her attention and Alfonzo clocks her across the back of her head with his pry bar. She falls like a corpse.

The thug spins to intervene but meets a yard of good Spanish steel, casually proffered in Franzis's hand. The thug back-pedals rapidly, meets Lazaro's outstretched boot and goes down in the mud. Lazaro, rising from the mud of the street, grabs the thug's sap and smiles at his fallen foe and bids him a good day. Alfonzo already has Urzula in a sack and the crew hurry away to rendezvous at the gravedigger's home by the graveyard. Udo goes to summon Sforbeck.

A Solo Traveller-adjacent Game

For the purposes of a solo game I'm running I use a very simple mechanic. Almost all rolls are a yes/no question, resolved by rolling d100 against the current difficulty. Initial difficulty is 50 and each roll replaces the old value with the current roll. If I judge the likelihood particularly high or particularly low I allow myself to double or halve the current target number⁷ If the result is far from the target, above or below, I will sometimes interpret it as an extreme yes or no.

If I roll doubles (e.g. 11, 22, etc.) something unexpected happens. I create an event that feels appropriate or I roll randomly.

I roll on whatever random tables appeal to me for events, names, and other descriptors.

The setting is a Traveller inspired galaxy following the adventures and misadventures of the crew of a free trader on a barely profitable backwater chain of worlds.

⁷ Some readers may recognise the kernel of *Kismet*, another solo RPG by Cezar Capacle. <https://capacle.itch.io/kismet>

Samovska

We start on a colony world called Samovska. Toxic contaminants in the atmosphere and no biosphere beyond hardy microbes make the planetary surface a write-off. Atmospheric balloon harvesters cruise in the cloud layers collecting valuable gases and photochemical compounds. In orbit there is a small station. It is there we first meet the crew.

Philip Ding is the merchant captain of the merchant vessel *Trip Hazard*. Tall and thin, he has a perpetual wince when he hears the ship's maintenance bill. Bel Djabir is his navigator. Short and mostly jolly, he loves to pester Sahah Bouri, the ship's engineer. Bouri is always tinkering with the ship's systems, sometimes they even stay working.

Philip Ding is out pacing the corridors of the docking ring, looking for some speculative cargo to round out his current manifest of plastic feedstock harvested from Samovska's various organic compounds. Ding grows tired of the meagre pickings and is about to accept a less-profitable run when he is approached by some members of a small local church.

Question: Are they legit? Roll 32, yep, the job is legit, as far as it goes. New target = 32.

The community of The Brethren of Harinder Bose are not well liked on Samovska and are looking for an outsider to ship supplies to a monastery located two systems down the chain.

Question: Is the church favored in the local area? Roll 96, highly disfavoured, I'd say. Target stays the same. This is not a protagonist's roll, but a setting detail randomly determined.

[Aside: Does the score change with every roll or only with active choices by the protagonist? I decide that I'll roll only when the protagonist makes an active roll, like perception to see if the contacts were legit.]

Given the difficulty the Brethren have with the Samovska authorities, their offer is generous. Ding needs the cash and accepts the mission of a supply run to Dragon's Nest Monastery on the planet Wills.

Still thinking of the payroll, Ding continues to ask around for cargos for the first leg of the journey, hoping both to cover expenses and make the cargo from the Brethren stand out less, in case the church members were downplaying the seriousness of their 'problems' with the local authorities.

Question: Does Capt. Ding's attempts at misdirection avoid the attention of the authorities? Roll 33. A miss by one, and

doubles! With such a close roll I rule that he doesn't drag the authorities in while he's liaising with the Brethren, but does attract the attention of another grey marketeer on station. New target = 33.

Ding runs across Oona Furst, a go-between for merchants and grey economy trade. She needs passage to Uman, the next planet and helpfully on the route to Wills.

[Aside: I decide that Oona's own experience of dodgy deals alerts her to something fishy about the Brethren's cargo and her curiosity will push her to stick her nose in.]

Random Event: an oracle⁸ provides Steal, Religion, Trap, which could hardly be more apt. Something about or in the Brethren's shipment is a trap. I decide that Oona's nosing about the cargo bay means that she pockets the trap and hides it in her cabin. It looks like a relic but is also an ancient weapon.

Ding pokes around the handlers' offices some more and eventually turns up a second cargo of feedstock, slightly different from the last.

Question: Does he get a good deal on the cargo: Roll 57, Not very. He'll have to sell high to cover the cost. New target = 57.

With the cargo stowed and the passenger shooed to their cabin, Ding and crew complete the pre-flight checks and prepare to depart.

Leaving the station they deorbit and choose a vector to a suitable jump point while Djabir works the astrogation calculations. At the jump point, Sahah gives the okay to power up the jump engines and the ship's running lights dim as is tradition.

Question: Is it a smooth jump? Roll 98. No, that's way off. I rule a mis-jump (mostly for giggles) and the crew are alarmed by the unusual tone of the drive as the normal universe disappears. The week in jump space is one of nerves and recriminations. New target = 98.

Lost in space

Bel and Sahah argue bitterly over who is to blame for the mis-jump, each one blaming the other for bad astrogation or a poorly maintained jump drive. Captain Ding, at the end of his tether, forbids further discussion of the mis-jump to restore order.

The *Trip Hazard* emerges in an uncharted system off the main. The crew get to the business of scanning the stars and the system for a hint of where they've ended up. How far have they strayed from the well-travelled star

⁸ Here I was using the Game Master's Apprentice deck of randomizers from Nathan Rockwood of Larcenous Designs.

lanes they know? Bel Djabir gets to work with the sensors while Sahah knuckles down to tend to the damaged jump drive, which was stressed by the mis-jump.

Question: Is there any other damage from the mis-jump: Roll 51. Yes, the forward sensor array is degraded. New target = 51.

The damaged sensors slow Bel Djabir's efforts and tempers begin to fray once more, but surprisingly, Oona Furst chips in with some electrical engineering experience to help with repairs.

About 24 hours later the initial scans form a picture of the system. A low-mass M type star with about 10 planetary bodies. They all breathe a sigh of relief when one of the planets is identified as a hot Jovian⁹, orbiting close to the primary. That world will serve as a source of hydrogen to refuel, if they can handle the atmospheric dive to fill their tanks. Ding eyes the proximity to the baleful red star and worries about flares.

Question: Is there anything else of interest in the system? Roll 13, Yes. Target stays the same. This is not a protagonist's roll, but a setting detail randomly determined.

Djabir's scans also reveal a super-earth waterworld under a crust of ice. This could be another source of hydrogen if the atmospheric scoop proves a non-starter. The surface gravity of the iceball is close to 2g standard, however, which would make conditions on the surface very difficult outside the grav-plates of the ship.

After discussion the crew opt for the atmospheric scoop approach, and Ding sets the gas giant as their new destination. A couple of days travel at the acceleration their manoeuvre drives can sustain, as their jump point exit point was annoyingly out of the plane of the ecliptic and remote.

Question: Does anything else happen during the trip to the gas giant: Roll = 08. Yes. A fight breaks out between Djabir and Bouri. Is it serious: Roll = 92. No. New target = 92.

Bel and Sahah continue to needle one another during the trip towards the gas giant. Tempers finally boil over in a fight over who had the last of the chocolate from the stores. But after an initial roaring argument the two realise they're overreacting and apologise, and reaffirm their friendship. Oona smiles, thinking of the chocolate stashed in her cabin.

⁹ I rolled a d8 for the stellar type, 1 = O, B, A, 2 = K, 3 = G, 4-5 = F, 6-8 = M. I rolled a d12 for the number of planets, and chose to have a gas giant. Without it the story would have ended rather abruptly.

After just over 48 hours under acceleration, the *Trip Hazard* assumes an orbit over Ptery. Sahah christened the gas giant, 'for luck', after an ancient Earth sage. Ding keeps any qualms to himself, but wonders if invoking the memory of a man known for comic irony is appropriate.

Ptery's upper atmosphere is swollen with the heat from the nearby M-type dwarf, and churns with storms. Trying for optimism, Ding says, "the expanded atmosphere may benefit us. We don't have to descend into the gravity as deep as I thought."

The crew begin preparations for the first atmo-dive for hydrogen. Sahal teases Ding. "Good thing I insisted we upgrade the scoops last month, eh?"

"A good investment," Ding admits, "but let's wait and see if they were worth the credits."

Question: Is the first dive successful? Roll = 89. Yes, just. The new target is 89.

The hull shudders from the turbulence as Ding wrestles the ship through the roiling murk. Everyone on board feels the grav plates struggle to compensate as they dive through the atmosphere. The groans of the hull as the ship is buffeted by the gas illicit nervous words of reassurance. "She'll hold," Ding says. "She'll hold."

The first pass complete, the ship climbs out of the grip of Ptery and resumes a safer orbit. All aboard breathe a sigh of relief, but Sahah in engineering reports they'll need at least a second pass to fill the tanks. "We need to dive again. Deeper this time if we can risk it. If we don't I reckon we'll need a third run."

Ding asks for opinions. Two more passes at a similar depth or a riskier single pass deeper in the grip of the turbulent gas giant? All but Sahah favour the single pass. He complains. "The ship will hold up to the storms, sure," he says hopefully, "but I'm the poor devil who has to fix all the leaks if the hull plating springs loose."

Question: Does the second pass go okay? Roll = 42. Yes, and well below the target of 89, so I'm happy to rule the scooping run as uneventful. New target = 42.

The hull creaks and complains almost as much as Sahah, but holds admirably during the second pass. Soon the *Trip Hazard* is back in a safe orbit with tanks filled to the brim. The outer hull pings as it cools from the friction-heating it suffered but Sahah is content that nothing untoward has occurred.

"Okay, Bel, you're up," says Ding. "Time to pin down our location and plot a way out of this system and back to what passes for civilization on the Main."

Question: Does Bel Djabir plot a successful route back to the Main? Roll = 33. Yes and event. I draw a card with

Regenerate, Material, Illness, and location = oasis. New target = 33.

The drive powers up and the universe disappears...

Brass Station

The nearest destination is Brass, a solitary habitat orbiting a G2 star, with plentiful supplies, known for lying outside the jurisdiction of both the distant Imperium and the nearby Samovska. Brass provides high tech medical procedures that some might call illegal in other jurisdictions. An old adversary of Ding's crew is on station for a rejuvenation treatment.

Question: Does Ding have enough cash on hand to cover the additional expenses of this unexpected detour? Roll 66. New target = 66.

[Aside: I think for a bit and jot down notes about what that event might be. I plump for a splinter group of the Brethren of Harinder Bose is also on the station, who might get wind of the crew's mission to Dragon's Nest monastery and oppose it. Ding also needs to find paying work or be forced to sell fabricator stock at a loss to generate cash reserves. I decide the old foe is named Edvern Vasquesz,]

The *Trip Hazard* emerges from jump space and the crew breathe a sigh of relief. A quick scan and the signal buoys in the system show they've arrived near Brass Station, an independent station just off the jump main from Samovska.

Ding hails Brass Station to negotiate docking fees and a berth. "That's just about emptied the purse," he says as he ends the call. "We need paying work, crew. Keep your eyes and ears peeled for offers."

The station is the usual bustling mess of transients, shift workers, and starship crews, scrambling to spend or earn a credit.

Question: Does Oona Furst take the opportunity to rat out the crew to Edvern Vasquez? Roll 05. Surprisingly no! New target = 05.

Oona Furst decides to throw in her lot with the crew, seeing the way they handled the mis-jump as a sign they work well under pressure. "I have a few contacts," she says. "I'll see what I can turn up." Furst leaves the ship on the prowl for a job.

The rest of the crew divide up the chores. Sahah Bouri gets to work repairing the various ship's systems still affected by the mis-jump and the gas giant pummeling. Ding and Djabir start looking for a buyer for plastic feedstock. An isolated station like Brass might be a good

market, but the station is not heavily industrialised. I allow a flip-flop on the next roll.

Question: Do they turn up a good buyer for the feedstock? Roll = 88. No, and the flip-flop is wasted. New target = 88, and an event.

After hours of talking to brokers and captains, they're no better off than before. "We're not even going to get half the value of the feedstock." Ding laments. "We need the cash but such a loss!"

They nurse their drinks at a club and watch a lounge singer with an improbably large boa constrictor in her act as she sings to an appreciative crowd. A thin salaryman approaches them with an offer. Maybe their luck has changed?

The man represents a concern who needs a clean-up crew for an automated robotics factory orbiting not far beyond Brass itself. The factory is in low power mode since a decline in the market for their robotic products but the patron wants something extracted from the factory.

The initial offer isn't marvellous, but Ding takes that as a good sign. Too good to be true would be fishy. Stuck with bills and little ready cash, Ding takes the job. The crew will travel to the factory, get in, grab the data cores required, and get out.

[Aside: I rate it 50/50 that the job is on the up-and-up and sure enough there's complications. Another party will be in the orbital factory and won't take new arrivals kindly.]

Question: Are the looters in the factory more dangerous than Ding's crew? Roll = 75. Yes, but only just. I rule that they're either greater in numbers or better equipped but not both. New target = 75.

With hopes of a quick score, Ding and Djabir return to the docking berth and tell Sahah the plan.

Comments on E&A #5

General comments: I've switched my copyright statement to the AIO license from the Human Commons community. It's much like the Creative Commons licensing structure but is explicit in its handling of AI/LLMs access and rights.

You may also notice the abundance of write-ups this month, with *Mausritter*, *Kriegsmesser* and a solo Traveller inspired game I concocted. Read what you like.

Brian Rogers: I'm sorry to hear about your depression and allergies, and approve of lining up 'I can do this'

tasks to help lift one's mood. I'm always available through email if you need an empathetic ear.

Well done on many years of set building and supporting the theatre kids. The choice of *Puffs* is disappointing certainly, but I think you're right to support the students. If the director is taking input, lobby for inclusion and trans-representation in the cast to offset some of JKR's horrible behaviour.

"B4: The Lost City" is a great adventure if memory serves, and it sounds like the kids and their dads had fun. Chucking one's own turds into a room to check for traps is not something I've seen before in a game. What a sheltered life I lead.

Re Speed Centaur: Man, I'd like to try whatever folks were smoking back in the pulp and Golden Age. I love the idea of a fake horse mask as his civilian disguise. I actually laughed out loud while reading it.

Once again I love your mastery of V&V that allows you to model these wacky characters. The Captain Marvel/Speed Centaur-Billy Batson/Carthorse comparison is apt too.

Thanks for the explanation and exploration of the B/X rule changes you introduced. I particularly like the accommodation for the player who wanted to play a cat; the wizard's familiar solution was inspired. I also enjoyed the bigger rules changes for the cleric, and agree that dropping memorised/prayed-for spells for the cleric would have been better. The cleric you ended up with has echoes of the undead hunter that the original Cleric seemed inspired by.

RYCT to Patrick Riley re *Amber Diceless RP*: I ran an Amber campaign for about 12 players back in the early 90s and it's still one of my fondest memories as a GM. Player engagement is critical, as so much of play is driven by inter-player machinations and plots. One player loved being body-swapped with Dworkin for a few sessions so they could really let rip their scheming tendencies. Another player never lived down that her PC slept with Julian's shapechanged horse. Happy days.

On your recommendation I've started the *Dungeon Crawler Carl* series and read the first book last week. As you said, not great literature, but great fun. I hope Dinniman can keep up the quality as I continue.

RYCT me: Brain Rover back at you! I hope that this issue's *Mausritter* write-up meets with your approval.

I too like random domains for fantasy gods. How else do you get Poseidon's sea, earthquakes and horses array?

Re *Quinn's Quest*: Like his contributions to *Shut Up & Sit Down* previously, I'm loving Quinn's videos about rpgs.

Our tastes don't overlap completely, but I enjoy his enthusiasm and obvious love for the hobby, and his reviews are comprehensive and fun.

Mark Nemeth: RYCT Patrick Riley re organic forms for dungeons: For both dungeons and continents I've had great success with drawing around puddles, stains and other found shapes, as shown.



Re college students dressed for clubbing: True. As a middle-aged father I mostly worry about the young women catching a chill while wearing as little as possible in the damp Irish winters.

Matt Stevens: Welcome aboard! The Pants of Devouring sound like a terrible risk to put on, and yet, somewhere some PC will give it a try.

You're not wrong to have a preference for a certain type of game. Not everyone likes the player/author split that story games often require, and there's plenty of new games with interesting ideas in the OSR and NuOSR space that put characters firmly in the hands of the players, while driving interesting stories in the process.

Roger BW: RYCT Avram Grumer re *Troika*: The rules are certainly light, and often ignorable. I think a lot of the heavy lifting is done by the character types/classes, where there is a considerable amount of world building hidden in the descriptions. The *Kriegsmesser* game I ran for my group before *Mausritter* was part *Blades in the Dark* and part *Troika*, with the *Troika* influence being mostly the long list of character classes.

RYCT Dylan Capel re *Pendragon*'s two tones: I agree it's hard to reconcile the two tones in play. You can play *Pendragon* as the shining Arthurian myth, or with the gritty, muddy Monty Python peasant in a field but there is bleed from one to the other, particularly in the Winter Phase. It's a bit like *Trail of Cthulhu* with the Purist and Pulp modes but with a Tommy gun that only works half the time.

Good point about the first mentions of the Aslan and the Hani in C. J. Cherryh's books. I can't find my copy of *Library Data A-M* to check what details that first appearance gave. If I ever used Aslan in a *Traveller* game I'm sure I leant heavily on the Cherryh model from the books though.

Re tick-hunting: One of my regular players is notorious for 'tick-fishing' as we call in our group. We are united in disdain for the USAn usage of 'check' for 'tick' however.

John Redden: Re *Mouseguard* as National Guard with mice: My *Mausritter* game is more like *MacGyver* meets the Marx Brothers with mice.

Mitch Hyde: I hope your minis were dry and your dice were hot for the Cauldron convention.

Erica Frank (Elf): Welcome aboard! By your rubric, most of my players are elves, but their GM (me) is an unrepentant goblin.

Your gaming week is pretty full! I play board games once or twice a week and have a regular RPG session on Thursday evenings. I'm kicking off a new RPG game slot on Friday 14th November but will have to wait and see if that becomes a regular thing.

Re solo TTRPGs: I've also started playing solo RPGs, and kit-bash my own rules as I see fit in the process. See the solo *Traveller*-adjacent write-up later in this zine. I have tried some of the published solo games, like *Corny Gron*, *The Last Tea Shop*, and *Four Against Darkness*. I think I prefer the journaling style more than the procedural approach of *4AD*¹⁰.

I too have hundreds of games from charity bundles. The interface of itch.io, the source of most of the bundles, has made it difficult to engage with the cornucopia of games, so I rely mostly on recommendations from others like yourself, or the Solo_Roleplayin Reddit sub¹¹.

I do generally start with pencil and paper for solo play. My handwriting isn't too bad and I like the feel of writing and jotting things down.

RYCT me re name spellings: Thanks for the sympathy. Do you prefer we use Erica or Elf in comments?

RYCT Avram Grumer re one vs. two columns: I'm flip-flopping on the number of columns. Single column feels more natural, but without a relatively large point size for the line lengths are uncomfortably long. I may

¹⁰ Not the once-glorious British record label that brought us the Cocteau Twins and Dead Can Dance.

¹¹ https://old.reddit.com/r/Solo_Roleplaying/

switch back to two columns to keep the point size down and limit the page count.

RYCT Pum re Windows 11: I don't know anybody who really prefers Windows 11 to what's come before. Not regular but non-technical users, nor the IT professionals I work with. For my home machine I had to use a script to create install media that removed most of the cruft and surveillance-ware that comes as default.

Also: fuck AI.

Gabriel Roark: Re me as a model player: Oh I write a good description but I'm sure I'm guilty of plenty of annoying behaviours as a player.

The Garavogue 20-yr single malt sounds delicious. A friend from work lives in Middleton and highly recommends the distillery tour, particularly if you tell them you're a local and get invited to some behind-the-scenes stuff not generally shown to the public. The free whiskey at the end of the tour is pretty good too!

Re resource hungry AI data centres: The tide might be turning, as more people are commenting on the lack of sustainability, and more importantly, on the lack of a clear path to profit for the venture funds and corporations that have spent hundreds of billions of dollars on what appears to me as a bubble. I do worry that the movers and shakers behind the hype will get off scot-free, while the stock market collapses, and everyday people (once again) pay hard for the folly and greed of the tech and financial sectors.

Sympathies on your skating injury. That's an impressive amount of bruising! I hope it cleared up well.

Michael Cule: Re *Mausritter*: Good luck with the game. I accept no blame for its reception, however.

I dropped the encumbrance rules early on. The combination of items and conditions as encumbering things is clever, but as usual more fiddly than I like to track. It's hard to keep the item and condition cards on a character sheet if everyone is sitting on couches, and not at a table.

Re Theodore the Debagged: So long as Pum doesn't try dressing in character for your sessions you should be all right.

The Lunar bureaucracy puts me in mind of the Roman Army in *Asterix the Legionary*. Thank the Red Goddess Graham doesn't have ready access to the Gauls' magic potion.

Re schoolbook inspirations: I've loved a lot of the Dorling Kindersley map books and exploded view books, as well as things like "Life in a Medieval Castle" as inspirations for game ideas.

Patrick Zoch: I hope the extended furlough is in the rear view mirror by now.

Re printing *E&A*: At a 183 pages lastish, I hope no one is printing the APA out unnecessarily.

Re *D&D* boss monsters not using magical treasure in their possession: You can handwave some cases with class-specific items that the monster(s) can't use but that becomes hard to justify if it means there is loot for the cleric or magic user but nothing for the fighter. Some monsters are perhaps too dim to realise what they've got, but that begs the question why they hold onto the useless loot.

Patrick Riley: I like drafting in the players of clerics & paladins to define the gods and the pantheon. One of my players in the *Dungeon World* campaign I ran in 2013/2014 played a priest and his descriptions of his god inspired me and drove a lot of the later campaign details.

Re em dashes: I never used them frequently, but I do object to them being tarred with the LLM-AI brush now. I've seen some writing where there are spaces around the em dash — like so — and that just feels wrong to me.

RYCT Mark A. Wilson re *Brindlewood Bay*: It just struck me that *Brindlewood Bay* fits better in the mold of *Columbo* as a partly a *howdunnit* rather than a *whodunnit*, with the audience (the players and GM in this case) at least partly aware of the genre conceit and waiting to see the pieces fall into place. For diehard *whodunnit* fans, I suspect it's very unsatisfying.

Pum: That cut-away tank isn't going anywhere soon. It makes me think of Cyclops of the X-Men going up against a tank.

RYCT Dylan Capel about line length and columns: Agreed. I often zoom a two column layout to single column for ease of reading, particularly on smaller screens.

Dylan Capel: Is *Beetle Knight* inspired by *Hollow Knight*? It certainly sounds like it is.

The chain of related encounters is something I first came across on the Necropraxis blog¹², where the sequence of encounters can include clues and hints to

¹²

<https://necropraxis.com/2014/02/03/overloading-the-encounter-die/>

the creatures one might later encounter, allowing the players to prepare if they're wise.

Jim Eckman: Re gaming style: Thanks for the compliment.

Using players to run monsters when too many turn up is a clever twist, so long as the player-controlled monsters don't wipe the floor with the PCs. I doubt that would be well received.

Mark A. Wilson: Sympathies on the continued stress of job hunting.

Re media: *Taskmaster* is required viewing in our house too, and one of the few shows that gets the kids to stay and watch a whole episode as a family.

Re texting as a game mechanic: It's definitely used in some computer games, and I don't doubt there are Twine games that lean heavily into it. For me in a traditional RPG, it would have to be a side channel rather than the focus of the play.

Avram Grumer: *Alzabos & Excruciations* is genius, and a game of fantasy cartographers and their hijinks would be awesome.

Re *Sentinels Comics: The Roleplaying Game*: I don't need another superhero RPG, particularly one that doesn't handle much beyond fights and crime fighting. It is a shame the Greater Than Games closed down though. My favourite superhero RPGs remain *The Supercrew* RPG for its clever, lightweight mechanics, and the Cortex-based *Marvel Superheroic Roleplaying Game* for its ingenious dice pools and troupe style of play.

RYCT Lisa Padol re *Smallville*: When I got to this comment, I realised that *Marvel Superheroic Roleplaying* probably wasn't for you. I love building a dice pool. Go figure.

Lovely artwork of the dragon on Atlantic Avenue.

Brian Misiaszek: Re Paratethys: Excellent stuff. I see from YCTM that you've read some T. Kingfisher. Have you read the most recent of her *Sworn Soldier* novels? I'd recommend it (and the previous two) as great horror stories inspired by decidedly non-*Lovecraftian* horror. The three books so far are *What Moves the Dead*, *What Feasts At Night*, and *What Stalks the Deep*, and I highly recommend them.

If you enjoy *The Twisted Ones* and its retelling of "The White People", another novel of hers, *The Hollow Places*, is a tribute to *Algernon Blackwood's* short story, "The Willows" and is also excellent.

RYCT Avram Grumer: I love the idea of *vegetarian metric*.

Lisa Padol: I read and enjoyed *Something Completely Different*. Well done on getting it out and thank you for the hard work.

Your sun-wound sounds similar to mine. "Curse Yellow-face¹³!"

I'm glad you've enjoyed the *Mausritter* write-ups. The map has been a real centrepiece of the campaign, as the players gradually explore the area around their home and learn more about the world. In our latest session, the group have finally plucked up the courage to follow "the Death road" towards the human town as they have an artifact they wish to destroy which can "only be destroyed by Man." This means I have to draw more of the map!

Thanks for the history of *The Masks of Nyarlathotep*. It certainly has grown over the editions.

The joke in James Wallis's *FRUP* was that while in-world everyone measured up against the rulebooks (the original three *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* hardbacks fell out of the sky and became gospel) no one in the world was actually a magic user, or a cleric, or had multiple attacks per round, etc., but everybody behaved as if the rulebooks were a true representation of reality and reflected the will of God.

RYCT me re Wax and Wane: I've never read anything by Brandon Sanderson. Are there yin-yang fish in his books?

You're right that I lost the end of my comment to Michale Cule. I think it was about off-the-cuff NPCs coming back to bite me when the players decide they really like a throwaway NPC.

Re zine length and APA length: I'm already resigned to accepting I'm not going to be able to read everything in each issue, and I don't expect readers to feel my zine is essential reading. I do try to read all the comments though. I feel that's the lifeblood of any APA and where a sense of community lies.

Joshua Kronengold: Well done on the comments catch-up.

Re Dead Dog: Curiosity Killed the Cat: There's got to be fertile ground for escape room/RP cross-overs, right?

Re Niven's Kzinti: Of course! How could I have forgotten the Kzinti? Marc Miller may have gender-swapped the male/female roles Niven used somewhat but I don't

¹³ To use a Gloranthan Troll curse.

doubt that Miller and the others at GDW read Niven's books. It doesn't surprise me that Niven had sub-intelligent females Kzin, while Cherryh had dominant and politically scheming female Hani. It certainly would be the way to bet if you knew either of the authors' other works. Cordwainer Smith also had cat people in his works, and as you say there are probably many other earlier examples.

Re CoC and BRP skill lists: I take your point that percentile systems are particularly vulnerable to the phenomenon of "a list of things my PC is bad at." There are just too many skills for me to care about, and too great a chance of one player dumping points into something that later never comes up in play. I'd almost prefer if the skill points were distributed during play (with some limitations) as the PCs encountered challenges the players' felt they should have a good chance at overcoming.

Re percentile skills and *Unknown Armies* mechanics: I liked the flip-flop rule (IIRC) and the cherries mechanic as well as the strong point you make about the regular/contest/stressful distinction in the rules. With the penumbra rule allowing skill rolls for things related to your skill, it felt more forgiving when calling for a skill roll other than in a stress situation. I admit in many games I do call for a skill or attribute test when I should probably let it slide. Generally I'm a lenient GM so I like to call on luck sometimes, or I'd have the players steamroller me.

RYVT Jim Vassilakos et al. re actual AI intelligence: A fellow called Maxim Lott has been tracking IQ test results for various AI models for some time now. The tests generally have to be modified to be text only, as most LLM-AIs can't interpret images, but the results are fascinating and perhaps a little terrifying¹⁴. If they represent actual intelligence is a question I can't answer.

Jim Vassilakos & Timothy Collinson: (Jim) Re the Vargr in *Traveller* and the Ancients soft spot for Terran resettlement/uplifts: Fair point. It's hard to justify beyond <spoiler>Grandfather having a soft spot for humans and wolves</spoiler>. With a single god-like figure in charge in the past, some of *Traveller's* Imperium setting is not much more detailed than "a wizard did it."

The Bobrick/Martire warp bubble sounds interesting, though as you say particle impacts are a killer at velocities close to *c*, particularly if lack of steering means

you can't avoid a previously unseen region of denser gas or dust.

(Timothy) RYCT Roger BW re *2300AD*: I loved *2300AD* when it came out apart from the rules. The exploration and expanding frontier setting appeal to me more than the regular trading and roguery of the original *Traveller*. Were I do play *2300AD* now, I'd use a different set of rules, probably *Traveller* or *Cepheus*, ironically.

(Timothy) Re the inspiration for the Aslan race: Joshua Kronengold hit the target with Niven's Kzinti. I forgot about them and they predate *Traveller* by a good margin, and even have a male/female split, though one more distasteful than Miller's Aslan.

(Timothy) RYCT John Redden re *Alien Clay*: I haven't read that yet, but recently read Tchaikovsky's *Cage of Souls*, a dying Earth-style novel, equally well-written and for the most part depressing.

TravCon sounds like a lot of fun. I love dogs, but six billionaires? That's an ethical quandary.

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¹⁴

<https://www.maximumtruth.org/p/deep-dive-ai-progress-continues-as>

OVERLORD'S ANNALS

ATTRONARCH, THE EXALTED OVERLORD OF UNCONTESTED VASTLANDS

VOLUME 4 · ISSUE 10 · DECEMBER 2025

IN THIS ISSUE

OVERLORD'S ANNALS is a monthly zine in which I share session reports from games I either run or have participated in. Sometimes I also share our house rules and other reflections too. Art is primarily from players—see attributions for details. In this issue I comment Ever & Anon issues three, four, and five.

ATTRIBUTIONS

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CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS CAMPAIGN

I'm running a weekly online old-school D&D game focused on underworld and wilderness adventures in the Wilderlands of High Fantasy Barbarian Altanis—a hostile land filled with ancient riches and antediluvian evils.

You can learn more about our campaign at: <https://attronarch.com/wilderlands>

Beginners and experienced players welcome alike. Write to me at attronarch@mailbox.org if you'd like to join.

EXEDRA

Comments and responses to previous issues of Ever & Anon.

E&A 3

RE: Reddened Stars number 1 / John Redden Thank you, John!

RE: BUGBEARS & BALLYHOO #42 / Gabriel Roark Them holding hands was a cute moment. There were four possible locations they could've teleported to—the one they went to wasn't the worst.

Players provide their character's description, I just turn them into a single sentence for ease of reuse. They can always provide an update but no one has done so thus far. I think I will ask (demand?) update once a character reaches name level.

Ignoring secret doors is sometimes the right thing to do. Opening them is always a gamble. Is it a way out? Or a monster that will eat your face?

Only one way to find out.

RE: Going to be Ad-Libbed / Avram Grumer When I quote player characters I always try to use their player's words verbatim. They sometimes see things differently, and I don't always jump to correct them. Unless it is a question of game mechanics and rules, of course.

Welcome to E&A, great to have you around. Beautiful zine layout. Looking forward to your future contributions.

RE: Twisting the Rope #3 / Myles Corcoran It was a lot of rats indeed. I'll pass the compliments to the player.

RE: Denizens of the Library #2 / Brian Rogers I have found that three hour sessions are long enough to keep tension without becoming too exhausting. Regarding the "suicide corridor," I was happy the decided not to explore it further. The results would be most unsurprising.

RE: Age of Menace / Brian Christopher Misiaszek I seldomly use puzzles, because they can easily gridlock any session. That's why I carefully curate a list of them, mostly children-appropriate (difficulty-wise), so I can pull them out in a time of need.

RE: Ronin Engineer for Ever and Anon #3 / Jim Eckman Thank you.

RE: An Unlooked For Zine #2 / Lisa Padol Assassins' Guild in Hara is obliged to identify their target that there is an assassination contract placed on them. They are also obliged to offer their target a chance to "buy off" that contract, effectively voiding it. What they also sometimes offer is an addition grace period within which they will not accept new contracts on the target.

Regarding rats, each player character rolled damage, and that determined the number of rats killed in a round. It was chaotic and desperate, just how we like it. Ghost kiddies were not malevolent, just playful.

RE: Accidental Recall #2 / Joshua Kronengold Thank you! We are blessed to have many exciting sessions. The tower claimed many adventurers.

RE: Traveller Play-By-Email / Jim Vassilakos LOL!

E&A 4

RE: Reddened Stars number 2 / John Redden John, always a delight to read your comment. Just let me know if you need any help running a game for your granddaughter!

RE: Engines & Emulators #4 / Blasted Heath Row Thank you Heath, appreciate it. Exedra has been my bane for years. I don't have so much time, so I often prioritise play reports over commenting.

I skim-read all E&A contributions, but writing meaningful comments takes more time than just banging our reports. That's why I decided to focus just on exedra in this issue!

RE: Ronin Engineer / Jim Eckman Thank you!

RE: Twisting the Rope #4 / Myles Corcoran Yes, it is a very common error, even after years of play. :)

But I am not surprised, since I know of people who played in the area for longer than we have and called it Barbarian Atlantis by mistake. I am not stressing about it though.

I never had too many players turn up for a session. The most I had online was 12, and the most I had offline/in-person was 17. I quite enjoy big-group games. It is important to modify Judging style a bit to ensure everything runs smooth though.

In fact, I ran several larger games at Cauldron con this year. You can read more about it at:

<https://attronarch.com/tag:Cauldron>

RE: Accidental Recall #3 / Joshua Kronengold Over the years I had people who were mostly interested in seeing / experiencing open-ended sandbox play. They'd join for few sessions and then leave. I don't really mind; everyone who resonates with our play style is welcome to play with us.

There are now several player characters in mid-levels. The level of brutality has not abated at all in my opinion. The stakes are higher, the dangers more dangerous, and the riches are richer. Just how it should be!

RE: Notes on Running Ever & Anon (and how you can too) / Jim Vassilakos Thank you for sharing behind the scenes, Jim. A fascinating read. I think you did a great job and set solid foundations for E&A. I'm happy to support and help however I can.

RE: Traveller Play-By-Email / Jim Vassilakos *Starship Troopers* recruiter is an apt reference!

Regarding Bob and Darius, I don't remember what led to me deciding both were de-faced. It might be possible they were both reduced to below zero hit points and I just got too lyrical with it. If I remember correctly they were fighting giant robber flies which have a mean attack. Both remained de-faced until they perished.

E&A 5

RE: Denizens of the Library #4 / Brian Rogers Nothing like having to roll that 1d6 while monsters are closing in on you. The tension is palpable.

Equally ridiculous is how often players mock each other for failing those rolls. There is always some trash-talking and banter involved with those stuck doors. :D

RE: Reddened Stars number 3 / John Redden Thank you! Several player characters retired from adventuring life. Luckily they are in a minority!

RE: Dreadsword 4 / Mitch Hyde Another stellar zine, mate! Owl bears are mean beasts...but you already have first-hand experience with them! ;)

RE: BUGBEARS & BALLYHOO #43 / Gabriel Roark Thank you! Barbarian Altanis is not for the weak.

RE: Ronin Engineer for Ever and Anon / Jim Eckman Thank you!

RE: An Unlooked For Zine #4 / Lisa Padol One of my internal rules is to start and finish on time. We must be respectful of that, for people have busy lives, family duties, so on and so forth. If there is combat, then finish after the round is over; if dungeon exploration, when the turn is over; if wilderness adventure, when day is over.

Since all players have multiple characters we do not have to force the unnatural "all sessions must end outside of the dungeon / safe spot." This allows players to undertake larger expeditions and dungeon delves, without risking their hard gained advance.

This is so important when they are delving into lair of intelligent foes. Imagine them going in three or five room, oops time to get out because the session will end in 15 minutes. Great, now when they return everything will be bobby-trapped, ambushes left and right, and who knows what else.

I keep detailed time records and a list of who is where. This allows us to seamlessly adapt to any number of players showing up. We always have something to pick up and just dive right into action.

RE: Traveller Play-By-Email / Jim Vassilakos Agreed. I like simple help the most—avoids players treating them like expendable meatshields.

IN NEXT ISSUE

Three session reports, picking up on where we stopped in the previous issue.

John Redden



Reddened Stars number 4
(E ka hoku o ula`ula`ole)

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Mix Natter And Anti-Natter

Regardance

We continue to watch Foundation and are enjoying it.

Gaming in Santa Rosa

I will be doing some table top gaming in Santa Rosa. The last time I visited, I was a bit surprised to find out that my wife and granddaughter we doing live action Mouse Guard in a local park. I do not know any details other than they enjoyed it.

I received a message with an image. My son, granddaughter and daughter-in law played "Heroes of the Borderland".



Sum Comments

Brian Rodgers, I like the cleric guidance. I haven't played D&D for years. But I will likely be playing a cleric during the visit with my family during December holidays.// I've been reading Tscikovsky's Children of Time. He has an amazing ability to create science fiction aliens.

Mark Nemeth, another beautiful zine. I read the D&D notes and enjoyed them.

Matt Stevens, BRP and GURPS can be the framework for story telling games. It depends on the players creativity and if the scenario has a sense of wonder.

Roger Bell West, WW II scenario with magic. Interesting.

Pedro Panhoca, Camila Panhoca, Jack and the ten bean stalks. I love it.

Mitch Hyde, those are some nice miniatures.

Erica L Frank, welcome to E&A. I still have all the old style dice but I never use them. When I visit my granddaughter during the holidays, I'll use her dice.

Gabriel Roark, Jargon Zen is back. Casting *haste* to make the E&A due date. LOL.// Skating, oh no!

Myles Corcoran, I enjoyed the Kriegsmesser writeup.

George Phillies, I enjoyed your zine. I always thought Traveller ships were a bit wimpy. My thoughts were influenced by playing a number of times in Nicolai Shapiro's Other Suns games.

Tiffanie Gray, hmm... I just might. Beautiful cover.

Michael Cule, there are ways to de-crunch GURPS. Start with GURPS lite. Make a select number skills available. Add *cross-training* as a skill, with the requirement that it be less powerful than all selected skills for the PC. The *cross-training* becomes a catch all for missing skills and attributes.

Patrick Zoch, I hope you get your back pay from this *expletive deleted* administration after the pause in the government shutdown.// I do all of my zines using Libre Office running on Ubuntu Linux. It's what I'm used to.

Patrick Riley, I enjoyed the candle story.

Paul Holman, I was annoyed by the costumes in Babylon 5. I read the Hobbit and Lord of the Rings in 1970. I still love the Hobbit, but I tend to be in *Bored of the Rings* fandom. In 1970, I had to make myself finish it.

Dylan Capel, I played in a Temple of Elemental Evil campaign 1990. I don't remember much about it.

Jim Eckman, re empires in science fiction, especially space science fiction. I've always thought that a society that could develop star ship technology, would advance social structure beyond our own and certainly be pseudo-medieval social structure.

Mark Wilson, re job search. If you can afford to be picky, *do it*. I was once recruited by a former manager of mine and the start-up was awful. Be careful.// As someone who has played in rock bands from 1970 to present (The Fabulous Baxters, Dollar Varden and the Rockin' Pneumonia, the

Bandemix, the Gonzos), I love your rock band scenario.

Avrum Grumer, nice random thoughts.// Maps for a detailed space game are difficult. I was able to pass out a notebook of maps to the players for a space exploration game involving a lost star ship.

Brian Misiaszek, hauntology, I can relate to that. Paratethys, a fascinating concept. // Does part 3 complete the Habanna Horror?// I continue to brace myself as I watch the news.

Lisa Padol, I did email Barry asking for a refund (not Lee). I was ignored. I used to work with Barry. He excels at ignoring unless it's something he is focused on.// As usual I am impressed by the number of games you touch. I just don't have anything to say.// Interesting question on mental institutions in other countries. // Re Wednesday. It is so unlike the original Addams Family. I think it was the elements of horror that leaked out.

Joshua Kronengold, I cannot stay up late. I can adjust to timezones, but not as easily as I used to. It's old man disease. // I enjoy Charles Stross.// What does TLDR mean?// Interesting enough, all the games I have run have been politically void. But, I myself, have strong opinions. You might look at Document on Network Economics on johntredde.com.

Attronarch, I believe I'm repeating myself, but as a background music for your games you should play Queen's *Another One Bites the Dust*. Nice writeups.

Vassilokos, Collinson and **Rader**, I enjoyed the writeup as usual. Up! With the Navy, *bleep* the royals.// Re **Timothy's** comment, I'm currently reading Children of Time by Tsaikovsky. Again he likes to paint bleak scenarios.

Jargon Zen

The four elements, earth, water fire and air disperse as in a dream.
The six dusts, perceptions, roots, senses and consciousness are originally empty.
To understand that, the Buddha returns to a place of light.
The sun is setting over the western mountains.
The moon is rising in the east.

Humor

A black hole sits down at a bar. The bartender says would you like to look at a menu? The black hole says, "no, I'm a light eater".

BUGBEARS & BALLYHOO #44

November 17, 2025, for Ever & Anon #6

Gabriel Roark

Rancho Cordova, CA

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I hope this zine finds you well & that you're untroubled by its changed appearance. See, after writing Dylan Capel in B&B #43 that I preferred to write & read online documents in two columns, a friend of mine on MeWe (mewe.com) complained to me about attempting to read E&A on his mobile phone. I decided that I could not help him, since he insists on reading a PDF publication *on a mobile phone*, but the conversation did get me thinking about document accessibility again. I've known for a while that sans-serif fonts are preferable for accessibility, so I moved from Bookman Old Style (12-point) to Tw Cen MT (14-point) font, which is a sans-serif typeface that resembles the Futura used in the Advanced D&D (AD&D 1e) core rulebooks. I also reverted to a one-column format for text, except when presenting longer dot or number lists. I am not settled on this arrangement yet. Opinions on it are welcome.

In this Issue

- Comments on E&A #5
- XP Tally for the Temple of Elemental Evil Campaign
- Nextish

Comments on E&A #5

Egoscan Index

- Cowman Baloney Face #1
- Shiny Math Rocks #1
- Denizens of the Library #3–4
- Dreadsword 4
- The Dragon's Beard #90
- Attacks of Opportunity 4
- An Unlooked For Zine #4
- Overlord's Annals 4(9)

Cowman Baloney Face #1 (Stevens): Welcome to *Ever & Anon*, Matt. Our A&E contributions didn't overlap, as I didn't send a zine to Lee until 2017. Bill Fitzgerald's description of Cowman Baloney Face is priceless. What was his deal with cows, anyway?

I hope you will share more about this obscure Blackmoor deity. Congratulations on 15 years of marriage!

Question: Did Bill Fitzgerald go by his middle name? What if Cowman Baloney Face was, in part, a reference to his initials—say, C. [Bill]oney Fitzgerald?

Shiny Math Rocks #1 (Erica L. Franks): Hi, Elf. Welcome to E&A! So, your name is Elf, but you are a Dice Goblin. What a contradictory ancestry! Regarding the prospect of commenting on every E&A zine, all good, do what is feasible & enjoyable for you. B&B tends toward smaller comment sections when the amount of gaming content is greater, or my reading & writing time is truncated. If I have a surfeit of time & shorter gaming contributions, B&B's comment section usually compasses most of the zines in the most recent E&A.

Denizens of the Library #3–4 (Rogers): I've enjoyed the explication of your Basic/Expert (B/X) D&D homebrew rules over the last two issues of DotL; you've concocted an impressive corpus of changes. As I sat down to comment on Under the Giant's Shadow (UGS), it occurred to me that I don't know B/X too well—I have better knowledge of the Basic/Expert/Companion/Master/Immortal (BECMI) rules—because I haven't read B/X but a retroclone thereof, namely *Lamentations of the Flame Princess* (LotFP).

First off, bravo for a premise that sounds original & gets players around the moral quandaries that bother so many about the FRPG tropes of killing & taking stuff. Well played. I assume that B/X & UGS use the Chaotic-Neutrality-Lawful alignment scheme since that is what LotFP uses. I prefer this to the unwieldy, if interesting, nine-alignment system of Advanced D&D.

Speaking of AD&D, you mentioned its “career system”. By this, do you mean the secondary skills table of AD&D 1e's *Dungeon Masters Guide*? The professional & personal keyword mechanic is elegant & appears well suited to B/X. Likewise your handling of going below 1 hit point (hp).

I like what you did with respect to reversing magic-user spells & think I might employ that in some future game. How do you handle this in practice? Some spells in B/X have reversible versions (such as Light) with defined effects at the set spell level. Do magic-users still have to be Level 2 to cast Darkness? In the example that you provided in DotL #3, the reverse of Magic Missile is Shield, another spell in B/X. Did you compile a list of such reversals or simply adjudicate on the fly? Similarly, could a magic-user without the Magic Missile spell know & memorize Shield as a Level 2 magic-user & use Magic Missile via spell reversal?

Say, in converting as many rules to an X-in-6 chance, was *Swords & Six-Siders* (<https://www.pigames.net/store/default.php?cPath=137>) an influence, or did you make a leap from B/X's thief abilities & searching conventions to managing probabilities for other actions (*Swords & Six-Siders* only uses a d6 for all resolution)? I am not sure that I could sell my gaming group on X-in-6 for combat rolls that most D&D editions handle

with a d20 roll, whether using descending or ascending armor class. Swords & Six-Siders looks like a good game, although straight 1d6 for everything seems limiting. I think it requires an actual playthrough to judge well.

Your healing rules seem sensible. Allowing some hp recovery in a campsite (would that apply to a suitably sealed room in a dungeon?) is a good compromise.

RYCTM on PCs going over the minimum amount of XP needed to reach the next experience level, I do allow PCs to go over the minimum amount of XP needed to reach the next experience level, but I cap it before a second level is gained. Maybe I was unclear or wrote something that I didn't mean by mistake. In the context of the ToEE campaign, the PCs usually return to Hommllet (relative safety but see this installment of play reports) before earning quite that much extra XP. Once they take a recess, no more XP earning if a PC has earned enough XP to level.

In DotL #4, page 4, you mention soul echoes—what are they? Acts of faith are cool.

Dreadsword 4 (Mitch): Phew! What a lot of preparation for Cauldron! The pics of the Battle of Emridy Meadows on your blog are sick! I am awed by your ability to use the Chainmail rules; I struggle to make sense of them, even though I find WRG's modern warfare rules comprehensible. Do you have any suggestions for teaching oneself how to use Chainmail?

The Dragon's Beard #90 (Zoch): It is good to hear that the hit-and-run accident didn't injure your daughter.

Regarding Skyrim: yes, real estate ownership in Skyrim is very distracting! Emma used to laugh at me for playing Skyrim over a period of years. High replay value!

RYCTM on followers in AD&D, I can understand your players' conundrum. What to do with the followers is a different set of problems than low-level PCs taking on hirelings, though. High-level PCs receive followers upon reaching certain levels & often by doing something grand, like building a fortress. Once a campaign reaches dominion play, I think the dynamic changes significantly & followers become personalities in a subgame of AD&D: domain management & defense. Take a fighter or cleric's followers as examples. They comprise a corpus of loyal, 0-level troops with up to a handful of leveled NPCs as sub-leaders. As stated, they come around when the PC builds a fortress, shrine, or fortified house of worship. I think AD&D's assumption is that these followers flock to the PC's banner to serve as a loyal bodyguard & to defend the piece of civilization that the PC is carving out of the wilds. In short, they are not dungeon fodder. These might mean that players haven't much to do with the followers during gameplay unless the action is brought to the PC's domain (there are provisions for this in the DMG). This can occur while the PCs are out adventuring elsewhere, become a campaign focus, or as an episodic subgame where the action focuses on the PC's home retinue & the leader-type followers.

Attacks of Opportunity, Issue 4 (Dylan): Appreciation for your mention of *Tomb of a Thousand Doors*. The Stonehell megadungeon also has dungeon repair crews (kobolds, primarily). I recommend Stonehell to any referee. The only pitfall is if you are not running the dungeon with a set of B/X D&D rules, be prepared to adjust the value of treasure in the adventure. A referee running AD&D or maybe The Arduin Grimoire will severely devalue copper & silver coin hoards on account of the different coin exchange rates.

In our ToEE campaign, I have the temple servitors & other dungeon denizens fortify, repair, & set new traps whenever the PCs let up the pressure. The modules themselves do not provide any guidance for this kind of thing, just parameters for recruitment & replacement of losses.

I don't think I checked out the links on page 5 of your zine. Think I will do that now. Thanks for providing them.

An Unlooked For Zine #4 (Lisa): Oh, you like players enthusiastically participating in their characters' deaths? The play reports that I included this are for you, then!

I am thinking about your LARP hacks for visually showing participants which PCs have one or more NPC hangers-on & wondering if I can repurpose similar visual cues for a different gaming purpose. See, I think that my players & I struggle with the sheer number of characters in play. Our table has two players running three PCs. There are hired hands, animal companions, & a familiar (mounts & carts, too, but they don't venture into the Temple itself). Players & their referee sometimes forget to have some of the actors act. This can be detrimental to the party. Too, I think some of the animal companions might react sub-optimally in a variety of circumstances, which I should probably enforce for added interest & verisimilitude. Maybe I should prepare a cheat sheet with the entire party on it (basic, I know).

That still leaves the dilemma of remembering & adjudicating the actions of a party of roughly 18 (counting animals) plus NPCs & the adventuring environment. The players struggle with this as well. Perhaps I will take index cards & make a set of action cards: cast spell, sneak, charge, parley, retreat, turn undead, close to melee, melee attack, wait, & ranged attack. Hm, that is fiddly. Better than committing it all to memory, but fiddly. Gotta reduce the number of options. Parley, wait, movement, spellcasting/turn undead, ranged attack, and melee attack. Six options are simpler than ten options. Players put their cards face up on the table when they declare actions & then all of us have a rough picture of the plan of action. It also makes it easier for me to group actions that are likely to occur around the same time.

I surely hope that you have closed your employment gap.

Overlord's Annals 4(9) (Attronarch): Castilho's art on page 4 is great; very illustrative of the party wiggling out over Ambros's glow. Ah, the infamous quest(s) in return for raising the dead! Poseidon might give Hagar another chance at life but the quests will give him many more chances to die again!

XP TALLY FOR THE TOEE CAMPAIGN

Between *Bugbears & Ballyhoo* #33 and 37 (written for *Alarums & Excursions*), inclusive, I provided session reports that detailed the PCs' XP earnings. That string of B&Bs covered the first nine sessions of the campaign. I resumed the project in E&A #3. I won't provide a synopsis of the campaign in thish because E&A is freely available; have a peek at my zine in E&A #3 if you want a sketch of what came before. In *Bugbears & Ballyhoo* #42, we left off at the end of Session 12. Naturally, thish picks up at Session 13.

Here are the XP gains for the Frog Leg Gang at the end of Session 12/start of Session 13:

- **Jack Ironheart** (human paladin 1)
 - Total XP: 1,859
 - Level 2 requires 2,751 XP
- **John Ironheart** (human cleric 1)
 - Total XP: 1,859
 - Level 2 requires 1,501 XP
 - John can train to Level 2
- **Ekim Gnimelf** (wood elf thief 1)
 - High Dex: +10% to XP
 - Total XP: 2,099
 - Level 2 requires 1,251 XP
 - Ekim can train to Level 2
- **Ttam Gnimelf** (wood elf ranger 1/magic-user 1)
 - 1,203/1,203 XP
 - Level 2 requires 2,251/2,501 XP
- **Dame Sonya Ravenclaw** (human cavalier 1)
 - Total XP: 2,582
 - Level 2 requires 2,501 XP
 - Sonya can train to Level 2
- **Lady Moira Ravenclaw** (human magic-user 1)
 - High Int: +10% to XP
- Total XP: 2,549
- Level 2 requires 2,501 XP
- Moira can train to Level 2
- **New Moon** (elven bard 1)
 - Total XP: 1,886
 - Level 2 requires 2,001 XP
- **Fern** (human druid 1)
 - Total XP: 1,886
 - Level 2 requires 2,001 XP
- **Amelie Atugar** (half-orc cleric 1)
 - Total XP: 1,782
 - Level 2 requires 1,501 XP
 - Amelie can train to Level 2
- **Omar Atugar** (half-orc fighter 1)
 - High Str: +10% to XP
 - Total XP: 2,034
 - Level 2 requires 2,001 XP
 - Omar can train to Level 2
- **Gobi** (gnome illusionist 1/thief 1)
 - High Dex & Int: +10% XP
 - Total XP: 1,822/1,765
 - Level 2 requires 2,251/1,251 XP
 - Gobi can train to Level 2 thief

New Moon composed these play reports, although I exercised editorial prerogative as needed.

Session 13. Reaping 25–26 (07/14/2024)

The day was half over when the session began, as the party was in Hommlet's Inn of the Welcome Wench at midday. There also were six girls that looked like sex workers with an evil human pimp (Jack the paladin can detect evil at will). Ttam paid the pimp to give all the girls a day off. Suddenly, Baldric & Fern keeled over, poisoned. Jack & Gobi rushed over to the kitchen just in time to see the one who is presumably the culprit running off. Baldric was dead & Terjon the head priest cast slow poison on Fern, who is near death. Sonja carried Fern to his superior Jaroo, who cast cure poison & saved Fern, though he would be incapacitated for the next week. After taking Baldric to St. Cuthbert's church, we learned that his only hope is Mother Screng, herbalist in Nulb.

Sonja, Ttam, Ekim, New Moon, Jack, & John headed to Nulb with Baldric's body in the late evening. They encountered a roadblock manned by a group of gnomish bandits. A few of the gnolls were quickly killed & looted.

The PCs nabbed **14 gold pieces (gp)**, although Ekim surreptitiously pocketed **4 gp & 5 electrum pieces (2.5 gp value)**. Defeating the gnolls netted the PCs **20 XP** each.

The party made its way quickly to Nulb. Jack & John took Baldric to Mother Screng & the rest of the party waited in readiness on the road to Hommlet. Meanwhile, back in Hommlet, Omar & Amelie investigated the sex worker's situation & offered to escort them to Nulb.

Mother Screng revived Baldric in exchange for the promise of 2,000 gp. She also informed them that the poison in the vial was often used by high level assassins, but that she had not seen anyone by the description of the assassin from Hommlet. The party then headed immediately back to Hommlet. Omar & Amelie rejoined the group on the way back.

Meanwhile, Lady Raven sold the small loot in Hommlet for **1400 gp**, which split to **147 gp** apiece (counting coinage we found).

Session 14. Reaping 27–Goodmonth 3 (08/18/2024)

Baldric required rest until Reaping 27, whereas Fern would convalesce in Jaroo's grove until Goodmonth 4.

Sonya hires a young woman named Lysia to mind the party's horses for a month & pays Carter the carter to keep an eye on Lysia to a total tune of 10 gp per month. Sonya intends to train Lysia as her squire if the young woman shows promise.

Terjon informs the Froggers in the morning that Kenter Nevets called a council meeting to address the poisoning/attempted assassination of the party. Gundergoot, Jaroo, & Miller Mitch were also there. Before the meeting started, John suggests appointing Lady Raven to a seat on the council. Kenter politely declined, suggesting that the party did not yet have enough standing in the area. They suggested that after the moathouse has been secured for a while, there might be a place for her on the council.

The topic of the assassination was then broached. The council suspected that conspirators supporting the ToEE are behind the attempted assassination, agreeing with the Frog Leg Gang's own suspicions. Jack apologized for the disruption that the party's activities brought to town, & Kenter assured us that no offense was taken. He also voiced the opinion that the ToEE is back in play. Burne said that the Tomb of Serten (who is Jack & John's father) is in the Emridy Meadows & that he was buried with magic items that might be helpful. He suggested that the party head due north from Hommlet about 10–15 leagues; the tomb is by an ancient oak tree growing at the top of a hill. Gobi borrowed 800 gp from Fern & 700 gp from New Moon. Gobi agreed to do a favor for Fern & to repay New Moon at 10% interest.

On the morning of Goodmonth 1 the party left Hommlet for Serten's Tomb. After two hours, Ttam stopped the party, having heard human voices. Lady Raven's raven familiar, Mr. More, flew high & identified bandits. They were unaware of the party & we quietly passed by. A second party of bandits took one look at the party & decided not to attack. After an uneventful night, we continued along the road (Goodmonth 1). When the road turned toward the west, the party continued due north. After a few miles, the party saw what looked like the hill with the ancient oak & a party of gnolls in between. New Moon parlayed with the gnolls & they agreed to help search for the tomb for the price of 1 gp each. When we reached the tree, there was a large stone with St. Cuthbert's holy symbol. New Moon cast detect magic & the stone was inert. Jack put his matching holy symbol on it & a stone door rose from the ground with a matching symbol. After solving the riddle ("I am Serten, speak the same, enter forth in order to gain") we paid the gnolls, sent them on their way, & entered the tomb. There was a man lying in repose & dressed in plate, holding a shield. Behind the body stood two statues, one of which was holding a wooden cudgel. With his detect magic on, New Moon detected magic on the armor/body, shield, & cudgel. After praying/speaking to their father, the body disappeared, leaving the armor & shield behind. We slept in the tomb that night, heading due west on the morning of Goodmonth 2.

After about six hours of travel, the road was in sight. We found a party of pilgrims headed to the church in Hommlet, although they were headed in the wrong direction. We led them back to the road & camped with them, telling them which direction to go to find Hommlet & warning them about the bandits on the road. Afterward, we head north toward Verbobonc (VBB). After a couple of hours, we encountered some gnomes on a covered wagon, Zuk & Zana Gnook. They are traveling merchants traveling from Nulb to Hommlet. They sell Jack & John a set of stone mason tools for 225 gp. They looked over the enchanted gear we found, identifying the shield as a low-level enchantment (+1), the armor as a higher-level enchantment (+2), & the cudgel as being enchanted & also having a special property that could be activated. We sold our platinum pin & ivory box for **2,050 gp (304 gp & 10 sp** to each PC). Zuk & Zana also offer to sell our other items for a 5% commission. We arrived in VBB midafternoon (about 3:00). When we got into town, they sold the rest for **1,300 gp**.

Session 15. Goodmonth 4–5

Zara & Zuk Gnook bring back their cousin Breena in the late afternoon. The party begins by heading to the inn & making arrangements. Amelie received a prophecy about the ToEE at Zodal's temple. Based on the prophecy, we determined that we need to acquire a "golden orb" to open four boxes, each connected to one of the four elements (water, air, earth, & fire). Fern headed up to VBB with a merchant's caravan on Goodmonth 4. Gobi cased the alchemist's shop overnight.

Ekim pickpocketed randsos on the streets, making **20 gp** & **10 sp** for himself.

On the morning of Goodmonth 5, Jack, John, Baldric, Sonja, Ttam, & Omar offered to guard Lakmed the alchemist's shop from the Hawkmask racketeers (led by Jubal). They agreed to guard the shop for 10 gp each (except Jack, who demands 11 gp) After their negotiations, Lady Raven charmed the alchemist & asked him about some scrolls & ingredients, which he left to get. Lady Raven negotiated to buy a scroll of exorcism for 1,200 gp (which was necessary to complete a quest with the thieves' guild). Meanwhile, New Moon, while playing music on the street, saw six Hawkmarks walking down the street & followed them to Lakmed's shop.

The Hawkmarks turned to leave when threatened by Ttam, but Jack ran up & kicked the leader in the butt, enraging him & starting a fight. New Moon shouted that the Hawkmarks attacked Lakmed & ran down the street, spreading the rumor as the fight continued. The Hawkmarks were defeated & surrendered their weapons & money before heading back to Jubal. Meanwhile, Ekim snuck into Lakmed's shop & stole a bunch of stuff. The party talked to Lakmed after the fight & ascertained that Jubal has about 30 men under his command.

The PCs gained **18 gp** from the Hawkmarks. Lakmed paid the PCs their reward of **10 gp** each, **11 gp** for Jack.

Several of the Froggers who were eligible to level up took advantage of new connections & the larger adventuring population of VBB to train: Gobi, Amelie, Jack, & Ekim.

End Sessions 13–15

My notes on the apportionment of treasure gains over sessions 13–15 are sketchy. The PCs also opted to pool some monetary rewards evenly among all party members but only shared others with the PCs directly participating. Then there is Ekim, sneaking extra dough whenever he could get away with it. Accordingly, the XP awarded for treasure is approximate. The Frog Leg Gang did not fight too many foes during these sessions, so XP for defeating foes was easy to track, calculate, & assign. Note that Ekim & Amelie did not gain XP over these sessions because they had already exceeded the XP required to qualify for their next levels. The Ravenclaw sisters & Omar lost out on XP for the same reason as Ekim & Amelie & still had insufficient funds to train. New Moon required more funds to train also. Jack made out well because he scored magic armor & a weapon

from Serten's Tomb. This alone effectively put Jack at the XP that he needed to level. I could have given more XP but was disinclined to do so because the magic items were practically a gimme.

- **Jack Ironheart** (human paladin 2)
 - Total XP: 2,751 XP
 - Level 3 requires 5,501 XP
- **John Ironheart** (human cleric 1)
 - Total XP: 2,507
 - Level 2 requires 1,501 XP
 - John can train to Level 2
- **Ekim Gnimelf** (wood elf thief 2)
 - High Dex: +10% to XP
 - Total XP: 2,099
 - Level 3 requires 2,501 XP
- **Ttam Gnimelf** (wood elf ranger 1/magic-user 1)
 - 1,527/1,527 XP
 - Level 2 requires 2,251/2,501 XP
- **Dame Sonya Ravenclaw** (human cavalier 1)
 - Total XP: 2,582
 - Level 2 requires 2,501 XP
 - Sonya can train to Level 2
- **Lady Moira Ravenclaw** (human magic-user 1)
 - High Int: +10% to XP
 - Total XP: 2,549
- Level 2 requires 2,501 XP
- Moira can train to Level 2
- **New Moon** (elven bard 1)
 - Total XP: 2,534
 - Level 2 requires 2,001 XP
 - New Moon can train to Level 2
- **Fern** (human druid 1)
 - Total XP: 2,388
 - Level 2 requires 2,001 XP
 - Fern can train to Level 2
- **Amelie Atugar** (half-orc cleric 2)
 - Total XP: 1,782
 - Level 3 requires 3,001 XP
- **Omar Atugar** (half-orc fighter 1)
 - High Str: +10% to XP
 - Total XP: 2,034
 - Level 2 requires 2,001 XP
 - Omar can train to Level 2
- **Gobi** (gnome illusionist 1/thief 2)
 - High Dex & Int: +10% XP
 - Total XP: 2,178/2,121
 - I 2/T 3 requires 2,251/2,501 XP

Nextish

- Comments on E&A #6
- ToEE Play Reports & XP Tally
- IgTheme essay, maybe

An Unlooked For Zine #5

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NATTER

My zines start reaching the limit with comments only, and that's a problem. It means I have a choice between only doing comments and spending much of the month on that, or skipping things I'd rather not skip. Saying "Just do what you can" is not useful; it's far more likely to make me shrug and decide not to do anything. I'll find a solution I can live with. For now, I've cut the partial review/reaction I wrote for a fascinatingly weird game called *Necrobiotic*, which brought this down from 17 to 14 pages and let me put in a two page write up.

Recent Watching includes the *Demon Slayer* movie (very good IF you've been following the anime), the *Chainsaw Man* movie (ditto), *Father Brown Mysteries* (1974 series, expands a lot on the stories it covers), *Thursday Night Murder Club* (by the numbers, but stellar cast), and various anime including *Case Vanitas* (vampire stuff), *Lord of Mystery* (Chinese, isekai, fascinatingly complex world), *Rise of the Shield Hero* (isekai with problematic and cringeworthy elements), and *Dead Mount Death Play* (sort of reverse isekai, fascinating).

COMMENTS ON EVER AND ANON ISSUE #5

BRIAN ROGERS: I've never heard of *Musical Comedy Murders of 1940*. Is it good? re *Puffs*: To quote the website: "*Puffs* is not authorized, sanctioned, licensed or endorsed by J.K Rowling, Warner Bros. or any person or company associated with the Harry Potter books, films or play." See <https://www.concordtheatricals.com/p/65301/puffs-one-act-edition> (the main page doesn't have the quote nor does it give any useful navigation clues -- I am not a fan of current website design trends). Josh and I saw it years ago, pre-COVID, so it may be easier for me to say you're fine, but I think you're fine.

re *Inside the Library*: Yah, I'd be hesitant to let that kid gm for anyone who hadn't specifically signed up for him to do so. I suppose if he had shown up with a group wanting to play in something he ran, that would be another matter. re *Speed Centaur*: He... disguises his upper body as a horse head? That is absurdly delightful and delightfully absurd.

re *Under the Giant's Shadow*: Having someone play a familiar as a PC can work well. The main thing is that the player has enough to do and the PC doesn't feel

like an afterthought. The cleric modifications you made look reasonable, even granting you maybe should have gone further. "Cleric" is a weird class in many ways, and it's interesting looking at systems that don't have it, but are either close in feel to D&D (e.g., *Green Ronin's True 20*) or are sort of adjacent to it (e.g., at least the early editions of *Legend of the Five Rings*) (as opposed to systems doing sufficiently different things that it makes a little less sense to compare them in this regard).

re Roger BW: I've played a couple of one-shots of *Moonlight on Roseville Beach*. I hadn't thought of it in terms of PCs caring about things no one else does. You may be right; to the degree I thought of it, it was as the PCs being aware of something no one else was, which may be a distinction without a difference.

re Heath Row re art and rulebooks: For me, there's a large degree of "It depends." I love the art in *Swords of the Serpentine*. The art's not why I bought the book, but it enhances it. I've drooled over *Call of Cthulhu* books made in other countries, but there was generally no question of my buying those, as I don't know enough of the languages involved to use them. *Necrobiotic* is a beautiful book, which doesn't change my view on some of the backstory or my puzzlement about how to run a campaign or even one shot with it, but I don't have a problem with the art, quite the contrary.

Art did put me off some books as well. I didn't back the *Discworld* game on Kickstarter because of the lack of women in the quickstart art, something that didn't use to bother me. Fortunately, that book didn't need help from me to get funded, and I may buy the full version at some point, as I'm intrigued by what I hear about the system. I took one look at the core 3.x books for D&D and winced because the faux-lined notebook look makes them hard for me to read. Also, at that point, D&D was not going to be my game of choice. This is still true for 5e/2024, but the system is at least somewhat better for me (or the tools for using it are somewhat better).

Art that makes books hard to read is a problem. This was true of a couple of *Kult* supplements some decades ago, and I'm not yet sure how much of a problem it is for me with the various games using the *Mork Borg* system that I've picked up.

re Professor Roberts being unable to put down the not-very-good Tarzan book: Yes. My father read *Battlefield Earth*, told me how in many ways it was terrible, and that it nevertheless was a page-turner, all of which I found to be correct. re Mitch Hyde re *Queen of the Demonweb Pits* being not a capstone but a trap for the greedy: I'd not thought of it that way, but it does make sense. What's the capstone, then? re Nero Wolfe books: I read a few, but got tired of them quickly.

re Quinns Quest: I've played both *Jorune* and *Nobilis*, though not campaigns, so I'm not surprised that neither is "unplayable". I've played *Toon* as well, a one shot with Doc Cross and a campaign with Lee Gold. I think the game is flawed, but it's definitely not unplayable! I don't necessarily agree with everything he says about *Delta Green*, which is hardly surprising as I've helped do some of the copyediting and proofreading, but I appreciate the obvious effort and thought he put into playing the game on its own terms and doing the review.

MARK NEMETH: I hope the vacation was enjoyable. re Eastlands campaign: The art theft thread is interesting. I'm looking forward to seeing where it goes. I'm not sure I'd have started the scene before everyone was there, but this is at least partly because I don't necessarily have a good feel for how long a combat will take once a system gets at all crunchy for me. It's also hard for me to tell how much banter is likely to happen, and of course, there's always the possibility of "Okay, I don't have the painting, as far as I know, but you're welcome to search for it, and hey, if I can help you figure out where it is, I will" -- I think that's not likely for your group, but one never knows.

Like Wudron, I was surprised at the effort Elia went to and half wonder if the letter is a cunning trap, perhaps poisoning him. re Archlo: Was that body really his, then? re the picture of the devil: I would have gone for something much more inhuman; a devil-boar, perhaps, given that you've said you're trying to avoid moral issues and human-like monsters. FWIW, I don't think your write ups are too wordy.

re Patrick Riley re *Amber Diceless RPG* as a work of literary criticism: I've been told that all rpgs are, to some degree, and certainly, have read others that seem as explicitly so as *Amber DRPG*. (*Over the Edge* and *Dogs in the Vineyard* are the first two that come to mind, but I could make a much longer list.)

MATT STEVENS: Long time no see in an apa! re *Simian Conquest*: That's one I'd not heard of. I suspect the Strategist had it at one point, but that's not helpful now. re drifting away from the Cthulhupunk crowd: No ill-feeling at all. IIRC, you noted that you'd spent many years playing the same game, and were ready for a change.

As you said, we were experimenting with storytelling games at a time when -- well, I think the best way to put it is this:

When Josh, Julian, Beth, and I played *Polaris*, we were amazed! Every time we were at all confused about the rules, we turned to the book -- and *found the answer!* Sadly, this was very much the exception at the time. I won't say that this is no longer the case so much as that there are a lot more such games out there, and a lot more games where, as with *Polaris*, we can find the answers in the book.

The Writer's Room issue hasn't gone away, but there's a lot more variety of storytelling games, and this means that some of them avoid it, while others handle it better. And, I think relatedly, they also often address the issue you had with games that play like cooperative board games better.

The "what's my motivation?" thing is more complicated. On the one hand, what you're describing was definitely there. On the other, that question is something that a game generally should address to some degree, and putting that burden on the player isn't, IMO, a bad thing. Fr'ex, if I'm running *Trail of Cthulhu*, I'm going to have players choose a Drive for their PCs, which is basically a motivation, an answer to "why is your character going to run towards the danger when sensible people would run away from it?"

Drives are a word or three (Duty, Revenge, In the Blood). There are some mechanics attached to this (following one's Drive gets Stability back; ignoring it loses Stability). But the main thing it does is tells the players who aren't the GM: *You* are responsible for finding Motivation for your characters to engage with the game you agreed to play. (This is not foolproof; a player did once decide to interpret their drive extremely narrowly. However, this had to do with out of game considerations that led them to drop from the game after the first session. I've no issue with them; deciding a game is not for you is legit.)

In games like *Good Society*, Main Characters start with Desires, which one player considers "more like guidelines, really", and I'd agree. Knowing what one's character wants strikes me as a good thing, as it helps figures out what one wants to have the character do in play. Heck, take a dungeon crawl -- is my Motivation to survive and get rich? Great! I can work with that. Is it to rescue someone, avenge someone, escape, learn secrets for my patron? Also great!

This is a separate question from whether you're expected to be creating large swathes of the story that you'd normally leave to the GM. Again, there's more of a continuum than there used to be. Also, matching

expectations is important. Fr'ex, give me a Belonging Outside Belonging/No Dice, No Masters game where I know going in I'm expected to occasionally play aspects of the world over a sudden unexpected "So, what's the twist in the villain's masterplan?"

Additionally, there are more safety tools than there were two decades ago, and more nuanced use of them. The concept of a session zero, where folks talk about what they do and don't want out of a game and otherwise get on the same page, is extremely useful.

As for heists, *Fiasco* isn't the game I'd think of, even given you're talking about the subgenre of "heist-gone-wrong". I've found *Fiasco* hit or miss for me; either it goes amazingly well, or feels very meh. But I'm not looking for what you're looking for.

What do you want from a "heist-gone-wrong" game? You know going in that this is the genre, and as you said, if the characters knew that, they'd do their utmost not to go on the heist. If this combination is a problem for you, what are you looking for? A game where you don't know, out of character, that the heist will go wrong? A game where it may well go wrong, and certainly won't go as planned, but where players and their characters can try to compensate, and where how successful the characters are (or aren't) isn't mandated ahead of time or based on mushy storytelling consideration? There are decent procedural games that can cover heists, some more traditional, some less; the question is which elements work for you.

None of this is to say either that your perception was off then (it wasn't) or that you'd enjoy storytelling games now (I have no idea). TL;DR: There a lot more storytelling game and there's been enough time that some of them are good. Whether any of them are to your taste is another question, and while I can make recommendations, it's completely fine if you decide it's not worth the time you'd need to invest.

re Simplicity vs Complexity: Funny you should mention *Chivalry & Sorcery*, as a new edition of it was published recently, along with various supplements. I have no idea how well the current edition is written. There's also *Zweihander* and *Blackbirds*, thick bricks of games, and again, I've no idea how good they are. The only one I've played of these is *Blackbirds*, a one-shot online session, and I don't think I understood it at all well. As with D&D 5e/2024, I relied on the GM to tell me what to do, and to some degree, an online interface to make doing it easy.

You are, of course, oversimplifying "roll 2D6+modifier", and "and guess" is not at all always part of it. Again, as you said, it's a continuum, unless you're insisting on "and guess" as part of the definition of "minimalist games". (And let's not get into "Roll a bunch of 1d6s

and see if any of them are 6s" Forged in the Dark games this month.)

I do care if spaceship repair is complicated if it's something I'm expected to spend a lot of time playing out or running. Heck, I care if I'm expected to have to spend significant parts of the game worrying about whether the spaceship will need repairs and whether the characters can afford such repairs. I have enough of worrying about that sort of thing outside of gaming to want it to be anything more than "you need to take the job that is tonight's adventure so you can repair your ship".

Where it gets odd for me is when one can point out that I am enjoying greater complexity than I'd expect. I'm not sure if I'm likely to read, let alone run, *Fate of the Norms: Ragnarok*, but Josh noted that I enjoyed playing it, despite complexity of roughly D&D 3.x level. Apparently, it gets easier for me when I'm pulling runestones out of a bag and placing them on the diagram.

Similarly, Cortex Plus/Prime, while theoretically simpler by far than D&D, has a larger mental load than I prefer -- but when playing a game using Paragon, which is similar in that both games require assembling a dice pool according to complex rules and then counting only a small number of those dice, the fact that the author created a cheat sheet with a diagram for me to put my dice on suddenly made that game easier.

You'd never want me gming *Feng Shui*, and I wouldn't have thought I'd enjoy playing it because of the complicated initiative/action system in combat in this game where combat is the main point. But Julian figured out how to make that easy for me. He handed me a bunch of colorful plastic tokens and gave me very simple rules:

- The number of these you have is your initiative.
- When I call that number, you get an action. This costs 3 tokens, unless the GM says otherwise.
- Your new number of tokens is your new initiative. Yes, this means you probably get multiple actions a round.
- If someone attacks and you want to defend, that costs 2 tokens. Yes, that means your initiative is now lower, and your next action is later.

And suddenly, I can handle playing a *Feng Shui* character!

(Obviously, there are other factors, some of which you've touched on, like quality of writing; some of which involve newer tools, like character keepers and

newer online gaming options; some of which involve source material, as apparently, some flavors of Forged in the Dark are easier for me to wrap my head around than others; some of which involve podcasts or videos of folks playing the game, so while I'm not a devotee of Critical Role in general, I watched every session available of their *Candela Obscura* games.) re not being able to meet the deadline if you respond to everyone: Indeed.

ROGER BW: re Neutral Currents: A duke makes a fine blunt instrument for opening doors. re *Day After Ragnarok*: Did the goanna wrestling at least get good ratings? re *GURPS*: Yes, my usual way of making a character in that system is to tell the GM what I want and ask them to make it for me.

re minigames: I think there are a lot, though it depends on how one defines that term. My knee-jerk reaction is to say I don't want them in my rpgs, but I am quite confident that someone looking at the games I play, run, and want to play and run would easily find things I never thought of as minigames, but which probably are. Heck, I created a small table for the Strixhaven game for random items in my dhampire PC's "hoard". (It has things like emergency candy and cookies for a fellow student, unfinished love poems, and the like.) And that's before we get into the exam minigame that's rather integral to the Strixhaven campaign.

re bad books being more useful as source material for rpgs than good ones: Holly Black once said that one way to learn to write good books is to read bad books. Good books, she said, are often so very smooth that it's hard to see how everything works to make the book so good. Bad books, particularly ones that are written by people with at least some understanding of what to aim for, have interesting bones, and you can see the bones precisely because this isn't smooth writing. You can see what the author was trying to do, and figure out where they went wrong, and get some inkling of how to do better.

I suspect this is also true of good-enough books. I remember one Gen Con where I played a good game of *Monsters and Other Childish Things*, good, not perfect, which meant I could see what the GM was doing, where it could have been a bit better, where it was fine exactly the way it was. I also played in an excellent game of *Grim War*, run by Greg Stolze. It was so smooth that I couldn't quite put my finger on what Greg was doing, which meant I wasn't (and still am not) sure how to emulate it.

re Brian Rogers re endings: I agree. I've done full campaigns that could have sequels or codas, and often did. My Dracula Dossier game, which may or may not Fully Finish some day, not only fits into an arc of

campaigns I ran, including Call of Cthulhu's *Tatters of the King* and Trail of Cthulhu's *Eternal Lies*, but also is itself deliberately composed of mini-campaigns and one-shots (even if these may take 2-3 sessions instead of 1). Each leg / arc / campaign / scenario ends / concludes. Another satisfying campaign was the first Kerberos Club Fate game, which ended with a triple wedding on a floating island.

re Mark Wilson re companies that decide not to pay so that their debtor goes bust and they don't have to pay: Grrrrr. re Patrick Riley re Erick Wujcik: He was extremely charismatic. I think I'd have enjoyed a game he ran while I was playing it. I am not sure what I'd have thought afterwards. re GUMSHOE: One think I have discovered isn't as good as I'd thought is its habit of renaming skills. In theory, this should be fine, as the feel of, say, *Night's Black Agents*, should differ from that of *Trail of Cthulhu* or *Fear Itself*, let alone *Time Watch* or *Swords of the Serpentine*. In practice, it causes me much confusion as I try to remember which game uses Stealth, which uses Intrusion, which uses Burglary, and is it Notice or Spot Trouble I want? Is one Investigative and the other General? And stopping to figure this out mid-game is annoying.

re challenge of redesigning 7e CoC sheets when Luck spending is allowed: Honestly, I'm fine dividing by 2 and 5 on the fly. Sure, it's useful that all the numbers are on the standard sheet, but I don't *need* that. OTOH, given I gather, a lot of folks found the old Resistance Table so very complicated, and I don't, so I may be an outlier. re Avram Grumer re Simplified Technical English: This sounds like a good thing.

re Dylan Capel re *Pendragon*: I've not seen the boardgame, but ranking Women as the most dangerous checks out, yes. re the disconnect: Interesting. I've not encountered this, but that proves absolutely nothing, as I've only played one shot adventures at conventions, and the Winter Phase has never come up in those. I wonder if the disconnect has grown, shrunk, or held steady in different editions.

re Michael Cule re if a PC is restrained and the NPC villain thrusts their big sword of PC-slaying into the PC's chest, we're in story territory, not mechanics territory: This is not an unreasonable way to play it, so long as folks know ahead of time that's how it will go. I tend to favor almost the opposite tactic. That is, I like the rule from the first edition of *7th Sea* (haven't read the current one) that says that one needs to decide to kill one's foe; it never happens by accident.

re Mitch Hyde: In general, I think you're right that once one gets beyond the one-shot, one is starting to shift from the horror genre. Sometimes, one can cheat a bit by using a single campaign as, er, a Very Long Multi-Session One-Shot. The tone has to be right for this;

Tatters of the King is a very different beast than *Beyond the Mountains of Madness*, and both are closer to "pure" horror than *Masks of Nyarlathotep*. Trail of Cthulhu's *Eternal Lies* splits the difference between pulp and "purist" by introducing the "noir" tone, which I'm fond of. re Patrick Zoch re chocolate-covered ginger candy: Sounds delicious!

re Mark Nemeth: I've found that I do like Critical Role's Candela Obscura shows, but those are right up my alley. They did feel like actual games, possibly because, aside from the one hour one shot, they're 3-episode mini-campaigns. Of the five full games I've seen:

- One showed me some things I should be doing as a GM.
- One showed me some things I should NOT be doing as a GM.
- Two showed me some things I should be doing as a GM and had me on the edge of my seat.
- One was a short entertaining show, and re-watching it might show me some things I should be doing as a GM.
- All of them probably showed me things I could do as a player, but I'd need to re-watch, as I was looking at these as a GM.
- All of them helped me wrap my mind around the system.

I don't watch a lot of streamed games because this level of usefulness combined with this level of entertainment is highly unusual. I've not watched any of the Chaosium shows. I have listened to the Yogsothoth.com material, which is usually done in two-hour blocks and is podcast, not streaming. On the one hand, that's easier on me; on the other, it's generally recorded quietly enough that I can't, fr'ex, easily listen to it at the gym.

re *Trail of Cthulhu* having the players come up with reasons for their characters to fight monsters: Exactly. This is what the Drive mechanic does and why I like it. Yes, there are places where, Drive mechanic (or equivalent) or not, I would be on the players' side if they said, "It makes no sense for our characters to do X" (*), but on the whole, I'm not in favor of making the GM cajole players to play the game they agreed to play.

(*) Two examples that come to mind are:

- The Call of Cthulhu convention game where two of us wanted our characters to go up to the surface from a mine to make a single phone call to alert the authorities that a Whole Lot of Explosives had been stolen. This idea was vetoed. One player said (roughly): "I don't want to hold up the game, so we'll go along with that, but for the record, this is total

bs." The other player was me, and I agreed. We weren't trying to break the adventure or even get authorities to help -- we just wanted our characters to alert them to what seemed a highly dangerous mundane situation. In fairness to the GM, there was a PC who had a vested interest in quickly resolving the situation, and that PC was the boss, but honestly, letting us establish that we took the time to go up in an elevator, make a phone call, and go back down would not have broken anything. (Yes, I know the elevator would take a while, but at most, I reckon that would be an hour, and I suspect more like half an hour, tops.)

- The *Night's Black Agents* published scenario I ran where the Agents, who were heisty-criminal types who'd agreed to do three heists, discovered that the third "heist" was an assassination. I ran this with my home group as part of the multi-mini-campaign Dracula Dossier, and agreed that this was an odd twist. This actually worked out well because I was completely fine with the Agents going way off script and cutting a deal with their supposed enemy. That made sense to all of us and allowed me to do a callback to a previous mini-campaign, with one former PC now being an enemy-turned-ally NPC. In fairness to the scenario author, there were 6 pre-gens, and I had 4 players. The 2 pre-gens left unplayed / as NPC backup were the nastiest of the bunch, and might have gone along with the surprise-assassination mission.

re Brian Miaszek re being on edge when playing insane people: Indeed. I've read about too many real world instances where those called to help someone considered insane wound up harming them to be comfortable with movies that make people who were institutionalized the scary mastermind-y villains or with scenarios that do likewise, which makes for an interesting tension, given what I run.

There are, I'm happy to say, some examples of scenario authors getting it right. Fr'ex, there's one scenario with a woman who is constantly described as "simple", to the point where I want to yell at the author that they don't have to repeat "poor, simple" every time they mention the NPC. But --

This NPC has specific coping mechanisms and rules that work for them. And late in the scenario, where all heck is breaking loose, their family is frantic because they've gone missing, along with one of the family's children. And it turns out that the two people weren't exactly "missing" -- they had planned to spend that day together, going out for a meal or something, and the rest of the family forgot this. It's understandable that

they forgot, given the situation, but when I reread the scenario before I ran it, I was thoroughly delighted that the "poor, simple" neuro-atypical NPC was doing *exactly* what they were supposed to do, and their "saner" neurotypical relatives were freaking out because they'd forgotten something that had been arranged weeks ago. The repeating phrase notwithstanding, this is an example of excellent representation.

re *Cthulhu Eternal*: Ah! Thanks for the look behind the curtain on this. I think I have most, if not all, of what's available for it, including the World War I and II books. re the switch to free software freeing up one of the sysadmins to do more useful work: Heh! Sadly, there are programs I find work better for me than the free ones, but I'm definitely in favor of this.

re reading a tome in Classic Call of Cthulhu not causing "an immediate screaming bout of madness": Really? Do the normal rules for Sanity not apply? I was under the impression that losing >5 Sanity and making a successful Idea roll still caused Temporary Insanity and losing 20% or more of one's Sanity from any single source, including a tome, caused Indefinite Insanity. The *Keeper Rulebook* confirms this, and also says on p. 154: "Failing a Sanity roll always causes the investigator to lose self-control for a moment, at which point the Keeper should choose an involuntary action for the investigator." And p. 174 does indeed have an example of a PC having a screaming bout of madness after losing 6 Sanity while reading a "flawed" copy of the mythos tome *Book of Eibon*.

re me re cat/dog cam: I bet they're playing their own online rpgs. re one-shot combat openings: That's often the case, though, I think, not always. I shall try to pay more attention so I can see when it is and isn't the case. re my Dracula: Good point. I decided he'd been Nicolaus Olahus originally, after reading <https://pelgranepress.com/2013/10/24/the-call-of-chicago-7-draculas-no-waiting/>. The idea of him as Dracula boggled and intrigued me, and making him a mild neophile made sense. (I would have gone for Michael the Brava aka Mihai Viteazul aka Mihai Patrascu if I'd known of him earlier, but perhaps next time I run this campaign.) I suspect a couple of less powerful surviving vampires, including the one who's a former PC, also have a mild case of neophilia.

re Joshua Kronengold re the problem of squishing multiple rpg tables into one room: Yes. I can deal with this, but it's great when that doesn't happen. I remember one time it was a bit surreal because one table started singing "Kumbayah" when a PC at our table was in extreme danger. (We were playing an odd all-children World of Darkness game, while they seemed to be playing something that might have been *Teenagers From Outer Space* or something with sports

and superheroes, but this was long enough ago I might well be completely wrong about that.) re SJG paying what they agreed to pay and on time: Kudos to them.

JOHN REDDEN: re Storybrewers Bingo: This wasn't for generating backstory. It's like if you're watching *Star Trek* with a bingo card with squares like "McCoy says 'I'm a *doctor*, not a ...'" or "Scotty says 'The engines can't take any more!'". We marked squares based on whether or not what was written in them had ever happened to any of our characters in past games. That said, we could probably use the blank squares on the bingo cards to inspire us for future characters -- is that what you meant?

re emotional play: This has nothing to do with criticizing the GM. It could be:

- Playing out romance and flirting, something that may well come up in a *Good Society* game.
- Agonizing over a difficult decision in-character, which happened in *Phoenix Dawn Command* as all four PCs discussed, in various degrees of intensity, whether or not to accept a devil's bargain they'd been offered.
- Debating long term goals which are not likely to come up in the campaign in practical terms, when the PCs have wildly different priorities and philosophies, which also happened in the *Phoenix Dawn Command* game. One player joked that his character and mine kept having what was essentially the same argument, which wasn't entirely correct, but neither was it entirely incorrect.
- Family drama. Fr'ex, one of the most intense scenes in a game of *Downstairs at the Abbey*, a *Good Society* hack where everyone has two main characters, one upstairs (noble) and one downstairs (servant) was when the housekeeper, who was, iirc, related to the noble family, finally asked the head of the family why she wasn't being given her due. It wasn't over the top, but it was riveting.
- I've been in more than one fine scene, in both rpgs and larps, where I'd describe the deliberately understated emotional play between me and another player as "being British at each other".
- Monologuing, which is built into *Good Society* and most of its hacks.

re you burning out quickly on medieval archetypes: That makes sense. While I agree with Roger that a lot of what we see in games that theoretically use a medieval or medieval-adjacent setting is actually USA western setting in medieval garb, we still perceive it as basically medieval, and there's a lot of it.

I thought the closest to a medieval game I played within easy recollection was Lee's Spanish Expedition in 2021. Checking, it turns out I was wrong -- you could consider Trials and Tribulations of Avoka Season 2, which was February 2024. One might consider the Dreamation *Everway* one-shot Survivors Guide to Dungeon Realm medieval, as it's a nod to *Delicious in Dungeon*, an anime that is itself leaning on traditional rpgs with medieval(ish) settings. I'm not sure if *The King Is Dead*, also a one-shot at Dreamation, counts. It might, having a very Game of Thrones feel. And possibly Verge, a playtest of about half a dozen sessions or so. More than I'd thought, but less than I might have expected, which is interesting.

In the last year or two: I've run *Swords of the Serpentine*, which is more Renaissance and definitely more Fafhrd and Grey Mouser in feel. I've run *Trail of Cthulhu*, which is set in the 1930s, and *Urban Shadows*, which we agreed to set in 201X, i.e., pre-pandemic, but basically modern day. I've played in *Harlem Unbound*, which is 1920s; *Crown of Creation (Trail of Cthulhu)*, 1960s; *Take the Universe: Power is Fleeting*, *Love is Eternal*, bonkers science fantasy space opera setting that draws on some of the bonkers 1980s movies; *Strixhaven*, which is D&D, so should feel medieval-ish, but feels more Renaissance-y, perhaps because of the college setting; *Phoenix Dawn Command*, which feels to me only like itself, though I could see you finding it too medieval for your tastes; our various playtests of *Dangerous Refuge*, all of which thus far have had contemporary settings; and *Streets of Jade* playtests, with an alternate 1940s-ish setting with magical martial arts, based on Fonda Lee's *Green Bones* saga. (It's like *The Godfather* movies, but with martial arts fueled by magical jade.)

PEDRO PANHOCA DA SILVA AND CAMILA

LOURENCO PANHOCA: re *Jack and the Ten Bean Stalks*: Fascinating. I like the ending where the giant survives, shrinks, and joins the community.

MITCH HYDE: Enjoy Cauldron! re video stores: I remember the time before they existed, and I remember patronizing them and combing through my local library's video section, borrowing the 4 Kurosawa films it had. My father preferred Betamax, so eventually, of course, we had both a Betamax and VHS. It feels weird having seen video stores both come and go. re *Hellraiser*: I suspect that might still be too intense for me, although I do enjoy Tom Smith's song based on the movie:
<https://tomsmith.bandcamp.com/track/hellraiser>

ERICA FRANK: Welcome! I'd like to play some *DresdenFiles Accelerated* and perhaps *The Between*, but I suspect I'm in / running as many games as I can comfortably handle right now. I'm curious about the

Fate rules for *Shadowrun 2* and, to a lesser degree, D&D 3.5.

re your games: As I fell hard for *The Untamed* and am working my way through the manhua, I grabbed for *Quill Untamed*, which looks hilarious and potentially astonishingly moving. Josh and I have (very) vague plans to do a larp in the mode of *The Dance and the Dawn* (where one is trying to find one's true love while dancing and dueling, a sort of speed dating game) but using characters from *The Untamed* (with characters from some other C-Dramas layered onto them to mix things up and make for a richer experience), where the goal is to find one's soulmate, whether one defines that sexually, platonically, or in some other way.

In classic *Dance & Dawn* games, the world broke because the relationship between the Ice Queen and Ash Duke went sour. For full success in the game, all of the True Love couples should be paired at the end and, for bonus points, the Queen and Duke should be reconciled. For *The Untamed Remix* (or, as I like to think of it, the *I Can Explain!* Remix, for reasons having to do with other ways of translating the title of the show), the world broke because of a platonic relationship going sour -- the relationship between the Wei Wuxian analog and the Jiang Cheng analog.

re *Six Figures Under*: I love the alternative title. Turns out I already own this, as it was in one of the several itch.io bundles I've purchased. It looks like a good enough writing exercise to give the right sort of students. re *DresdenFiles Accelerated*: In any game I have run or am likely to run set in that world, as far as I am concerned, there never was a Harry Dresden. The PCs are the game world's equivalent of Harry and the other major characters.

I did play in one game where Harry Dresden showed up, and it worked very well because it was a game of *Fiasco*. It used the *Hocus Focus* playset where everyone creates characters who are very minor villains. These characters have very minor schemes, all of which were going so well (maybe) until the mid-game *Twist*, which is when Harry Dresden shows up.

A *Sense8* game would be interesting. I'm not sure that you need to do more than say that any player can have their PC advise all the others, and perhaps that, for a Fate point, anyone can draw on another PC's skill. Sure, you can get more complicated, but the tricky thing, IMO, is to make sure that no one's PC is more useful in play than everyone else's.

re *Midnight at the Well of Souls* and how you'd rather it had a better system: I hear you. The question is what feel you want the game to have. I enjoyed the series when I read it, back when there were only 5 books, and I don't know how well it would hold up for me

today. If I were to play an rpg in that setting, I'd want a simple way with coming up with a huge variety of alien species. The more challenging thing would be answering the question "Okay, now what do we do in the game?" re *Star Wars RPG*: While I've played a couple of sessions of this, my system of choice for the Star Wars setting is, probably unsurprisingly, *Fate Accelerated*. (A friend of mine says that Fate Accelerated jumps onto the table and shouts "Use ME for Star Wars!")

re me: The ashcan of *Curseborne* has the scenario I played in at DexLite. The thing about the ending wasn't that it was "you lose; sucks to be you" per se; I enjoy *Call of Cthulhu* games and *Bluebeard's Bride* scratches an itch I didn't realize I had. Part of it's the context; I'm not playing an ordinary human confronting the reality of being utterly insignificant on an insignificant planet that's ultimately doomed to have its anomalous safety bubble popped. I'm not playing an aspect of Bluebeard's powerless nameless bride. I'm playing a supernatural being who is supposed to be at least somewhat competent. Part of it is that there was never a chance to save the NPC. Having failure on the table is fine; indeed, it's usually essential. And part of it is mismatched expectations. The blurb implies that there's a chance to "win" when there isn't.

re more structured session 0: *Good Society* does structure the session 0, but it's also starting with a lot of constraints. This works for me, but I don't know if it would work for you. I backed the kickstarter for *Session Zero System*, but haven't yet read it, so I don't know what it covers.

GABRIEL ROARK: re Myles Corcoran: He is a great player in any rpg. I should look for Garavogue. Thanks for the recommendation. re Patrick Riley re the challenge of mapping natural caverns: While not a solution, there is a fascinating solo game, *Thousand Year Campfire, or Old Morris Cave: A Continuous Use Campsite in Mammoth Cave National Park, An Excavation*. It's by Tim Hutchings, the same person who wrote *Thousand Year Old Vampire*.

re me re Dracula: Thanks! I asked folks what advantage he'd have getting in on the ground floor of psychoanalysis, as it were, and one person had a lovely disturbing vision of a vampire sitting virtually invisibly, with a Don't Notice Me hypnotic effect, while a psychologist had therapy sessions with various patients. Not what I had in mind, but hilarious. re you making a terrible frost giant: Oof! I hope the arm's healing well?

MYLES CORCORAN: Sympathy to you and Sam on the health issues! While I did miss the Mouseritter write up, I enjoyed the Kreigsnesser write up. re Brian Roger re the twist of killing things and taking back your stuff:

Or not killing things. I'm thinking of a scenario I've enjoyed playing and running, where the PCs may well resort to violence to reclaim their property, but are likely to stop well short of lethal violence.

re Roger BW: re *Cthulhu Eternal*: Were you able to get it via the Bundle of Holding offer? If so, was it watermark free? re Heath. Row: IIRC, *iHunt* is an rpg about hunting monsters in the gig economy. re Paul Holman: We have Windows 11, and while it functions, I wouldn't mind debloating it and removing its surveillance spyware. How does one do that, or is it a bit late at this point? re RuneQuest editions: Thanks for the chart. It's helpful, although, inevitably, already out of date, lacking Rivers of London, and probably other titles with which I am unfamiliar. re Mark Nemeth: I am likewise not invested in D&D combat, though I find the Strixhaven game fun. Combat isn't its focus, which helps, and any non-sports combat feels more Buffyesque in mood (if not system), which also helps.

re me re your At the Table bingo card being nearly full: I am not at all surprised. re why *Swords of the Serpentine* is my favorite flavor of GUMSHOE: Yes, it's more than just being recent, although that does mean it has rules to deal with some of the weaknesses and annoyances of earlier games, such as refresh tokens, an economy that allows spending Investigative points to create pools of General points, rules for social combat, teamwork rules allowing those better at Sway to help those better at Warfare and vice versa, and rules for NPCs that give set bonuses rather than requiring me to decide how many points to spend on their attacks, which means I don't feel like I'm deciding the result of combat by fiat.

SotS is FUN and prioritizes agency, fun, and letting PCs be cool and awesome. There are refreshingly few General skills. The character sheet looks good. The game looks at other plots besides mystery solving per se. The world is cool, and as Rob Donoghue notes, one can quickly list a few important differences, such as the importance of swans and statues, and the bonkers varied rates of sinking buildings.

It's one of the few fantasy settings that gives women a higher social status, rather like the Astreiant stories of Melissa Scott and Lisa Barnett, which means it doesn't feel cliched or satirical. There's a refreshing lack of heteronormativity without making a big deal about it. There's also good support for the game: Page XX articles, a book of four scenarios with pre-gens, and one forthcoming campaign that we helped playtest. The authors of the core book are on the Pelgrane Discord, and are friendly and willing to answer countless questions.

MICHAEL CULE: The Names That Live sounds awesome. Sympathy on the head cold. Don't give up all

your pleasures! I understand relinquishing ones that no longer give you enough pleasure to be worth the hassle, though.

re Glamour Days And Nights: I love Sandene's worry that, because of the failed Hate Praxian roll, Vishi will start to think she likes him. I see no reason there can't be glockenspiels in Glorantha. re whether the group could cross the road before the parade arrived: Unless you have some reason to want it otherwise, I agree you should let them have their way. I might rule that everyone around will remember them as the people who dashed across the road rather than wait a few moments for the parade to pass. re The Great Sister tracking Jarathir: Ah, I see you already thought of that. The restaurant interlude was amusing.

Why am I not surprised that there is a family living illegally in a yurt on the roof of the building where the PCs live? re the moment of tragedy and your comment to me re context of the campaign: I didn't get it until I did a google search. The sudden disaster offstage reported by the Janitrix was Dragonrise, correct? re 20% in one's own culture: Given it's culture, not subculture, I agree with you, although I'd be likely to rule in many cases, a la *Delta Green* and, no doubt, other systems, that in many cases, that 20% merits an automatic success.

re me re panel with GRH: Sympathy. Moderating panels is hard work. re Six Gods: Fair point. I agree "Youth" doesn't specify "male", and I don't know a synonym that does. re removing irrelevant earthquake stuff: From Telleuric Dracula? I think it's easy enough to just ignore. If you like, I can check what I did, which I think was to use earthquakes and the earthquake machine as a way to access Castle Dracula, which I put in an interdimensional space. The whole business with "Harker" and the blue flame was a ritual to open the way. Earthquakes otherwise were probably connected to the Chthonians. I can email you details if you want.

re Timothy Collinson: In general, I agree with Chris about gaming to play someone I'm not, though with sufficient warning and a setting I feel comfortable playing myself in, I might make an exception. re Clark Timmins: I am often quite willing to tell players OOC that they've fixated on something irrelevant. This is especially true when running mysteries, as those are challenging enough without accidental red herrings.

re Roger BW: I'm afraid I don't know anything about plate tectonics either. re city maps: Generally, I agree. Usually, it's mostly necessary to know where important locations are relative to one another. Where I am likely to disagree with you is when I use a real world setting, which is a different kettle of fish. There, I can often find a map that already exists, especially for modern

day settings. re what RACHE means in your game world: Perfect!

re Brian Misiaszek re reacting to things because our ancestors did: Like the experiment with chickens? Chickens are occasionally preyed upon by hawks. The chickens learn a fear reaction to the shadow of a hawk. Breed those chickens a few generations and raise the latest generation entirely in a barn, having never seen the outside, having never seen the sky. Rig up a fake hawk shadow, and these chickens, who should have no context for it, nevertheless, I am told, have the same fear reaction. re Joshua Kronengold re *Once Upon a Time*: While it is absolutely possible to create genre themed cards, we have found that one can go far without them, simply shifting into the genre we want. IIRC, Matt Stevens once started by introducing a drug dealer, and my first thoughts were all about figuring out away to get to my ending card, the one about "they are dancing there still", which seemed to me utterly compatible with a tale about drugs. And there was the game where folks at Columbia University told a post-apocalyptic version of Romeo and Juliet set in NYC where the feuding families were gangs from Columbia University and New York University. So definitely make new cards if you are so inclined!

PATRICK ZOCH: re various programs from Affinity to Inkscape: I need something akin to the old Osborne Busy People series. Their books deliberately taught in small bit and made me eager to try what I learned. re Brian Rogers: I do like the distinction between equipment treasure and treasure that isn't equipment.

re me: Good point about the humans in Magical Kitties. re *Masks*: Yes, Adults are obstacles in that game. They literally try to define the PCs tell them who they are and should be. Mechanically, even in an utterly positive relationship, adults aren't nurturing and supporting their children. The most they can do is define the hero in a way the hero and player find helpful / desirable. Overcoming a single adult's influence to the point where that specific adult can no longer influence one is a big deal. To put it another way, in the same spirit that inspired "a BRPS character sheet is a list of things my pc sucks at", one GM noted that having playbook in *Masks* (aka having a character sheet) "means you suck". Not sucking means growing up and outgrowing playbooks, becoming a paragon of the city, which, in *Masks*, means you can no longer play the character.

re Sources of Stability: Yes, it comes down to player skill. re how strong the halfling in *Fellowship* must be to carry all that food: LOL. Josh opines that the food is made up of stuff like Tolkien's lembas, i.e. magical food that weigh very little. At some point, I may try to read the rulebook and see if it addresses this question, but I confess none of us worried about that in play.

PATRICK RILEY: re being inspired by games: I have been as well, though a fair amount of that has been being inspired to want to play specific rpgs. re larps inspired by *Sandman*: I am not sure; none spring to mind, although that proves nothing. I did play a 6-player larp inspired by *Good Omens*, and that was a lot of fun. re *Seven Samurai* via *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. Intriguing. re *The Prisoner*: Yes, I recall *GURPS Prisoner* suggesting that one person (possibly the GM) play Number Six, and everyone else play fellow prisoners, er, villagers, trying to get information out of him.

re Adventurers Guild: I gather Millie only lit the candle's reflection once and was in no danger of losing Large portions of her soul? re Entan's player dropping: Ah well. re the standees keeping you honest: Fascinating. I love it when tools are useful. *Giggle* at the use of Mushroom Kingdom lore. Sympathy re feeling the boss fight was lacking. I've been there with *Night's Black Agents* vampires. One GM I know gets very annoyed when PCs one-shot their big adversaries. Players generally enjoy being able to do that, and it should be okay, but I do understand feeling sad that the big boss couldn't put up more of a fight. re Pumpkin: Could she write or could someone write that she's injured, acting strangely, or was last seen about to do something foolishly dangerous? Or maybe a ransom note? Or maybe someone claiming to be a spouse or business partner of Pumpkin shows up?

re Michael Cule re enjoying the backstory one creates even if no one else ever sees it: Good point. If it isn't being shoved down folks' throats (if it's at least one of relevant, requested, or invisible to others) that's enough reason to do it.

re em-dashes: I intend to keep using them as well. re Mark Nemeth: While I also noticed this, I assumed that there is either a medical or societal code, if only implicitly, that holds that help should be given to exiles to ensure a safe birth for a child, at least if such a thing can be arranged, and that the infant isn't considered to have inherited its parents' guilt. re me re turtling: Exactly. re Mark Wilson re *Brindlewood Bay* as a game where players resolve, rather than solve, mysteries: I think that is correct.

PAUL HOLMAN: I'd need a docent tour to properly appreciate the tank museum. re not succeeding in slimming down the game library: Sympathy. It's a challenge. re literary influences: I think it's tricky to take direct inspiration from *Lord of the Rings*, albeit not impossible. It's so very much its own thing. I think the main thing I took from it is a love of creating complicated family trees. *Babylon 5* is amazing and easier to borrow from; I regret JMS didn't know for sure he'd get that fifth season. I'm both intrigued by and apprehensive about a reboot. The Eternal

Champion mega-series is a great source of shiny ideas. I'm mixed on *X-Files* as a show; as a source, it's great.

re Mark Nemeth re moral dilemmas not being particularly adventurous: It really depends. When I ran the full *Eternal Lies* campaign, I quickly discovered that I wasn't likely to put the PCs in a position where they were likely to die (which was fine by me) and that the Stability and Sanity losses were well enough paced that no one would have to retire a character because of these stats before the climax (and not even then, it turned out), unless the players chose one of these options for their character (nearly happened, but that turned out to be misunderstanding an NPC's offer, so it didn't). This meant questions of ethics and morality were on the table more often than I expected, so the campaign became, in part, a question of how far the PCs would go and what atrocities they'd commit in the name of saving the world. There was a lot of action / combat, as well as a lot of intense conversations. I think the first Kerberos Club Fate campaign I ran also blended action and philosophical questions, though Josh can probably speak to that better than I can.

Player interest in such things is critical, but if that's there, I don't think you need to have it be either moral dilemmas or adventure. Various superhero stories have both. Also, as Josh and I discovered, a surprising amount of anime blends high violence with high philosophical debate of entire systems of ethics, government, morality, and so on.

One of the less extreme or bonkers examples comes from the My Hero Academia movie *You're Next*. The protagonist's frenemy and fellow student at the eponymous school tells the villain (or so the subtitles told us) "I despise your strength!" While it's easy to follow the plot in the movie even if you've never seen an episode of the show (which has a lot of philosophy about what being a hero means and what the proper use of power is), for those of us who'd seen everything before the final season, there is so much narrative weight in that sentence because of the character growth it shows, growth we'd seen. That character could not have spoken that line earlier, and it would not have meant as much coming from anyone else.

DYLAN CAPEL: re *Bone Ships*: Some books are easier for me to read in print. Some are easier to read on my tablet, including large hardback rpgs with a 2 or 3 column layout. And sometimes, which edition of a novel matters. I'm not talking about differences in content so much as layout. In grad school, *Middlemarch* became much easier to read when I returned the 400-page book to the college bookstore and took out the 800- page version from the library.

re megacampaigns: Ones I've run, but would like to run again: *Masks of Nyarlathotep* (with the new

edition, which I've not run), *Eternal Lies*, and *Tatters of the King* (but with Aviatrix's Trenchcoat rules). Ones I'd like to finish: *Pillars of Sand* (for *Swords of the Serpentine*), Dracula Dossier (for *Night's Black Agents*, but with Agents of the Night rules), *Fearful Symmetries*, and *A Poison Tree*. Ones I've not run but might like to: *Horror on the Orient Express* (would take a lot of work), *Cassilda's Song* (once it's out), maybe *Ocean Game*, a *Candela Obscura* game, possibly the scenarios from Chaosium's Berlin sourcebook, possibly *Children of Fear*, *Sutra of Pale Leaves*, *Impossible Landscapes*, and (in my dreams or nightmares) *God's Teeth*. That's just off the top of my head, of course.

JIM ECKMAN: "GR" = "Goodreads"? re growing up phase: It isn't common in rpgs, true, but there are some that have it, including *Castles in the Air*, a *Good Society* hack which draws on authors like Louisa May Alcott and L. M. Montgomery, rather than on authors like Jane Austen. There are games harder to find, given the firehose that is itch.io and small indie rpgs in general, that focus on coming of age (the Powered by the Apocalypse game *Masks* is arguably one of these, and one could make a case for *Monsterhearts*) or on a pattern of the PCs going on a portal fantasy trip, first as children and then as adults. I got to playtest the first half of one such game at Metatopia in 2024, and had a blast. I don't know where it stands in development.

I see I correctly identified the Heinlein. I've only read 1 book by Norton and wasn't any of the ones you listed. re me: Thanks!

MARK WILSON: You're extremely professional about the job hunt. re companies' lack of professionalism: I'm curious about what you mean. I know I have often been annoyed when I got interviewed by companies that did not do me the courtesy of telling me when they'd decided not to give me the job. The ones who did were the exception, and they were always professional and encouraging.

re *Doctor Who* as a source of good plots: An excellent point. There were a lot of complex plots over the years. I'm particularly intrigued by the idea of using the plot of "Caves of Androzani". I've definitely lifted characters from various sources. I read your online essay. I don't entirely agree re keeping as much NPC detail as possible and only changing what's necessary, but perhaps I'm not defining "necessary" as broadly as you are.

I'm thinking of a *Sorcerer* game I ran where I based various NPCs and backstory bits on Ellen Kushner's Riverside novels. I hadn't gone further than putting things down in my notes, using the names from the books, which some of the players had read, but not all. One of the ones who didn't suggested that folks use Germanic names for their characters, and the players

agreed. I then did likewise for the NPCs, and I'm grateful to that player for suggesting this. I didn't want to make the backstory a Darling (in the Kill Your Darlings sense), and it turns out that when one renames Diane, the Duchess Tremontaine, to Grafyn Gudrun von Ouranenburg, one thinks of her somewhat differently, which was all to the good here.

AVRAM GRUMER: re Alzabos and Excruciations: Should I make a game based on *The Book of the New Sun*, I may well call it that. (There's a larp scheduled for Intercon X, Tonight, at the House Absolute, which is basically a performance of Dr. Talos's play (x.interconlarp.org/events/6710-tonight--at-the-house-absolute#run-7513) but I'm in a different larp in that slot.) It could also be the name of an arcane or mythos tome. re maps: Lots of campaign possibilities, as you say. I know Josh read a book about mapmaking, set in a fantasy world, and mapmaking was definitely a political activity. Lois McMaster Bujold has a scene in one of her Five Gods world book where soldiers from an enemy country capture the protagonist, search her belongings, and rejoice because they were thoroughly lost and she has maps! Maybe they can get home now! I suspect something very like that has happened in our world.

re recent gaming: I gather the group has now done actual gaming. re *Scum and Villainy* write up re Devil's Bargain and the poor doomed cop: Nod. Gareth was confused. re Affinity: I downloaded the current free version and have no idea how to begin to learn to use it. I want to start by creating a character sheet for Agents of the Night, and I miss the Osborne series of how-to books that. Those accurately gauged my lack of knowledge and attention span. (Josh agrees that Inkscape is the better choice and may try to walk me through that.) re Jim Eckman: I see what you Kiplied.

re me re emotional play support: Something in the middle, I think, neither or all. I was going to say not +2 on a roll, then realized *Pasion de las Pasiones* does this with its moves and "Roll with questions", and various other Powered by the Apocalypse games do something similar. I was going to be dubious about pre-planned character arcs, and then remembered that folks at Magpie Games said outright that the playbooks in 2nd edition *Urban Shadows* are tailored to specific arcs, which is why they don't recommend having more than one player with the same playbook.

Digression: The reason *Apocalypse World* said not to have more than one player using the same playbook is that Vincent Baker didn't want to bring multiple copies of each playbook to conventions when he ran the game. He didn't explain this in the 1st edition, and many PbtA games that followed assumed that only 1 of any given playbook was a core principle. This, in turn,

led to some designers building PbtA games where things really do work best that way. End Digression.

I want to be able to roleplay, not just do tactical stuff. To put it another way, I don't want a game that's only procedural. On paper, this means that I should hate GUMSHOE games because they're designed to be procedural, but I've found that there's plenty of space for character development in narrative arcs, angsty scenery chewing, and so forth.

Heck, in theory, one can point to D&D and say that there's really no room for the emotional play I like. In practice, I'm in a D&D Strixhaven game, and there is plenty of room for it. And yes, there is mechanical support for that, because there's this whole system of building positive and negative relationships with NPCs. It isn't perfect, and it gives no real incentive to have a negative relationship, but it's there, and that matters. The setting matters as well, as we all know we're doing Wizard College with friendships, romances, rivalries, and enmities. And, of course, the group matters. The GM knows how to pace and play to the genre conventions while still using all the extremely D&D elements, and while this group should be too large for satisfying play, we all seem to have a sense of when to pass the spotlight.

Swords of the Serpentine is the flavor of GUMSHOE that most explicitly matches "I can launch an attack on a character's feelings that has as much mechanical heft as stabbing them with a knife, and I'm not talking about psychic duels", which is one of many reasons I love it. It has Gear and defines it very broadly -- a maidservant whose name you can never remember, a gambling habit, favors owed by various merchants, et cetera. It has 3 What Is Best In Life motivators.

But I've seen a surprisingly poignant moment in a session of *Night's Black Agents*, where two Agents, working together (in 1989) for the first time since the late 1970s, referred to the loss of those close to them, making it clear, without saying directly, that they were talking about people who'd died from AIDS. Similarly, when running *Trail of Cthulhu*, while folks were digging up the grave of the lover of one of the PCs, for Reasons, and doing a bit of backstory building, there was a moment where we all suddenly realized that Martin, the PC whose lover had died, hadn't been allowed to go to the funeral, as the dead man's family was flat out not acknowledging the homosexual relationship, and that one of the other PCs, Joyce, had gone in Martin's stead, allowing the family to assume a relationship with the deceased, even though she was a lesbian. Unsurprisingly, that hit harder than most of the mythos horror, and I don't think any part of it came from the system.

I think where there's a division between stuff I like from systems and stuff I don't, it falls into one of two categories:

- The game pushes away from anything that isn't tactical or procedural.
- The game is more prescriptive than I prefer, mandating specific reactions or ways of having reactions rather than using the mechanics to hand the keys to the players.

Until I saw Critical Role's *Candela Obscura* games, I wasn't sure how much space for emotional roleplay -- whatever one wants to call it; maybe just roleplay? -- Forged in the Dark games allowed. This was despite my having playtested *Blades in the Dark* itself, using a set up that bound the PCs tightly as surviving members of an extended family that had to flee their homeland to Duskvol. I'm beginning to get a sense of where the roleplay fits in, at least for some FitD games, but there's still also a sense that in many FitD games, it's fighting the system.

Monsterhearts, *Pasion de las Pasiones*, various Belonging Outside Belonging/No Dice, No Masters games, *Good Society* and its hacks, these are all games that feel to me like they give me the keys. Heck, *Smallville* and Cortex Plus Drama feel the same, despite the complicated dice hokey. No one can force your character to do something specific, other than leave the scene in some manner, which can include passing out, storming out, or mentally withdrawing.

Contrast that with the POTs and NOTs from *Tian Deng*, which didn't really do it for me, or with scene between Harmony and her brother in the 11 November 2025 session of *Scum and Villainy*. In theory, that's a scene of talking and emotion, and, well, roleplay. In practice, it felt very procedural. And I think that's at least partly because of the system fighting against roleplay. Or perhaps it's because we're all still figuring out the system and once we do, it'll be easier. Or maybe it's that the scene really was procedural; Harmony's brother was trying to manipulate her and find the Aleph Key. Even so, we've seen scenes like that in shows that have emotional weight.

In any case, did I actually answer the question?

re Joshua Kronengold re overabundance of skills in 7th edition *Call of Cthulhu*: Nod. It collapsed Fist, Kick, and Head Butt into Brawl, and also applied Brawl to small weapons like knives and small blackjacks, and also there's now no separate skill or subsystem for "martial arts". It combined Hide and Sneak into Stealth. It didn't combine Listen and Spot Hidden into something like Perception (nor did it add Smell or Taste), and it didn't combine the social skills, though it did tweak them.

GUMSHOE started from there, with *Trail of Cthulhu* (actually, it started with *Esoterrorists*, but I'm far more familiar with *Trail*), which leaned heavily on *Call of Cthulhu*. That had three combat skills: Firearms, Weapons, and Scuffling. I think *Night's Black Agents* collapses Weapons and Scuffling into Melee, while *Swords of the Serpentine* collapses everything physical combat into Warfare.

Interesting idea about considering when the applicability of character abilities is established. In theory, in a game like *Call of Cthulhu*, it's in the rulebook. In practice, it's often at the table. One GM might allow Charm or Persuade, while another might insist on one of these two in the same circumstances. One GM might only allow Fast Talk if one is trying to lie, while another might allow it if the approach is defined as trying to confuse the issue so that the target can't stop and think clearly, regardless of whether or not what's being said is true or whether the person using Fast Talk believes it.

BRIAN MISIASZEK: Good luck to Lauren! re hauntology and ontology: *Delta Green* does a reasonable job of showing GMs how to keep the Lovecraftian Yog-Sothothery weird, both with advice and by renaming things. See my comment to Mark Wilson about the difference in feel between "Diane" and "Gudrun". Graham Walmsley's *Cthulhu Dark* uses some similar techniques and some different ones, particularly the insistence that the PCs all are all people who are essentially powerless. In your asylum example, they'd be either the patients or their hapless relatives.

The paratethys is cool and reminds me of:

- Shoggoths, obviously
- T. Kingfisher's/Ursula Vernon's novel *What Stalks the Deep*
- *Night's Black Agents*'s weird alien stones vampires, which is itself a nod to Tim Powers's *Stress of Her Regard* and its sequel(s)
- The Shan (Ramsey Campbell, *Mythos*) or the Johrlac (Sean McGuire, *InCryptid* series), two species that were seriously messed up by what seems to me some sort of telepathic contamination that now self-perpetuates

re Habana Horror re Enrique Morales: There's an error in the stats: POW is 65, so MP should be 13, not 10. re the bokor on the train: It is entirely possible that the PCs won't know what's going on until the wave of darkness rolls through their car; I don't think that's a problem, though. I look forward to more of the scenario.

re Roger BW: I like the scenario idea about the buried painting and the man who no longer remembers quite where he buried it. re me: Thank you! re Jim Eckman:

Ah, as I thought; the one Norton novel I read was not one of the ones he summarized.

ME: For more about what I mean by emotional play, the second and third chapters of Critical Role's *Candela Obscura* do a good job of illustrating some of that, with the obvious caveat that the players are actors being paid to perform. (See <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL1tiwbzkOjQwrPBNkPgQEQtNVDvJwrqTm> particularly the Needle and Thread and the Tide and Bone chapters.) re my ct to Myles Corcoran re playtesting *Eternal Lies*: In the last line of the last paragraph about that, I typed "masks" where I meant "maps". re my ct to Joshua Kronengold about Resolve tokens: They force people to talk OOC rather than just do a thing and make everyone immediately decide whether to push back or not.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: re *Lord of Mysteries*: For a game in that setting or even using those tropes / mechanics, we'd need to know a lot more about how everything works than we currently do. Does the web novel have an English translation? re Heath Row re Worldcon: The gaming panel I was on was so sparsely attended (being up against the Masquerade, among other things) that we'd have invoked the rule about adjourning to the bar if the panelists outnumber the audience if we hadn't realized the panel was being recorded. I think by the end, we might have had one or two more audience members than panelists.

re me re Astreiant astrology mystery example: Good point. re making vs succeeding on a roll: Given this sounds like something happening in play, my first question is: Why does the player know what the scenario says? My second is: Positing a case where the player didn't know what it said, and was responding to the GM saying "Make a Sanity roll", would you really think the GM is out of line for not specifying "you have to succeed"?

I can put on my editor cap and die on hills over serial commas. I totally get "specify 'succeed' in the writing". But this isn't about that. This is about playing in bad faith, or to put it crudely, being a shit.

re playing suboptimally to make up for the game's shortcomings: The problem here is that it isn't necessarily obvious to the players that *Phoenix Dawn Command* has this particular shortcoming. re Mark Wilson re *Alice Is Missing*: Heck, at one of the Double Exposure conventions, a game of *DIE* started with a pre-convention online game of *Alice Is Missing* to set the background.

re Jim Vassilakos re the whole Sanity thing: While I had a different answer, your point about our minds not being as under our control as we think is valid. I remember Avram being somewhat skeptical about

Sanity loss in one Cthulhupunk session, where folks were in Carcosa, and my take was that being in a mythos deity's home territory was indeed that disturbing. One can look at an Escher painting with aesthetic appreciation, but being trapped in an Escheresque landscape is different. You aren't looking at it from outside; you're stuck, likely getting more and more frantic as you try to figure it all out.

re Brian Rogers re people who usually play loners not playing them as secretly good team players the way people who don't usually play loners do: An interesting point, though obviously not universally true. I think it's more a matter of recognizing best principles, whether consciously or not.

Fr'ex, I ran *Eternal Lies*, and one of the players was trying to play outside their comfort zone, first by playing a horror game at all, and second, by playing someone with a fair amount of Weird Darkness. This was a mixed success, for various reasons, though I applaud the effort. After the game finished, one of the other players ran *Eternal Lies*, making various changes, and I was one of the players in that game. I had a character who, on paper, had a similar Weird Darkness set up, but I played this character very differently. She tried to fit in, and when given a choice between getting information or getting Stability back by getting so distracted by how dreamy a professor looked, after a moment of analysis paralysis, I went with "What's in character? Hormones -- Professor Dreamy Eyes!" and took the Stability.

The attempt to fit in, even as it failed frequently, is part of what made the character work as a team player. This wasn't someone who took joy in being Weird. It was someone who tried, with desperate sincerity, to squeeze herself into a box and anchor herself to human values and to people, particularly the other PCs. It's not the only correct way to play this kind of character, but it did a good job of keeping me on track. (It also helped that I trusted the GM, and that the GM had no compunction about reining things in as needed.)

re Mark Wilson re *Brindlewood Bay* and putting on Crowns: Eventually, one runs out of Crowns and the PC dies, no? re Roger BW re PCs realizing that in certain situations, they can frame events as a non-supernatural crime and call the cops: Indeed. Of course, sometimes, the Evil NPCs are, if not the cops themselves, highly respected / respectable / wealthy / powerful people, which makes calling the authorities a fraught proposition (or, in *Blades in the Dark* parlance, a Risky Position with Limited Effect).

re Patrick Riley re Amber: IIRC (without, you know, looking it up), joining after the auction means your PC is not allowed to be better than whoever is the top ranked PC in something when you first make your

character. I don't recall whether experience points can boost a PC above the top ranked PC. Probably? re John Redden re rpgs focusing on the labor movement: *The Price of Coal* is another one, and we have it. Google tells me that there's a *Blades in the Dark* scenario/supplement about labor organizing, *The Stealweaver's Rebellion*. There's also the game *10 Workers United*, which I think inverts the structure of *Ten Candles*, and *Owe My Soul to the Company Store* for *Mothership*.

re Michael Cule re *Blades in the Dark* with a mission of Wedding Planning: I wonder how that would have shaped the fairly freeform roleplaying we did in the Cthulhupunk world after Cthulhupunk +20 ended and one of the PCs got married. The conceit, as you may recall, was that the other PCs wanted to make sure that the couple didn't have to deal with any problems. I'm not sure using *Blades* would've been a good idea, but I could see how one could do it. re super-specialized games: I would posit that there have always been these. Ignoring whether D&D itself is, *Call of Cthulhu* and *Pendragon* certainly are, and I'm not eager for their "era" to pass (nor do I think their designers haven't "graduated"). I just think it coexists with the "era" of more general games, and I note that we both agree that saying one's game is Completely Universal and Can Handle Everything makes us, at best, skeptical. re Myles Corcoran: I have often said that *Over the Edge* is one of the systems the Cthulhupunk PBEM didn't use, as we generally skipped the die rolling.

ATTRONARCH: I very much prefer quests in return for a Raise the Dead spell than just coin. Was the scroll written by the player?

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: re Lost Creche of Perpethwe: I love the idea of the climax being a philosophy debate! I remember one session of Matt Stevens's *Two-Fisted Tales* campaign where there was a mayoral race, and one of the candidates was Josh's PC, and there were speeches! The session ended with my character unsure who to vote for -- the idealistic PC with no political experience or the person who everyone knew was in the local crimelord's pocket, but this was a crimelord who kept a certain amount of order in the city?

IGTHEME: Issue #5 – October 21st: What media (novels, film, anime, etc.) have inspired you vis-à-vis RPGs? Anything I like that doesn't run away fast enough.

WRITE UP: Magnolia Season: Summary of Ultimate Session

This is a game of Joseon Society which is a Penned to Good Society game set in Korea. We chose to set the game in the Renaissance period, so

Patriarchy/Confucianism is going strong. Going through the main characters (bolded on first mention):

Jin Sook and **Moon Jun-Ho** were in love. Jin Sook, however, was angry with Moon Jun-Ho because, when she'd disguised herself as a man and spoke with her beloved, he explained that one must have balance in one's life, put one's career in a box, one's love in a box, and so on.

Jin Sook: But shouldn't love be the biggest box?

Moon Jun-Ho (having no idea he's not talking to a young man): Ah, I thought that way too once, when I was young. (He's currently 23.)

However, Sook could not stay angry at her beloved for long, and cheered on by Jun-Ho's fortune-telling aunt, they were determined to wed. This would almost certainly not go over well with Sook's family, but perhaps things would work out, given that Jun-Ho hoped to start a school and already had two students of good family willing to speak well of his abilities as a teacher.

One of these was my character, **Ryu Su-Bin**, who had started studying with him almost on a whim. Su-Bin wished to live in the style to which he was accustomed, and had decided to court Jin Sook (who remained blissfully ignorant of this), and was surprised to learn from his best friend's brother, **Dae Haneul**, just how complicated all this Confucian etiquette was. Haneul was studying with Jun-Ho as his exams were coming up and he hoped to get a good posting. Su-Bin had written to Jun-Ho to ask to study with him as well, and discovered that there was indeed a lot to learn, and a lot worth learning.

However, he now found himself in an awkward position. He had assumed that, obviously, the best person to marry was Sook. Sure, there was some feud between his family and hers, but it was absurd! No one even remembered what had started it, and anyway, her family was rich. He thought that his family agreed with him, not realizing that they thought the obvious person for him to marry was his childhood friend, **Dae Yeong-Ja**, sister to Dae Haneul, as the Haneul family had been loyal supporters of the Ryu family. This was why it hadn't occurred to Su-Bin; after all, wedding Yeong-Ja wouldn't bring in more money overall.

Haneul got the letter from the Ryu family, and showed it to his sister, who was very surprised and had no inkling that this had been even considered by anyone. He wrote to Su-Bin asking about it, and Su-Bin came to visit him as soon as possible, apologizing and assuring Haneul that he would never have deliberately done such a thing without telling the siblings. Su-Bin then had a heart to heart talk with Yeong-Ja, who, as proper

etiquette demanded, remained in another room the entire time. The two sat on opposite sides of the same wall as they cleared the air. Both would remain friends. They would marry, but not each other, and Su-Bin would first accompany Haneul as an assistant when Haneul went to his posting.

Su-Bin also spoke to Jin Sook's cousin, Jin Hoon, the heir to the head of the family, apologizing for any confusion, as he'd no idea that Sook had barely glanced at the letters of courtship he'd sent her. He also said that the feud was absurd and asked if Hoon had any more idea than he did what had started it. Hoon wasn't about to admit he didn't, but did acknowledge that Su-Bin was trying to act correctly, had come to him to apologize properly, and that, perhaps, someday, the feud could indeed be laid to rest.

I'm leaving out some details I don't recall very well from the game as a whole: Jun-Ho's aunt arranging a rendezvous for the lovers; the siblings' father, played by me, talking about his illness and the good old days; Yeong-Ja's "friend" Baek Isul boasting about her marriage and children and being thwarted in her attempt to leave a gift for Haneul with Yeong-Ja; Haneul wondering if Jun-Ho's new passion for learning was as much a phase as his previous passion for horse racing (which is how I learned my main character had such a passion); Hoon chewing Jun-Ho out for trying to court Sook secretly in the backstory, unaware that the courtship was still going on.

A couple of the letters I wrote as Ryu Su-Bin during Epistolary Phases:

===

To the esteemed scholar Moon Jun-Ho,

I have discovered that I lack the talent to write a sincere poem that inspires anything other than laughter. Might you have time to give me some guidance in this?

Additionally, I have learned that my understanding of the virtues may be incomplete, and perhaps this contributes to the poor quality of my poetry. I understand that a man must treat his elders and betters with deference and respect, and those beneath him with consideration and respect. I do not understand the many nuances, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I do not understand the reason for these nuances. Is it not enough to be ever mindful of what is owed and due others?

I suppose it should be obvious to me that it is not enough. My understanding is clearly incomplete and far from perfect. I would rectify this if I can. I understand

that you are already quite busy tutoring Dae Haneul, and I understand enough nuance to realize that this surely takes priority over my small problems. But perhaps, after he has passed his exams, you might have time to show me my errors and how to correct them. I truly wish to become a better son of my parents and to become soon a good husband and perhaps soon after that, a good father.

-- Ryu Su-Bin

====

To my future sons (*) --

By the time you are reading this, I will have tried to teach you proper values, and you may well be wondering why you must learn all of this. I will endeavor to explain.

We all need to be taught the proper way to live. If it were not so, we would be animals, already knowing our place, but incapable of building a civilization.

Not all men make good teachers, and I hope only that I have not done too badly before you take lessons from one whose profession is teaching, and I hope it will be Scholar Moon Jun-Ho, the wisest man I have met.

I came to him a callow man, knowing only that I did not know enough about proper living. Many would chide me for this failing, and I will not say they would be wrong. But he did not do this, nor mock my ignorance. Instead, he set about to correct it.

He started our first lesson with the instruction to sit in a spot of great natural beauty (and perhaps you, too, will sit in that very spot). And at first, I did not understand. Yes, it was a beautiful spot, with a breathtaking view of a waterfall. But what did all of this have to do with our town and proper living?

But as I thought and watched and listened, I began to understand. The thousands of voices within me gradually silenced themselves, and there was only the sound of the waterfall and the birds. The bustle of everyday life was gone, and there was only beauty that demanded nothing.

This, I finally understood, was the first step, to quiet the mind and see everything anew, as if for the first time. It is only the first step, but it cannot be rushed. Yet, if one stops there, all one has accomplished is to sit in silence, which leads to two paths, that of the animal, which is not desirable, and that of the monk, which is admirable, but not something for which I have ever had the talent. Nor would duty permit it, so any regret I might have (which, to be honest, is not much)

would be tempered with relief that I was not suited for a position that was not proper for me.

And from there, I tried to take the next step, understanding why there were so many rules to living a proper life. Surely, one could grasp the essential points in a handful of rules! And surely, that handful is where one should begin. Why did no one give me that handful when I was a child?

The answer, of course, is that I *was* a child, too young to properly understand. One does not expect a child of two summers, however precocious, to read and recite the Analects. One teaches by example. This I have endeavored to do.

====

(*) Su-Bin is enough a man of his time that it did not occur to him to include future daughters. Also, it is not unlikely that this letter went on much longer, but I didn't write more of it.

I think if Su-bin ever finds out about Jun-ho's past shenanigans i.e., his courtship of Jin Sook), he'll think that it's part of *why* Jun-ho is a great teacher. He *gets* that people aren't perfect and have to struggle to be better.

DENIZENS OF THE LIBRARY #5

A 'zine for Ever & Anon, copyright 2025 by Brian Rogers

All About Me

Thanksgiving is approaching quickly – to be honest much of 2025 is a blur – which means prepping for the big family gathering. Turkey to break down and de-bone for the classic Julia Child Turkey and Stuffing recipe, buttermilk biscuits to cook, and then all the stuff the rest of the family is making (lovely wife is doing some pies, eldest will be home for a charcuterie board and perhaps an olive oil cake). Given the age of the attendees we'll be eating early and then everyone scoots by 3:00 while the sun is still up, giving the eldest and me time to hop out to the movie theater for the third *Knives Out* mystery. I'll admit it, I am a giant sucker for these star-studded cast whodunnits. All points to Rian Johnson and Kenneth Branagh for bringing them back into fashion.

Work is going well enough. The added contract work this year has been helpful for the household finances, but I'll admit that working in the non-profit fields has not been great for the old sense of stability: people tend to not donate to larger causes when their immediate community is being hard done by. (To that end a bunch of the frozen meats in our house are moving on to the food shares in town so our neighbors can have a good holiday; if we're fortunate enough to have a full sized freezer in the basement we can afford the charity.)

The play went well; here's a photo of the set taken during the sensory friendly production, as well as my *Hufflepuff Cookies As Trans Pride Flag*. Because fuck you, JKR.



Speaking of plays, we did make it out to the eldest's school to see the production of *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812* where she helped with costumes and did the dramaturgy. The show was performed in the central hall of one of the Newport mansions, with some seats cabaret style in the action and the rest of us looking down from the balcony; amazing production, and we couldn't be prouder of our kiddo.

Inside the Library

After 2 months of play the Denizens and I came to the conclusion that *Draw Steel* just wasn't working for us, and we are transitioning back to the *13th Age* game at about the time this issue drops. You may ask 'Why?'

The first word on the *Draw Steel* cover is "Tactical", and I have never been into the tactical parts of RPGs: My beloved V&V is in theory supposed to be played on the grid and it's just something I've never cottoned to. But *Draw Steel* is designed for that from the jump, and I admit a lot of the things they built into it are very appealing, but it's a cognitive load in places I'm not used to. Some GMs struggle with the theater of the mind, free form, Feng Shui inspired combats I prefer running, seeing the grid and minis as a scaffolding. For me, they are tools I have not (yet) mastered. I think I'd do a lot better with that and the monster designs if I wasn't using the starter set but built everything from scratch so I knew it soup to nuts. As it was, I was ending each session dissatisfied.

As for the kids, we started with the pregens but it was part of the same problem: none of them had ever played tactically before, and none of them really knew what the characters could do. When I had them replace pregens with their own PCs things improved considerably, but a lot of the juice in *Draw Steel* combat is, *D&D 4E* style, figuring out how the various class abilities interact with each other to bolster the other PCs actions. Which is great! But it requires a different style of play and interaction with the rules than these kids have done. At their most engaged they were trying to use the powers to do things that worked conceptually but were outside the rules: The Talent used Telekinesis to yank the intended sacrifice against the high ceiling out of the goblin's reach while the earth-focused Elementalist used one of her secondary abilities to build a rock-cocoon down from the ceiling to hold/ protect the hostage. This was *great*, even though by the wording of the Elementalist's power it shouldn't work.

I will be coming back to *Draw Steel*. There is so much I love in it for how it integrated down-time actions and handles the encounter/experience/rest gameplay loop. I just to approach it from scratch, most likely by taking some of the ideas I've wanted to play with in the *Gamma World* setting – building and protecting a community in a post-apocalyptic world – and using the *Draw Steel* engine to explore them with more experienced players.

Stating up Regrets 5: The Iron Skull!

Fourth from Jon Morris' *League of Regrettable Superheroes* is a hero whose name appears to be a straightforward description of his powers, but he's much more complex. Gentles and ladyfolk, I give you The Iron Skull.¹



The Skull's birth name is unrevealed. All we know is that he was an American WW2 vet whose body was destroyed and his brain and remaining parts had a hi-tech body built around them. This body is covered by a realistic skin, but lacking a nose or eyelids, giving him a singular, unnerving appearance.

"But wait," you ask, "This is a 1939 American hero who is already a WWII veteran?" Well, yes, and this is why I picked him for this month. Because the Iron Skull's heroics take place in the far-flung future of 1975, twenty years after the end of World War 2! This pessimistic timeline has the war ending somewhat inconclusively, including land battles in North America. Now the USA is one of several major powers, and in a precarious position: its postwar government is at risk from within by racketeers and organized crime and without by hostile foreign states. It's a unique setting ripe with potential... and then Burgos left the book, and the new creative team put the Iron Skull in a traditional super-costume, let him fly, and had him fighting Nazis with a more normal face but no hair. New guys hadn't gotten the series bible.²

We are sticking with the Burgos original: he's got a weird appearance but sports conventional clothing and blonde hair rather than bald-with-a-skull & crossbones costume, with flight and telepathy with the District Attorney. I am also ditching his ring that leaves a skull and crossbones mark with his punches as that's too clearly borrowed from the Phantom. That leaves us with super strength, durability, combat skills, canny intellect, an electrical blast he can fire from his hand, and, of course, his Iron Skull. Can't forget that.

Villains & Vigilantes gives us several ways to approach this sort of mechanical being, since it has 3 separate abilities that lay out Android vs Cyborg vs Robot. All three give a defense type, but Bionics is freeform – pick 1d6 bionic body parts or system and figure out what they do – while the others give standardized abilities and drawbacks that include how human you look and how much you can heal without repairs.

Since for me it's a game of using the smallest number of abilities to capture the character I'm going with Robot Body, but also 'cheating' as you'll see in a minute. Robot Body has an appears human percentage of d%-30. The Skull looks *mostly* human, like if you saw him from behind or in a dark alley you'd go, "yeah, that's a human...?" and then you see his face and "nope!" I'm comfortable with saying he looks 63% human. If he tries to disguise himself as human, he must score under that on a d% test. He also can't heal without repairs and recovers Power³ faster than human when plugged in but slower when not. He weighs more than a human, triple his normal weight to 480 lbs. (and -2 Agility) He gets a +17 on his Strength score and the Robot Body defense type, which reduces conventional combat to a 10% chance. He's tough, strong, doesn't look human.

But... and this is important... Robots get a free roll on the device table to balance their limitations. Do you know what else is on the device table? Bionics! So, his living parts are held in bionic systems inside his robot body, and those bionic systems give him more abilities! Bingo! Now we're cooking with cheese!

What are those bionic systems? I want him to be as strong or stronger than Speed Centaur, which is difficult with Speeds really high weight. *Synthetic musculature* gives Skull another +13, so he has an 8 ton lift and 3d10 HTH

He repeatedly fires an electrical blast from his hand and recovers quickly, so let's add *bio-electrical generation* which lets him a) recover Power at normal human speed and b) lets him fire a Lightning Control style attack but at double normal Power cost (8 points) His electrical burst is tiring, using up 1/11th of his power per shot.

To mix things up, let's have some of his other bionics be how his brain is an add to the robot body, since he's a clever, highly experienced soldier. Bionics #3 is simply *heightened intelligence* +14, improving his damage, detects, inventing chance, and power score. The Skull is a classic pulp hero in the Doc Savage mold.

¹ The Iron Skull was created by Carl Burgos in 1939 – who also created the original android Human Torch – and is in the public domain. Image from <https://comicvine.gamespot.com/iron-skull/4005-54998/>

² The Iron Skull has been rebooted a couple of times, once as part of Malibu Comic's 1992 stab at a supers universe, then as an [ancient immortal guardian of humanity](#) by Frank Schildiner. Neither of these took my approach.

³ Stamina in *V&V*, yes it's needlessly confusing.

Bionics #4 is *Weakness Detection* V&V's analytical fighter. With one action you can study a foe for an accuracy boost based on your intelligence score for the rest of the fight; for Iron Skull that's +9. This usually also reveals any rolled weakness, but while I might see 711 or the Eye being able to see that someone is vulnerable to fire or has psychological issues, I'm not seeing this here. Instead, his bonus applies to every foe in the scene for the rest of the turn: he can read the scene and act in that split second, but the fog of war quickly swamps it and the power only helps him against one foe again. The Skull only gets 1.5 actions a round, so this is only useful when he gets that second action. But when he can use it, he can pick up a big, heavy object and try to hit several foes at a 18 or less per attack.

Finally, the Iron Skull hits things with his head. A lot. So let us give a 5th bionic part of *iron skull* where a) he can attack with his head and add his body weight as an improvisational weapon (+2 to hit, +1d6 damage) or three times his weight if he charges (+3/+1d10) and b) any blow to his head has no effect, and any round when he doesn't head butt someone he has another -2 to be hit because he arranges to take shots to the head⁴. His robot body is still pretty tough (and he has 63 HP) but he's not invulnerable the way Speed Centaur is. When he builds up a head of steam, he can break through most any barrier with his titular noggin and be none the worse for wear.⁵

All told, Iron Skull is fast (about 15 mph hour run), very tough, and insanely strong; he's the sort of super strong fighter who wrecks the environment by using huge, improvised weapons, but always with a purpose and goal—very much like the Thing in well written *Fantastic Four*. Yes, it's only 8 tons, so not much compared to other supers' universes, but it's a lot for V&V, which helps keep the game in check a little.

For his backgrounds, we're looking at Military and Research/Technology (he may not have built his body, but he knows how to maintain it). With his high intelligence he could be like Zippo making constant modifications to his gear, but I more see him helping to invent a counter to the villain of the week's weapons. Again, Doc Savage.

But how do you play it?

I've been building up to this one because I realized that the Iron Skull's alternate timeline is the one where *the Regrettable's*⁶ stories are taking place. Like I said, I find the setting ripe with potential.

Starting in 1939 with the appearance of super-humans the world timeline gets thrown askew. Super-powers and super-technology extend the war another decade and brings land conflict into the Americas. I already know some of the reasons for this, which will be detailed as we explore other Regrettables. (If you think you've seen strange things up to this point, strap in!) This change does mean a change in the Eye, in that I would add Dimensional Travel A, travel to and from a particular dimension, and the Eye remains the contemporary me astral projecting to the alternate 1975, trying for my own reasons to direct that timeline. This combo makes his astral projection even more expensive (16 power per hour!) but also means his body isn't even in this world....

For Iron Skull, he makes a perfectly good solo hero, and a fine member of a team. He's like Atomic Robo in that he is tough, smart, strong, and tech inclined; with his military training he is probably a decent leader who knows squad tactics. As he comes out of nowhere with professional clout, but not in a recognized costume, I think he's got some wealthy agency or part of the US Government backing him.

Maybe this makes him team leader?

Regretting what I said to you...

Matt comments on the Golden Age of comics as a time of wild invention: exactly, which is why I love it. V&V's randomness keeps me from a rut, I still have modern awareness; these creators were in uncharted territory.

Myles is right that Zippo feels like an early Daredevil foe, with the single device-based power a really silly costume.

Lisa's statement that 711 makes a good NPC is not wrong: like the Phantom Stranger showing up to tell the JLA that shit is getting weird, 711 can sneak into the *Regrettables'* HQ whenever he needs to warn them of a street level conspiracy about to boil over to super-hero level, and he thinks he needs some backup.



⁴ Any ranged attack that misses does so because it hit his head! *Ping!* That has to be disheartening to his opponents.

⁵ This image is a panel pull from a [complete Iron Skull story](#) from 1940

⁶ Yes, that's their team name.

Under the Giant's Shadow

I'm going to refrain from any D&D rules mods this month so that I can address comments from the last two issues in one go. Thanks for your patience.

Comments on E&A 5

Mark Nemeth: Several large wheels of cheese!? Mouse People! Check Myle's zine for the lost painting.

Death by birdshit would be a horrible way to go.

re Removing the Orc: I have a theory, which is mine, that the inclusion of Orc as a PC race in *World of Warcraft* fundamentally changed the way new entrants into the hobby perceived them. It's strange for us grognards, but for most players in the hobby today Orc has always been a playable race with a vibrant culture. Complaining about it is like yelling back the tide, he said, his feet getting wet.

Matt Stevens: Welcome Back! I think you and I overlapped for a year or so at my start, but I've been hearing of you for years from Lisa & Josh. RE story games: You're not wrong, but it is a different sort of fun. They are in the same family but they ain't the same animal. And yeah, all these youngsters having the same debates we were having ages ago is tiresome, but I've learned to not get too involved. The worst are full of righteous indignation, and I have blood pressure meds.

re Golden Age being unsophisticated but with shocking variety: That's it exactly. I love V&V because its randomness can spur unexpected ideas, but even those get watered down by my contemporary expectation. These are completely off the leash.

Roger BW: I love the IRC *Steve & Terry* theme! "I'm Jane Freakin' Goodall!"

re not seeing the point of being in the world if you can't be in the big story, which is already told: I've seen this expressed in other ways ("if the PCs aren't the most important people in the WORLD than I don't want to play" was said to me once) and it's not something I can wrap my brain around. Any world is vast; their stories infinite. It's like refusing to play the Teen Titans in a DC Heroes RPG because they aren't the Justice League.

John Redden: Oh it's not the current *D&D*; *Under the Giant's Shadow* is modeled on the Holmes/Moldvay B/X of my youth.

Mitch Hyde: I just rewatched *An American Werewolf in London*, what I remember as being my first ever 'horror' movie (so young I pulled the crochet blanket over my face but still looked through the holes in it to watch); it held up pretty well, but yeah, my horror GM is always tinged with comedy now.

Re *Draw Steel*: Yeah 'Director' was a weird choice since DS is resolutely not a story game. While not old school in mechanically two of the operating principles is 'the villain wants to win' and 'the players interests drive the action', so hardly "lets story game this to conclusion" that Director would indicate.

ELF: I am on the east coast of the US and have a son who wakes up at 5 am and I am NOT running a game at that hour. They are in the UK. Or iceland, maybe?

Re Windows 11 being a downgrade: PREACH!

While I don't begrudge anyone their love of GURPS (and as Roger Bell-West pointed out, when I wrote for SJG they paid me on time), being on the GURPS Supers playtest for 4E was scarring. So many pixels spilled about the tank barrel tensile strengths & what STR Superman would need to bend one, vs just ripping the whole turret off. RPG designed by engineers for engineers.

Gabriel Roark: yup, Mahjong. It's obvious the moment someone says it. (Repeat this for everyone else who was flabbergasted by this knowledge.)

Myles Corcoran: I feel like you & I are in the same boat; lets pledge to make 2026 a more mentally hopeful year.

Is getting the snot kicked out of you the rules as writ fail state for oratory? Because that's hardcore!

I missed the mic!

Michael Cule: RE the family of the dragon: I totally see how the system would be fighting against that, but it is a great idea for a game. Glad it worked.

As I commented, my players have decided to move back to *13th Age* from *Draw Steel*, but specifically to not move to 2E because the 2E time skip removed the big bad they had made the center of the campaign. I appreciated that.

Patrick Zoch: re hit and run - well that's terrifying.

Re *OSRIC* vs *AD&D*: The perpetual problem with retro-clones! fiddly bits!

re preferring the *MI* TV series: I knew you were a man of taste and distinction. (Also: *Farscape*!)

I like the look of the new zine; it feels classic and bright
Re your image of the Cat PC: the quintessential cat. But they wanted something that was more literally a cat.

Patrick Riley: You didn't have enough > in your Timm v Snyder comparison. An infinite number might do.

re Fungus based empires: I love when the empire prior to now are not even remotely human....

re Em Dashes: yeah, I was here first, ya silly buggers. If AI uses em dashes it means the samples they learned from - NORMAL HUMAN WRITING - is full of 'em.

re never playing D&D that wasn't small unit heroism: Which means you've never played the endgame (level 9+) of AD&D, where the fighter's power base is about larger unit heroism. You've likely also never played the mid-levels (4-8) as designed where each PC has 4-6 henchmen + hirelings. The adventuring party on the Trampier cover has 10 members! But to be fair, not a lot of people *did* play that as designed, which is why game design moved off of it.

re Earthdawn: I did tell the players it was a sandbox, so I had no real space to complain, though it did feel like a little bit of a premise reject for me to come up with the stuff in the area they were heading to and they repeatedly noped out of it. My own damn fault.

Pum: I'm not sure you really grasp the goal of a games clean out.

Dylan Chapel re *Parlaintb*: There are so many lovely bits in *Earthdawn*. I am too crunch averse for the integrated minigames these days, though. It's one of those things were I wish there was a system agnostic setting book.

re Soul gems as currency: yeah, Wraiths Oboli came immediately to mind for me too. That was one messed up setting.

re random encounters: I really appreciate the Knave 'event die' where every turn a d6 is rolled. on a 1 there is an encounter, but the the numbers include the party needing to rest, their torches guttering out (so much more dramatic than tracking torch turn time), there being a shift in the dungeon environment (similar to what you mentioned), there being a sign of monsters nearby (roll an encounter, give a sign of that creature, and that's what shows up next time you roll a 1), or nothing happens. It's incredibly elegant and a great prompt for the adventures. I will roll a dozen d6 before play so it's both random AND I know what's coming (but I roll the encounters, signs, and shift prompts at the moment to keep things unscripted).

re Megacampaigns: I've long wanted to do a proper megadungeon, and if we keep coming back to *Dyson's Delve* every summer I will be happy. Ever since the *Heroes of Battle* 3E supplement came out I've wanted to run a proper wartime game (the realization that dungeons are flowcharts and you could translate flowcharts to the battlefield was wonderful); my *13th Age* group will likely be doing *Red Hand of Doom* starting January 2026.

Jim Eckman: I need to study more Chinese history as a possible empire model for space opera.

Mark A Wilson: re *MI*: it may have been a great action series; it's a shame that *MI* isn't an action property.

re emails to PCs: this is actually an excellent idea.

Avram Grumer: <facepalm> over the spelljammer campaign. As for the Gene Wolfe apa, well that would be specialized!

Re *Sentinel Comics*: Oh good, more supers RPGs for me to own and not run!

re House Malaprop: well thats... enervating.

re *Champions* taxes: I only ever build characters in *Champions*; I would never want to play/run it.

re *Smallville*: oof! I loves it conceptually (and stole from it for *Mech & Matrimony*) but wow is it overcomplicated.

Re Character creation as a morass of tiny decisions: I am noodling with *Chill* for the first time in decades and am amazed at how few decisions there are to get a unique PC - roll and place 8 stats, spend 2-5 points (random, ick) on a list of 30 skills. 1 point= student, 2 = teacher, 3 = master. Are your stats good enough to know some magic? if so, pick 1 from 9 options. Done. Let's get playing. To an old person like me this feels like the right amount of crunch.

Brian Misaiszek: re Paratethys: this is fascinating stuff. It's a bit... too explicable for the Mythos mold, but it does make great base for an occult campaign.

Lisa Padol re PCs showing off their special abilities at the beginning: this effect was partially responsible for a divorce among my player group. It was the mid oughts, a Feng Shui game, and in the 1st session where she appeared Lena's Ninja was going to sneak from the prison cells to the command center to shut down security so everyone could escape - classic 'let's show how badass the Ninja is' move. And Lena gave a decent "I'm a badass so I can do this and you can't" speech, then rolled a botch so epic she started with a 15 Intrusion and ended at -20. It was astounding. Her husband Jason said "and that's when she stepped on the antique bicycle horn... AH-OOO-GAH!" They were divorced a year later. OK, they might have been underlying issues but I maintain this was a pivotal moment.

re Foundation vs Foundations Edge feeling dated: concur.

Legion of Super Heroes, not League, and I really wish I had the mojo to keep that game going.

re *the Robert Chambers*: I have no shame. But I did explain all of these references in the endnotes for the kids to do additional reading. And it was a fun time. I hope to come back to it next summer

re PC death: yeah, you have to know what you're signing up for. Interestingly, there has only been 1 PC death in a year's worth of Knave play, and that was over the summer when the PC got himself blown up by doing something he knew was stupid. The Knave/OSR players are just really cautious (the Con point buffer between 0 HP and death helps, but it's mostly play style). So, it's not random death, it's "you don't have plot armor".

re players short-circuiting scenes: communication is a large part of it, but there's also genre emulation - the best example was when Jim, who was a heavy *GURPS* and *Traveller* player, kept expecting his pulling a gun on an unarmed person would shift play from fight to interrogation mode... in a *Feng Shui* game. He had real problems getting out of the stricter firearms simulation to 'guns are punching people at a distance'.

re opposition intractable to negotiation: In the *Emirikol D&D 3E* game, the beast-men were creations of chaos, made of stolen and tortured human/demi-human souls. There wasn't negotiation because their existence was anathema; they were extrusions of entities that wanted to destroy the world. The PCs had plenty of political enemies they could negotiate with, as well as the cultists who had bought into chaos. But these rank-and-file beast men? no. As for the *Eternal Lies* NPC, that's just weirdly irritating.

re players wanting to be friends with every NPC: in the main campaign, Biblebap's player's PC, Giggleshook (no I don't know where he gets these names from) wants to steal from every non-combat NPC/town they meet and hire every combat NPC they encounter. His henchman is a recruited Orc Pirate who he pays... with money he steals from poor townfolk.

re *Gumshoe QuickShock: Mutant City Blues 2E* had shock cards for personal crises as optional, but we never used them; felt extraneous and complicated.

RE Marian Cox: you won't find much about her; history has swallowed her, but her papers are at Yale and one of her books is on Project Gutenberg. Her husband saddled her with properties that she had to spend the lions' share of her time managing so she had no energy to write. She had the promise that when he died the properties would support her, only to learn that he willed the bulk of his money to his sisters and the properties were arranged so that she had all the downside risk and his male friends were 'business managers' skimming off all the profits. She was widowed in her late 30's deeply in debt. She never had the space to really write again.

Re *Draw Steel: The Delian Tomb* comes with everything you need - the core mechanics, the adventure (a plot book, a combat book, and maps), the minimal rules for starting play doc, and a bunch of pregens, for \$25. As for the \$70 for the PDFs, look at it this way - the digital and physical books for *DS* together come to \$140, and the digital and physical together for *D&D 2024* come to \$180... except *MCDM* pays the highest rates in the industry and directly promotes its creators.

re *Giant's Shadow*: yes, 7 players when everyone could make it. and yes the PC has an NPC haunted weapon and a PC haunted grappling hook and an NPC haunted amulet (that gave him a map of parts of the dungeon) by the time we stopped play.

Re *Amber*: having just reread the first series out loud for my daughter (who adored them and kept copious notes on what was happening), I suspect it would hold up for you. The second series is deeply inferior.

re maximum apa lengths: Honestly, based on the last few months I'd like to see the maximum individual zine cut to 12 pages and the maximum monthly zine set to 150. The 183 pages in this issue are overwhelming, and I can see us hitting 200 a month which would be unimaginable.

Joshua Kronengold: re inspirations: I was happy to see *RWBY* on there given how much Diskette from the Legion of Super-Heroes PBEM

Re inter-party conflict in *Dyson's Delve*: there already has been considerable well-played tension, and that will definitely ramp up as the Mushroom King's plans for territorial expansion move forward and the PC cultists facilitate them - of course Pyramiad already wants Bog Hollow converted to the Mushroom King's army.

re horses: back in college one player (now in the *SotS*) game accused me of treating horses like motorcycles. I had the advantage of pointing to the *Amber* campaign I was running - Morganstern is a great example.

re RPG healing: I keep thinking of the rules in 1E, where non magical healing was 1 HP per day, and you were meant to have multiple PCs running at once to keep the game going by bringing PC 2 in while PC 1 is healing. Or as Bilbo says.... "time! time is the answer!"

re our daughter calling: she's a historian, of course she uses antique tech.

re how the cat manipulates objects: with his pointy teeth, head butts, and adorable little toe beans. He's a cat, he has next to no manual dexterity.

re *BESM* Issues: see, I *want* to like the variable skill cost per campaign rules, but every time I run something with it everyone skips maxing the 6/level core skills and instead maxes the 1/level trivial skills and then tries to centralize their character being a master chef/translator of ancient languages/helicopter pilot. It's not so much premise rejection as "expand the premise to include the things I am an expert at, which means the cost of the things I am an expert at should be higher than they are." It's a skill point oroboros.

re page count max: 100% agree

re YCT Michale Clue: *V&V* actually had Power (which is your endurance, pays for your actions, rolling with attacks, and power-use, and when you run out rolls into your HP), your HP (which are your ability to directly soak damage, and when it runs out you're incapacitated, and if also out of power, dead), and Basic Hits (the physical integrity of your body, 0 basic hits means you're an unrecognizable smear). There is also your Movement Rate, which I started using as a separate damage pool for things like entangles or near misses.

re designers of hyper specialized games graduating: Alan Moore had a great quote about making the *America's Best Comics* line after *Watchmen*: "the reason you deconstruct watches is to learn to build better watches." I really do hope that we get better games out of this era.

Attonarch: I had to double check that *Swords & Wizardry* used the Fighters get 1 attack per level vs foes of less than 1 Hit Die (i.e. the original Mook rule) but that's clearly what's happening here as Hagar is laying into the goblins. Also laughed at "bree-Yark!"

Raise Dead! Now we're cooking with ectoplasm!

Everyone else RAEBNC – but I will respond to all the comments on my B/X homebrew rules next ish. Also, here's the photo of (clockwise from rear) **Brian Misaiszek**, A&E Emeritus Eugene Reyonlds, myself and Jason Dressel at the final 2002 Milwaukee GenCon



Reviews to Fill Space:

Lullaby by Ed McBain: One of the run of 1980's 87th Precinct stories that I read when they came out (as opposed to the earlier ones that I devoured en masse one summer), revisiting it is looking at a snapshot of NYC at that time, before the lead poisoning started working it way out of everyone's systems in the 1990s. There are three separate stories here – a police procedural A plot of some child murders (so be warned), a B plot of gang and drug war stuff in the city, and a C plot that continues relationship issues from last book. Recommended.

Vet at the End of the World by Jonathan Hollins: all veterinary memoirs are in conversation with *All Creatures Great and Small* and Hollins doesn't have Herriot's lyrical style, but he gives it a game try. His stories are all about his time as the vet in residence in some of the most remote Islands of the British Empire – the Falkland's, Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha – and he does have a lot of interesting anecdotes. My wife tore through it and it took me a bit longer, but I never gave

up on it. If nothing else, Saint Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha make a fascinating game setting.

Murderbot Dairies volumes 3-7 by Martha Wells: Yeah, I kept with it. It is clear that novellas 1-4 make up a complete story, and 5 is an interstitial before we started the next complete story in 6-7. Wells does something clever from a writing perspective in taking what would be a single long story and giving it rising action, conclusion and denouement repeatedly in the novellas. This is something she abandons in book 6 (*Network Effect*), writing a novel sized piece, and the story suffers for it. It's doubly weird in that book 7 is a novella that takes place immediately after book 6, continuing the same characters and themes and in a normal series would have been part of the prior book. I still haven't watched any of the TV show, but I can say that the novellas have all held my attention nicely, and the novel is solid.

The Next Always by Nora Roberts: mystery/romance genre fiction is always fascinating because some of the energy SD/F would put into world building is instead put into explaining how real-world jobs work as they are either relevant to the crime or verisimilitude for the lovers' lives: in this case the construction trades for the three brothers who will be married off in the series, as well as bookshop, restaurant, and hotel management for their inevitable wives. This is one of Robert's series that eschews the steamy sex scenes in favor of borderline true crime (with stalkers/evil ex-boyfriends for our heroes to deal with) as well as nerd trope-ing with the center-of-the-story building being rehabbed into a hotel has a ghost haunting it. Honestly, these series of Roberts where we have 3-4 siblings or close friends sharing a business getting paired off as one of the series goals would make a great RPG setting... perhaps in *Hillfolk*? Are there any romance systems out there designed for that larger group play?

Goodnight The Eye, wherever you are.

Firedrake's Hoard

Number 4: by Roger BW

- Blog: <https://blog.firedrake.org/>
- Gaming stuff: <https://tekeli.li/>
- RPG podcast: <https://tekeli.li/podcast/>
- Actual Play: <https://tekeli.li/whartson-hall/>
- Mastodon: <https://discordian.social/@RogerBW>
- This zine contains no content produced by generative AI tools.



Recent Games

I've been away at Essen SPIEL, the biggest boardgame show in the world. Not much RPG content there, though some publishers do show up, including Ulisse Spiel, Chaosium and Cubicle 7. As usual, I was demonstrating for Indie Game Studios when I wasn't seeing the show; they're a great crew and it's always a pleasure to work with them. I even had a few chances to show off one of my favourite games, *Flash Point Fire Rescue*, a cooperative game of firefighting.

Also I was able to indulge my passion for Currywurst, a fast food which began when British squaddies with curry sauce in ration packs met hungry Germans with second-rate sausage circa 1949. (A book set in pre-WWII Berlin¹ was quite ruined for me with a line that Goering "obviously liked his Currywurst". If you're trying to impress me with the quality and detail of your research, and you then lose my trust...)

In even less role-playing-related news, it's been time for [Everybody Codes](https://everybody.codes/) (<https://everybody.codes/>), a series of programming puzzles in the style of *Advent of Code*, and as with that other challenge it remains open for later participation. I love this kind of thing, and always learn by doing it. (All right, there was the time I did

Advent of Code entirely in PostScript. That may not have been sensible. But people don't think of it as a "real" programming language, and I wanted to correct that impression in a small way.)

Meanwhile, back in the games...

Bayern: One more session with Group 1 (Whartson Hall), who are currently more or less even with Group 2 (Sundays). Group 1 has reached the ice base dug into a glacier on a deeply frozen world; group 2 has poked the base and run away before it could poke back too much, which was definitely the right thing to do.

(Earlier, after a spaceship mishap) "You press the HELP button. Nothing happens. You revert to the paper manuals under the console, which someone has helpfully given a new title page: *So, You're Naffed.*"

Cried the Lady: just as we thought it all made sense, we found some even stranger information. But we've stumbled over another trove of handouts, which is always a good thing. (Some people assert that the *point* of playing a Lovecraftian investigation is to get the handouts. I don't entirely agree, but our GM is very good at producing them.)

Neutral Currents: We attended a diplomatic party in Monrovia and avoided

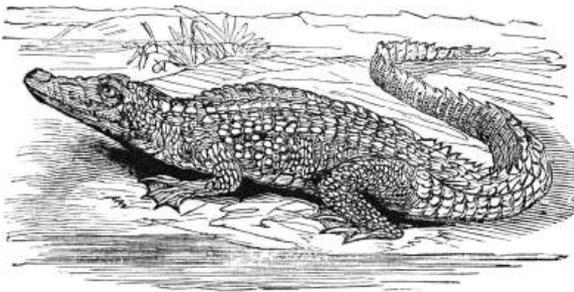
¹*Black Roses*, Jane Thynne (2013)

murdering *anybody*. As we came away, someone was stealthily approaching our plane out in the harbour...

[The Duke of Windsor] “was after all the head of the Church of England for a while.” “Not a great one, but certainly not the worst.”

The Day After Ragnarok: Chasing up the origins of the giant goanna, we found that the local vet appeared to have been reading too many Strange Books. And finding allies who felt the same way. No more wrestling, but I did get to punch a smaller goanna on the nose. (And my long-term goal appears to have become founding a sanctuary for Serpent-tainted creatures.)

“It’s a man’s life in the mad serpent-cult.”



Crocodile à double arête (*Crocodilus biporcatus*).

oldbookillustrations.com

Unknown Artist (1884-1891)

Meta, meta, what is meta?

I talked last time about software to make putting together a PDF-APA easier, and I’ve now released it at [Codeberg](https://codeberg.org/Firedrake/apatools/) (<https://codeberg.org/Firedrake/apatools/>). If anyone finds it useful, or thinks of features they’d like to have added, get in touch.

Obligatory Typst Content

While working on a piece for the next *Path of Cunning* I realised that, rather than lift numbers from a CSV file or elsewhere into the

typesetting engine, I could generate the entire table at compile time with a small embedded Typst program. And if I want to tweak anything, the code is *right there*.

How I game remotely

I’ve been doing practically all my role-playing gaming remotely since 2020, and this setup seems to work fairly well, while not being the standard roll20 or similar.

For the basic videoconference, I use [Jitsi](https://jitsi.org/) (<https://jitsi.org/>). I host my own server, but you can use one of the public instances. No spyware, no covert recording, no AI training, no registrations and passcodes, just connect (use a hard-to-guess room name if you’re on a public server) and play.

If we want a game recording, I can do that locally by recording my microphone and the output from Jitsi, though the quality of the latter isn’t ideal. For Whartson Hall and other podcasts where I want better quality, we each make local recordings of ourselves, mostly on the same machines that are showing the conference window², and I merge them together later.

“But Jitsi doesn’t have a dice roller”, people say. Well, we’re all role-players of long standing, we all have lots of dice, and we, er, roll them. (One player likes to join from his bed on a laptop and uses a web-based roller³, fair enough.) The only difference is that we can’t see what other people have rolled, but if I were that suspicious of my

²Since I am awkward, I use a separate recorder, now a Tascam DR-20X since the DR-20 died and I couldn’t find another one in a hurry. That has the advantage of keeping my mic track and the conference track with everyone else’s voices in perfect synchronisation, and I use that to sync up everyone else’s recordings.

³Actually it’s [this one I wrote](https://tekeli.li/js/dice.html) (<https://tekeli.li/js/dice.html>).

fellow players I wouldn't be playing with them at all.

Jitsi has a text "chat" box. For handouts, we post links to wherever they're hosted (my own server, Google Drive, Dropbox) there. Also in chat, you can click on a participant and send a message only to them. so that's note-passing sorted. There isn't an automatic "breakout room" feature, but if you need more private conversation than text allows you can always spin up a separate channel and send the relevant players the link. Or just ask the others to step away for a few moments.

Maps aren't a big part of most of my games, but a little while back I ran a bastardised *GURPS Pathfinder* hybrid which seemed to need them. For that. I'd extract the maps from the PDF modules as bitmaps, draw a hex grid over them with some custom software⁴ and load them in [Inkscape](https://inkscape.org/) (https://inkscape.org/). That's mostly a vector graphics editor, but it has the great advantage over bitmap editors like The GIMP that each separate object (e.g. the image representing a player character) is effectively in its own private layer, so you can move it around, overlap other things, and so on, without having to worry about erasing parts of the image. I then share that Inkscape window into Jitsi. This does mean that players can't move their own pieces, and if I were in more tactical games I'd look at a shared whiteboard or other option, but this works for me at the moment.

All of this (except the Tascam recorder) is entirely free software, no need to rely on any external services that might suddenly go away,

⁴If a thing is worth doing it's worth overdoing. I rename the bitmaps to include a scale, so many pixels per foot or metre, and the grid generator takes that and the game I specify to drop on a grid at the right shape and scale: one yard hexes for *GURPS*, 1.5m squares for *Traveller*, whatever.

become pay-only, be bought by a spyware company, or introduce compulsory AI slop. And now that we're all used to the system it largely fades away from our experience; it's not the same feeling as sitting round a room chatting, but it's pretty good.

One unexpected change: I find players tend to go through material faster than in a face to face game, possibly because distractions and side matters are more obvious and easier to dismiss. At the same time, the on-line games are more wearing; one of the groups tends to run for about two hours, which is about the maximum we're happy with non-stop, and for the groups that prefer four-hour sessions I make a point of calling a break after at most two hours so that we can stand up, walk around, go to the loo, get a cup of tea, etc.

Game conventions: the good, the bad, and the weird

I mentioned last time that I don't tend to play RPGs at conventions any more: I used to, quite a lot, but most (UK) conventions now crowd several RPGs into the same room, and an atmosphere of creeping dread isn't really compatible with shouty *D&D* at the next table.

That's why I stopped *running* RPGs at big conventions too, as well as a certain feeling of stinginess on the part of the organisers. If I run three four-hour sessions in the same day giving maybe eighteen people a good time, my reward will be that you'll generously give me a ticket to the convention (that I won't get to see any of the rest of) for that day only. Woohoo. I wouldn't mind as much if the players weren't paying to be in my game, in addition to their tickets to get into the show...

I do still play at Stabcon, where they actually like RPGs and so don't try to make the players suffer; at the current venue, there are several rooms that can hold just one or two groups each. (And the Stabcon players don't run to loud games to quite the same extent as the players at UK Games Expo.)

Another consideration is that in the time taken by that four hour RPG slot, which might be good or might be bad, I can play two or three or four boardgames some of which I know *will* be good (and if one game is not fun at least it'll be over sooner). Perhaps I'm being over-conservative, perhaps I get enough role-playing with the groups I play with at home; I'll gladly go with GMs I know, but mostly I'm not interested in risking a sizeable chunk of my convention time on someone new. (This doesn't mean I think they're *bad GMs*, just that many games are unlikely to suit me. Perhaps I am picky.)



George Henry Boughton (pre 1905)

Sometimes four hours is the ideal length for an RPG session (particularly, as I've said before, horror games with a high casualty rate). But all too often the really good stuff is the product of a longer period of play, which the convention game just can't provide.

I've had good convention games; particularly memorable was a session of *Continuum* at a US Worldcon, after which I looked over at the British friend who by coincidence had ended up in the same game, and we agreed that this game would be really hard work to run, even for a young and energetic GM.

We Also Heard From

Comments on E&A number 5

Brian Rogers: I love to get completely outside my usual competence zone (broadly, computers and writing) and do a practical Thing every once in a while. Also, why did nobody tell me about hot-melt glue years ago?

Now that everyone knows about computer-moderated RPGs, I suspect the vital point to emphasis in the real thing is specifically that you *can* do anything: you can negotiate, you can bribe, you don't just have to fight.

"Welcome to Racket City. We don't play tennis."

RYCTM: I hadn't heard of *Moonlight on Roseville Beach* but, yes, that's the sort of thing I was thinking of: you or your friends are people whom the authorities just don't care about, so you'll have to solve your own problems.

RYCT Heath Row: I rewrite [board game rulebooks](https://tekeli.li/rogers-rules/) (https://tekeli.li/rogers-rules/) for fun, especially when there are lots of expansions with separate rules or when those rules just aren't very well put together. Something I've been

seeing in recent years is the over-lush narrative style: yes, yes, the dwarves need help, now what do I roll to hit something? So I go for a very abbreviated, often enough to fit on a single side of paper (which I can then fold into an 8-page booklet, using the “Pocketmod” approach). It’s not flavourful, but you can look at it at the table and find out what you want to know.

RYCT Mitch Hyde: it’s all very well to say “this adventure is a punishment for a specific mode of failure in the last one”, and maybe your interpretation is correct, but I think that if the author doesn’t actually say so this has to be speculation. (I was just reading a review of a book which the reviewer was hailing as subverting its rather clichéd genre, but my feeling was that the author just wasn’t terribly good.)

I’ve never got on with Nero Wolfe; I just don’t *like* the people involved. I’ll try that Spotswood. I agree with you on the Wiswell: good ideas but sometimes a bit of a slog.

Mark Nemeth: for my taste that sort of deep involvement in background information is what makes it interesting to have a game in a specific world, rather than a generic fantasyland or indeed the modern day. Different people, different laws and traditions and ideas of honesty and honour, but still *people*. So I’m certainly there for the exposition.

RYCT Patrick Riley: I think that in-combat healing has the sort of prolonging effect you talk about, but healing out of combat is still useful because it cuts down on the number of times the party has to retreat and replenish. (Certainly in *Call of Cthulhu* and similar games in which magical healing is absent or highly dangerous, it can be quite frustrating that

someone who got injured in a minor fight is effectively out of the rest of the adventure.)

Matt Stevens: with the usual proviso that I’m talking only about what I enjoy in RPGs, not what anyone else “should”, I find I don’t get on with games that ask me to switch from thinking like the character into a more authorial or editorial role (as it might be, “spend a point to be an old friend of the bartender”). It’s not because I don’t like doing that, but it *is* a switch, and I would rather stay in one or the other mode — and an RPG is the only thing I do which involves an extended period spent running an emulation of someone else’s mind in my own.

I’ve argued with Robin Laws (over *Hamlet’s Hit Points* in particular) about this; he wants, I think, to eliminate dull sessions by having the pace managed like an episodic TV show, while I feel that the amount of spontaneity one gives up is too high. Sometimes everything just goes right for the PCs: for me that’s not an occasion to throw in a new complication so that there’s an appropriate climax, it’s an occasion for backslapping and “aren’t we great”.

RPGs are a narrative form like no other, and I want them to be able to flow their own way rather than imitate some other form. Just as I’d rather read the book than watch the film of the book.

(I do regard the “alpha player” problem as a problem with the *people* more than with the *game*. You can try to design it out, and some games do, but a domineering person will find a way to do that unless it’s made clear that it’s not welcome behaviour.)

A system that goes somewhat in this direction but which I have found I enjoy is *Genesys*: the dice may tell you that you succeeded but with

some drawbacks, but they don't demand you come up with something smart when you also have the option of saying "sorry, Bob, one extra black die for you".

Elf: RYTCM: Yes, part of the problem with *GURPS* is definitely that you need to know the whole thing to decide which part of it you're going to take for your own game. There are a few PDFs which do this for you (the various series including *Dungeon Fantasy*, *Action*, *Monster Hunters* and *After the End*) but of course those may not be the genres a new player wants to run.

Myles Corcoran: I enjoyed the *Kriegsmesser*; a very *Warhammer Fantasy* sensibility, I thought.

RYCTM: Quite a bit of *Bayern's* new page count is the extensive deck plans and longer



Paul Dominique Philippoteaux (1878)

NPC writeups, but in terms of the playable content, the original has *Death Throes* (an adventure en route) and *The Daughters of Atlas* (the mission goal); the Mongoose expansion makes *Death Throes* one of eight "Interludes", and *The Daughters of Atlas* one of six "Plot Points". So that should give some idea of how much *stuff* there is here. No PCs in the box, though there are full stats for many of the senior crew of *Bayern* herself, and one could certainly borrow some of them to use as PCs. (Perversely, I like the idea of focusing a campaign on the support ship *George Bauer*, the one that goes off and does asteroid mining because suddenly we need half a ton of niobium to feed the 3d printers, while the rest of the flotilla concentrates on exploration.)

Bayern's range extension system is indeed an additional drive unit (three of them, in fact), but there's a fair bit of material on how parlous it is to jettison the old drive and fire up a new one in deep space⁵ the cost of dumping a drive is not trivial in itself, but there's also some determined engineering support needed to make it all work. (Thus the rest of human civilisation, the politics of which are defined by the 7.7 light year limit, remains viable.)

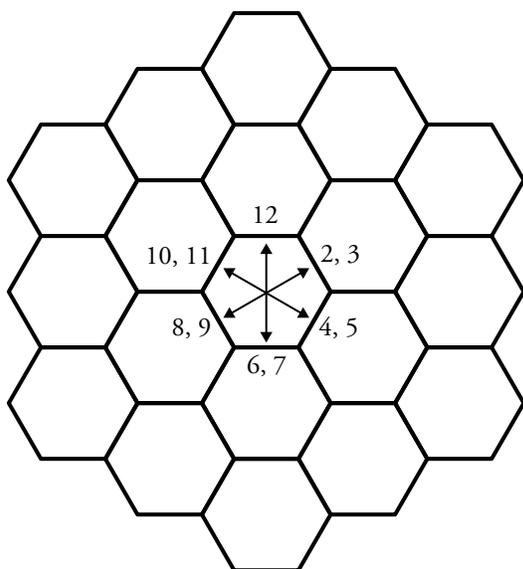
RYCT Pum on Windows 11: great time to buy a second-hand laptop to run Linux on.

Michael Cule: hope you're feeling better by now!

RYCTM I see that city building is a future IgTheme so I'll let my further thoughts fester, I mean mature, until then.

⁵You have to jettison the old drive because when it hits the distance limit, powered up or not, it undergoes "relaxation", one of those safe-sounding terms that nuclear physicists use to mean a highly energetic event.

Dylan Capel: your mention of escalation on an encounter chart reminded me of the “hex flower” style of chart originating with [Goblin's Henchman](https://goblinshenchman.wordpress.com/hex-power-flower/) (https://goblinshenchman.wordpress.com/hex-power-flower/) that some OSR enthusiasts favour, a hex grid with dice-based navigation that introduces a deliberate directional bias (the relative odds clockwise from NE are 3, 7, 11, 9, 5 and 1 in 36, so the overall drift is down and a bit to the left). If the marker drifts off the edge, one starts again from the centre or wraps round to an opposite edge, depending on taste. This allows for clusters of related events and reduces the overall hopping about between types of (for example) encounter.



RogerBW after Goblin's Henchman

Pum: I keep meaning to get to Bovington. Somehow the time never seems to be quite right.

Avram Grumer: for that matter, what if the world is flexible based on the people travelling through it? Distances can be flexible, even cities might appear or not depending on who's there.

RYCTM: *Cthulhu Eternal* does just what you point up as a problem, no crit success until you

get to a skill of 11, and it doesn't seem to break anything.

RYCT Jim Eckman, and if the PC's motivation is “bad things would happen if I tried to live a settled life”, don't be surprised if they choose to retire when they can.

RYCT Jim Vassilakos: cpdf is certainly available for Linux, though the free version is under a no-commercial-use licence. Not a problem here of course.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek: I think it's notable that Lovecraft tended to invent a new monster for each story, and it's the limited imaginations of the writers of *Call of Cthulhu* that have rendered them down into a list of standard foes. Some of the names recur, but that's about it. Of course, early 1980s RPG design convention demanded a list of monsters with stats...

I see Paratethys as less a Mythos-replacement and more an explanation for why the world has magic in it. But how do you account for the non-testable nature of historical claims of magical power?

Lovely start of a scenario, thanks! I may well run this at some point...

RYCTM: I'm broadly familiar with *Achtung! Cthulhu* but my general taste is a bit less pulpy than *A/C* tends to favour. (And, in spite of its name, the *Cold War Pulp* campaign tended to a fairly “straight” sensibility even as we encountered and in some cases developed weird powers.)

Lisa Padol: RYCTM/3: without knowing your way of thinking a bit better, it's hard to say. I treat a lot of design tasks as programming tasks (I also like OpenSCAD, in which you write a program to design a 3D object) because

that suits the way I think, but that may not be the case for you. Really, I think the best bet might be to try the on-line editor (no commitment needed) and see you like it.

RYCT Michael Cule/3: one trope I often see in mystery stories is what I call the Single Sin: suspect A is cagey about answering certain questions, but once it turns out that they were *actually* trying to hide their illicit erotic rendezvous rather than sneaking out to murder someone, they're effectively off the hook for the murder. That seems as though it might work well with the *Brindlewood Bay* model: here's an incriminating thing perhaps provided by the GM, but there's a way for the players to dismiss it in a way that's unrelated to the murder.

RYCT George Phillis/3: Michael Cule and I interviewed Mike Mornard for an early podcast episode, and his description of the caller role linked it firmly to the much larger player groups of that era: in effect it was hiving off part of the GM role ("all right, so what are you actually going to do?") to someone else rather than anything meant to impose a particular style.

RYCT Myles Corcoran/3: I've played the "new" *Masks of Nyarlathotep*, and the whole thing can be heard via Whartson Hall (link at the top of the zine). We did play Peru, shifted to Bolivia for Reasons, and we dug into the Harlem side of things in NYC, but apart from that it seemed broadly consistent with my old memories.

RYCT Brian Rogers/3: the *Artifact Space* series by Miles Cameron does a decent job of portraying trade negotiation with aliens who don't share a language or many concepts with humans.

RYCTM/4: *Cried the Lady* is running in *Cthulhu Eternal*, while *Lions, Tigers & Dragons* (and *Neutral Currents*) are in **GURPS**.

RYCT Mitch Hyde/4: sometimes the result of a skill roll is not "pass or fail" but "how long do you take to do the thing" or "how stylishly do you do the thing". This is effectively a meta-rule in pretty much any game I run, and I suppose it's an answer to *Gumshoe's* approach to the same problem.



George Woolliscroft Rhead (1898)

Joshua Kronengold: RYCT Mark A. Wilson/3: I think some of the changes between Greyhawk and the Forgotten Realms as a default setting were simply based on who might be (or think they were) owed money over it at the time.

RYCT Jim Vassilakos/3: of course if the campaign premise is something like "you work for the Agency, and they tell you what you're going to be doing this week" that can work well too. My occult WWII game started explicitly like that, but by the end the PCs had enough agency in the world that what they were going to do in a given session tended to be largely up to them.

RYCT Brian Rogers/4: the way a cat familiar manipulates an object is that everyone looks

away for some reason and then the object is where the cat wanted it.

RYCTM/4: thank you for your thoughtful comments on rule zero games. I do feel that a lot of the early indie RPG movement was inspired by reaction to bad GMs: all right, some GMs are bad, we'll make a game that limits a bad GM's ability to ruin it. And an enjoyable rule zero game absolutely requires deep trust between players and GM, to a degree that a non-r0 game probably doesn't.

I don't think your two-part statement is inevitably connected: for me, yes, no playable rules can fully represent what's happening in the game world, but no, that doesn't mean hiding things is part of what's going on. "Ragnar is a level 8 fighter" is an abbreviated and game-relevant way of saying "Ragnar is a master of several weapons, and tough enough that normal opposition barely bothers him". But that doesn't mean that being a level 8 fighter is an actual thing in the game's world.

Where I've seen rule zero becoming important is with players who want to argue authority of published rules over the GM: this book says I can do X, and it's an Official book, therefore I should be able to do X. Rule zero is a convenient way of removing that whole class of problem. (Even if the player's request is a reasonable one, having the argument during the game will in my experience destroy any immersion that might be happening.) Of course as we've all got older and, I hope, more mature, there's less need for this sort of thing.

(And I think you probably assume it, but just to be explicit, I'm talking about what works for me and the people I game with, not saying anyone else is wrong for doing things differently.)

Re CoC7 and Gumshoe: I think that *AD&D* may have been the acme of a different mechanism for each thing you wanted to do, and the more recent a game's design in general the more it tends to have a small number of core mechanisms that get used for everything. This can mean losing flavour (I get this feeling from *HeroQuest/Quest Worlds*), but needn't.

RYCT Myles Corcoran/4: ISFDB lists "The Pride of Chanur (excerpt)" in *Science Fiction Digest*, October-November 1981. But I agree, it's awfully close to be a formative influence, unless whoever came up with them (Miller, I guess) talked with Cherryh directly.

Jim Vassilakos: RYCT Panhoca da Silva & Lourenço Panhoca, I agree, there's definitely scope for "how to build a solo gamebook". Dave Morris has some specific mechanical points on [his blog](https://fabledlands.blogspot.com/) (https://fabledlands.blogspot.com/) but I don't think there's ever been a full book on the subject.

RYCTM: I've never been able to take alignment languages seriously, and I've never missed alignment in the many non-*D&D* games I've played that don't have it. I suspect it originates as a way of deciding which creatures fight on which side in *Chainmail*, and even there I can picture an Orcish Brigade that's choosing to fight for Good. So *my* answer is "away with it all"; your helmet can still reverse personality, but I don't need a Detect Evil spell to say that a tyrannical and oppressive society is pretty darn bad, whether it's populated by drow (who really ought, like most underground creatures, to be pasty white rather than black!) or by humans.

RYCT Mitch Hyde: Sandy has also said that in his original draft of *Call of Cthulhu* there was no provision for increasing Sanity.

Ignorable Theme for E&A Issue #6

Game conventions: the good, the bad, and the weird

I attend two game conventions consistently: DunDraCon and Kublacon, both here in the Bay Area. Though they both offer roleplaying games, board games, card games, miniatures, and other activities, I'm primarily there for the roleplaying and a bit of board gaming to fill the gaps in my schedule.

I use the cons as an opportunity to run games based on ideas that have some spark of inspiration but may not be a good fit for my current rpg group. This could be because of genre or because we're in the middle of some other campaign. I currently have a good rpg group, but I didn't for many years and cons were my only rpg outlet.

I rarely run the same game twice. Something about my mental composition and creative process leaves me with little desire to retreat old material. I know some folks really enjoy running the same adventure for different groups of people and seeing how they come out differently. That's cool, but it's not me.

Cons can trigger my social anxiety and make my nerves very raw. My patience, tolerance, and fuse reduces to zero, making me prone to outbursts. Plus, there are just some players I cannot stand to be around. When this happens, I have to give myself a timeout. Not always and not every time, but enough that I'm ashamed.

In A&E, I detailed how the games in last year's DunDraCon were bad, but yet I managed to find my own fun. I think once I accept that a game will be bad, I can detach myself. It's when I'm invested in a game being good and it's turning bad that I struggle.

Many years ago, I was in a Call of Cthulhu game. For reasons I don't recall, my character went to the library on her own, got captured by the baddies who were there for nefarious reasons, and I literally sat out the middle half of the game waiting for my character to be rescued. I wandered around the con, dropped in on friends, went to the dealers room, and occasionally checked in on my game to see if I could come back. I should have been annoyed, but it didn't bother me for reasons I don't understand.

The cons are also an opportunity to catch up with folks that I rarely see except at cons. I usually share a room with my buddy from college who flies up from San Diego (we went to UCSD). Just hanging out and talking is often better than the games themselves.

We try to get into the same games so that we can play together, but it doesn't work out as much as we'd like. Twice I've played his character's wife. One of my favorite moments was during an Unknown Armies game, we were having a bit of a spat¹ in parallel to what was going on with the actual plot. We weren't being disruptive, but we did distract the player sitting across from us who was quite entertained by our conversation. The GM checked in to make sure everything was ok but we assured him we were happy in our own little bubble.

If I can get one memorable roleplaying moment per game, I'm generally happy (assuming the rest of the game was at least decent).

One thing to note about these cons is that the rpg slots usually run 6-8 hours rather than the 3-4 of other conventions. As more indie games populate the schedule, they often hit the 4-hour mark, but then you could have games, typically D&D, slotted for 12 hours.

Perhaps the best thing of these cons is that rpgs take place in dedicated hotel rooms with one game per room. Organized play for D&D and Pathfinder take place in larger conference halls and sometimes multiple games will be put into larger rooms (like teen games). The privacy means you don't have issues of shouting over the neighboring table and you can take advantage of electrical outlets and the in-room refrigerator.

The cons occur over 3-day holiday weekends, stretched to 4 by starting on the Friday before. The more ambitious attendees will arrive, meet, and play games on Thursday evening. I usually run games on Monday morning because there usually is not much happening on Monday, making it a convenient time to run a game. It also makes for a relaxing morning and a great way to end the con. I'm the first in the room with plenty of time to set up and prepare. I run until 4 p.m. then hang out and have dinner with Brian before taking him to the airport and then driving home.

¹ Based on details the GM had written into our characters. I wanted kids; he got us a cat.

The Adventurers Guild

Our Protagonists

- Iggy: Rock Gnome Bard
- Chayote: Rock Gnome Cleric of Hathor
- Anan: Copper Dragonborn Fighter
- Millie: Human Wizard
- Vrax: Blue Dragonborn Ranger
- Eridan: Wood Elf Fighter (new player)

I'm Not Mad, I'm Just Disappointed

No, wait, I am mad!

Here was the setup:

The week leading up to the Summer Festival has been noted by growing activity in Islingford-upon-Orlin as folks prepare to celebrate the height of Mid Summer. As Enol, the blood moon, wanes to a thin crescent, the eye of Inar grows ever brighter and promises to be full for the two nights of the festival. The air has turned hot and sticky with intermittent overcast skies being the potential harbinger of stormclouds to come.

The markets have swelled with summer fruits and flowers brought in from the surrounding farmland. The docks are crowded with riverboats bringing goods from further afield. Temporary merchant stalls, entertainment stages, and pavilions are under construction in the neighborhood squares and wider streets. Musicians, dancers, and actors practice and rehearse their routines, mummers sew their costumes, nobles decorate their estates, and the city guard ramp up their patrols.

The guildhouse of the Adventurers Guild has become crowded as members delay their travels to take advantage of the festivities. They are also taking advantage of the facilities and training grounds to sharpen their skills for the various tournaments and contests of martial, magical, and musical prowess during the festival.

I then asked each of the players what their character was doing in preparation for the festival. First, the good.

Chayote was helping with the many small shrines to Hathor (in the form of cairns) that were being put up around the edges of the city. In the course of her rounds, she was called over by a cheerful and friendly young lady with strawberry blonde hair and freckles. She was giving away dark cookies (like chocolate, but we hadn't established chocolate is a thing in this setting)

shaped in the form of a dog's head with lines of white frosting to make out the mouth, ears, etc. After she took one, the young lady said, "May the Blessings of Set be upon you."²

Chayote immediately flicked the cookie back on the plate, saying, "No, thank you!" It was then she noticed the booth was for the Temple of Set and she made her hasty retreat.

Millie was in the library of the Arcane Estate. I don't know if I gave her a choice because I knew that's where she would be (and could pre-write an encounter). As she read her tome, she felt a looming presence of someone approaching. It was Osmira, a goliath cleric of the Cult of Enlightenment that they had adventured with some months back.

Osmira is wearing a white tunic trimmed in red with the flaming eye of enlightenment emblazoned in gold on her chest. The absence of her usual breastplate, not to mention shield, mace, and adventurers gear, gives her a much more feminine appearance than usual. Her platinum blonde hair has grown long and frames her blue-tinted face. She smiles awkwardly at Millie. "I heard about the work you did for Monsignor (Helmut) Gardeax. I, uh, wanted to thank you personally. We've already learned so much and, um, I have already been using your translations. Trying to figure out the grammatical structure and rules. Do you, uhm, want to maybe talk about it over some tea?"

Osmira is socially awkward (Charisma 8) and this was her attempt at a personal connection. And maybe flirting. I don't think Millie or her player caught on. Anyway, she accepted and they found a nice tea shop that wasn't too busy near the Arcane Estates. Osmira asked Millie questions about the Dikaryan city they had explored and possible insights to their culture. Millie's player was clueless, but then so was Millie, so that she was not exactly comfortable in this conversation was part of the point.

And now for the not-so-great. I have to give the next two a bit of slack because this was only the second session for Vrax and it was the first session for Eridan.³

² Yes, this is directly inspired by the phrase, "Come to the Dark Side. We have cookies!"

³ Whose player annoyed me for a different reason that I'll expand upon later.

Vrax was also in the library doing archaeological research and looking for artifacts. As if I could just whip up an adventure specifically tailored for him. At least he could notice Milie leaving with Osmira.

Eridan was at a tea shop. Kudos to the player for identifying a place Eridan could be that was in physical proximity to another PC. But still. Did either Vrax or Eridan engage with the Summer Festival? No, of course not. That would have been too easy. I didn't have anything specifically planned, but I was hoping that I could a) practice my improvisational, sandbox adventure skills and b) gain some insight into their characters through their expressed interests and interactions with NPCs.

This brings me to Anan and Iggy. In the past, Anan initiated a wrestling match with an NPC which Iggy and Entan (no longer with us) even bet on. Iggy is a bard. A fucking bard. Could either of them engage with the festival? No. They decided to hang out at The Tawny Owl, Iggy's favorite tavern.

Fine. I described how there was a sign-up board for an entertainer competition with four different venues (including the tavern they were in) that would each select four acts on the first day of the festival with the sixteen finalists performing on the second day and winning prizes. Did Iggy care? No.

Not great, but what I really wanted to set up was a hook into Iggy's tragic backstory™ that "That night defined Iggy's life and shaped them forever."⁴ Several months ago, in this very tavern, Iggy and their unrequited love and performing partner, Minda, met a mysterious performer whose instrument could light up "in some way for some reason" (intentionally giving me license). The three took up conversation and they took the stranger around town until they eventually ended up at another tavern/distillery called Guy Firey's Winehouse.

Iggy decided to call it a night and went home while Minda stayed behind to learn more about the instrument. That night, the building burned down and there were no survivors. Following this tragedy, "It is impossible to describe Iggy's depths of anguish."

Iggy didn't "remember anything about the traveler or the instrument at all. It's as if pitch had been poured over those images in their memory." However, when a person wearing a floor-length skirt of blue in a blue vest

with white and gold thread went onto the stage with a strange instrument and proceeded to create elaborate illusions to accompany the music, Iggy's player had no memory of the backstory they had written and did not connect the dots even if Iggy themselves could not.

In fairness, the backstory was written just under a year ago. In counter-fairness, I remember the tragic backstory of a D&D character that I haven't played in a decade—and I never wrote it down because the GM never cared!

When I spelled it out for them, they had to go back and read the backstory they had written. And even then, did they do *anything* to advance this plotline? No. They just left the tavern. Fuck.

To pull Anan into this, he was a member of the city watch at the time and the fire at Guy Firey's Winehouse was a major event. We retconned that Anan was even there to help with crowd control. Plus, it had already been established that Anan knew Iggy after the event when Iggy kept landing in jail. Anan was the one who cajoled Iggy into joining the Adventurers Guild. Did Anan pull on this plotline? No. Why do I even bother?

A Musical Aside

I struggled a bit with what kind of instrument was involved. That it had some illusion-creating properties was obvious, but I didn't want to just copy the holophone from *Futurama*. I envisioned a cross between a stringed instrument and a wind or brass instrument. Eventually (as in the day before the session), I found the celloridoo—a hybrid cello and didgeridoo. Even better, the inventor is an Iranian artist and Iggy's player is from Iran.

Coming Prepared

Despite over two weeks of prodding with the new player over Discord, I did not get any character information until two days before the game. Nor did I get to see Eridan's character sheet until the day of the game and immediately found mistakes.

The last session was three weeks prior and two of the players had not updated their PCs to 6th level. So, we wasted time with three players updating their characters and at least three different conversations going across the table. It took nearly an hour to get everyone settled and ready before I could start the session properly.

⁴ The player's words, not mine.

The A Plot

Iggy's tragic backstory was the "B plot" of the session. With that summarily ignored, I needed to get the PCs focused on the A plot (even if the B plot is what I really cared about and had thought most about).

While Chayote was at the stall of the Temple of Set, she noticed some shady figures watching her/them from an alleyway. They quickly retreated before she could engage with them. Meanwhile, Vrax came across an ominous confluence. With one moon going full while the blood moon was entering a new moon at the same time as the Summer Festival (which occurs at the exact middle of the three months of summer), the god of darkness and chaos—Aphophis—would rise.

The exact alignment of these events don't quite match up on my campaign calendar (which Millie would later confirm), but it was close enough to not only give Vrax something to find and kick his butt in gear, but also give an excuse as to why the PCs would eventually triumph.

Chayote and Vrax converged on the tea shop (I don't remember how I got Chayote there) and their discussions (despite Chayote's insistence that they keep their voices down) pulled the eavesdropping Eridan in. They went through the obligatory "can we trust this stranger" song-and-dance, but everyone at the table had an interest in getting the new player engaged, so this was just a diegetic formality.⁵ Osmira got out of the way by leaving to consult with her cult.

After some discussion, it was decided that they needed to either stop the festival or stop the moons from changing phases. From a practical perspective, the former was chosen. They decided to split up. Millie and Vrax went back to the library to confirm Vrax's findings and to talk to Helmut Guardeax about cancelling the festival (since asking her pseudo-nemesis was out of the question). Naturally, he could not be contacted (he was also a member of the Cult of Enlightenment and so was with Osmira). If they had pushed harder on getting the festival cancelled, I was going to emulate the scene from *Jaws* about the mayor refusing to close the beach.

Chayote went to talk to her people and had a discussion with one of the priests minding a shrine. He mentioned that the other night four figures in dark hooded cloaks had dismantled and scattered the cairn. When she mentioned the Temple of Set, he said that the cookie was quite good and had a slight flavor of lemon. Upon

⁵ The name of my improv theatrical prog band.

her disapproval, he went into a bit of a panic questioning if eating the cookie was the cause of all the problems. She advised him to drink some warm milk. I suggested dunking the (Set) cookie in (Hathor) milk.

By now it was getting late and the party of six began a search of the city for these mysterious hooded figures. Not the best of plans, but they rolled well and wanted to move the plot along, so they did indeed find their quarry and followed them. It was important (at least to me) to note that it was highly suspicious for anyone to be wearing a heavy hooded cloak in the summer heat and humidity (which persisted after sunset). My original plan was for the PCs to see these figures as they explored the festival, but I goosed the plot through Vrax and the PCs went into "we must act now!" mode before the official start of the festival. This is good, because they probably would not have explored the festival anyway.

The cloaked figures took a ferry across the river Orlin to the western docks. The PCs followed by Chayote casting water walk,⁶ much to the consternation of the ferryman (who would not be getting his six copper). They spied the figures watching a group of longshoremen who were resting and talking after a long, hard, hot day. When one of the workers, an elderly man with a walking stick,⁷ walked away, the four figures descended upon him, surrounding him and bringing him to the ground.

The Obligatory Combat Scene

It occurred to me while I wrote this that following several combat-heavy sessions, we only had one fight this session.

Following inspiring, but silent, gestures from Iggy,⁸ the PCs launched into action. Eridan impaled one with magical arrows while Anan charged forward, and directly engaged the now-injured figure. He was rewarded by being stabbed by daggers that the figure created out of shadowstuff. Chayote dispelled the daggers (which had no mechanical effect since it wasn't really a spell). The others likewise focused their attacks and slayed the cloaked figure.

One of the figures dashed for the edge of the dock and plunged into the dark waters of the river Orlin, escaping the fate that would befall their comrades.

⁶ Let the cleric cleric, I say.

⁷ According to the standee I randomly picked.

⁸ It annoys me how things like Bardic Inspiration get reduced down to their bare mechanical effects.

Millie subdued one temporarily with hideous laughter. Once they recovered, they made a break for it, sprinting away with preternatural speed. However, they were unable to outrun Vrax's bow or Millie's spells and was killed.

The fourth figure picked up the body of the longshoreman and tried to escape down the dock. However, Anan took chase and blocked her path. She diverted and went down an alley alongside one of the warehouses while Chayote and Eridan tried to triangulate and meet it at the next intersection. Having been slowed by a critical shot from Vrax's bow, she was unable to make enough distance and found themselves surrounded at the intersection.

She dropped the body of the longshoreman on its head with a sickening thud and then the following escalating exchange occurred:

GM: The figure leaps up and onto the corner of the building and climbs up the wall.

Anan: Opportunity Attack!

GM: Bonus Action—Disengage!

Anan: Sentinel feat, I can attack even with Disengage.

GM: What?

Anan: (Explains what the feat does.)

GM: Oh... OK then. Roll to hit.

He does hit and the villain is stopped and then knocked unconscious by Eridan.

When they pulled back the cloak of their captive, a venomous snake slithered out and Anan cut it in half. A similar thing happened with the dead bodies, though they were unable to capture the snake. The cloaks also concealed puncture wounds in their necks that matched the fangs of the snake. The figures were wearing ordinary, commoner clothing under their robes, but they did recover 45 gold coins from among the three bodies. They also discovered that the old man had died during the initial ambush by the cloaked figures.

Soon, the city guard arrived and started asking questions. Anan's former captain, a no-nonsense orc by the name of Pughilug Axul, grilled him about the details of the assault until he was satisfied he did not have to bring charges against the PCs. He also deputized them on the spot and put them in charge of investigating who these figures were, what they have been up to, and if they were connected to a recent spate of missing

persons from the dock district. Millie and Iggy were taken aback by this forced conscription until they confirmed that they would be given badges. The guard was already hiring extra bodies to keep the peace during the festival, so they had temporary badges on hand.

The party was given access to an interrogation cell where they put their captive and once she awoke, started asking questions. There were three factors working against the PCs in this endeavor.

- 1) The captive was immune to Charm.
- 2) The captive was a bit "out of it," now that it was no longer being influenced by the snake.
- 3) The captive had no reason to answer their questions and betray her cult, so even though they could compel the captive to speak the truth, they could not compel her to speak anything.

Quick aside for context. The Cult of Aphosis is led by a vampire and the cloaked figures were vampire familiars (with corresponding abilities and immunities). Aphosis being a snake god, I replaced bats with snakes and threw in some *Stargate* Goa'uld aesthetics. I also thought this was an adequate, if minor, misdirection so the players didn't immediately jump to "Vampires!"

During the interrogation, I stared at the players with a blank, slack-jawed expression. Iggy tried to use a charm spell to no effect. They started trying to interpret my random blinking as answers to their questions. A couple of times, they made me break character and smile or laugh.

Realizing they weren't getting anywhere with the live captive, they instead turned to speak with the dead. Their questions were more about the *what* and not the *where*, so they didn't get actionable clues. When asked what their master was doing, the body replied, "Bathing in the blood of her enemies." I couldn't resist a bit of foreshadowing. They also got the master's name: Ianira.

The party then formulated a plan to let the prisoner escape and to then follow it. Classic, solid plan. We spent a few minutes debating how easy it would be for the prisoner, shackled to a table, to pick up a "dropped" key from the floor and unlock the shackles. This was resolved by, assuming the prisoner had no shoes, Iggy's player demonstrating the plausibility by picking up a pen from the floor and putting it on the game table.

Into the Snake's Lair

The party shadowed their “escaped” prisoner to a compound surrounded by stone walls eight feet tall. The woman first tried to get inside through a huge wooden gate but found it barred from the other side. She then made her way down the wall to another, smaller door that led into the main house, but it too was locked. Eventually, she simply climbed the wall with preternatural ease and was out of sight of the party who were watching from across the way.

There were three structures along the perimeter: a main house, a secondary house, and a coach house with sliding barn doors. The party approached and Anan peered over the wall to find a few trees, some garden boxes, a large assortment of finished clay pots, an area where they formed the pots, a wood-fired kiln, and a pile of broken pottery shards.

They scaled the wall and unlocked the back door of the coach house. Inside, they found a desk with three cages (2 with snakes and 1 with mice) as well as a small pit with 3 vipers. There was also a rack with a heavy hooded cloak of the style worn by the cultists as well as boots caked with dried mud.

Vrax used a spell to speak with one of the snakes to get more information. He incentivized the snake with one of the mice—who pleaded in terror as Vrax put it into the cage with the snake. Unfortunately, once the snake started the slow process of eating the mouse, it was no longer in a state to carry on a conversation. So Vrax talked to the other snake who didn't know much useful. The snakes in the pit mentioned how the humans would sometimes take them out and hold them and that Bill, the second snake Vrax talked to, was sick.

The party moved onto the adjoining room where they discovered a circular stairway down and a few clay pots that held or once-held unidentifiable viscera. Before they took the stairs, they made their way into the main room of the building—a worship place for the Cult of Apophis. There was a statue of Apophis in the style of a human male with a snake for a neck and head, as well as a mosaic of the snake symbol of Apophis on the floor. They unbarred the barn doors that opened to the outside in case they needed to make a hasty retreat.

Making their way down the stairs, they entered a series of underground chambers. They encountered a couple of guards who not only demonstrated remarkable strength and resilience, but also a propensity for grabbing their opponents before biting them and

injecting them with venom.⁹ Vrax took the brunt of it, but they had particular animosity toward the cleric of Hastor in the party's ranks. The guards could not overcome the PCs' numbers and eventually fell.

Nearby, a side corridor led the PCs to two imprisoned humans locked in the darkness.¹⁰ One of them pleaded to know of the fate of his husband who had been taken from his cell a while ago. The PCs calmed them the best they could and decided to lead the prisoners upstairs and outside the complex before continuing onward.

They entered a grand hall with balconies on either side. At the far end where only Vrax's extended darkvision could make out, there was a circular chamber. In the center, a body was hung upside down and slowly dripping blood into a large clay vessel beneath it. As the PCs approached, a column of blood rose from the vessel. At first, it had a serpentine shape, but as it rose, it morphed into a female humanoid who then stepped out of the vessel to confront the intruders into her temple.

So. Going by the challenge rating (CR) numbers, the party should have had a difficult time with the encounter, but I just knew they were going to run through it. Sure, there were some challenging moments, but I wouldn't have called it a difficult encounter. Ianira, the villain, tried to escape by transforming into a snake and slithering out a drainage grate, but was thwarted, as her minion was the night before, by Anan's tactical skill.

Afterwards, the party took down the body and decided to rest for a bit in one of the balcony areas. However, they were interrupted by more cultists who had discovered the bodies of the guards outside the hall. One managed to escape to warn the others.

Though they had discovered the stairs that lead up into the main house, our adventurers left the compound without exploring either of the other two structures, allowing the majority of the residents—the familiars—to escape and to not gain any treasure from their efforts. Instead, they reported back to the city watch who took over the case and took back the badges from the party.

⁹ Doing necrotic damage rather than poison because, you know, vampires.

¹⁰ I should probably write up my rant about darkvision.

Post Mortem Thoughts

Iggy's player made a comment that I had two modes: wanting to kill the PCs and then being disappointed when I don't. Or something like that. It's mostly true. I am disappointed when I don't give the PCs enough of a challenge and don't make the players fear for the mortality of their characters during the big boss battles. But I don't really want the PCs to die. I like them. I want them to continue to have adventures (even if they do ignore their tailor-made plot hooks... grumble).

The Next Quest

Their job done, they enjoyed the two-day festival without further incident. Eridan and Vrax competed in archery contests and placed respectfully. Anan got to the semi-finals of his wrestling bracket. I ran these as simple dice-offs. The player rolled 3d6 and compared their single best die to a bunch of dice from d4 to d12 that I rolled to represent the other competitors. Based on how the PCs' roll compared to the other dice indicated how well they did.

The day after, the new quests at the Adventurers Guild were posted (see next page). To Iggy's chagrin, they were not allowed to take on Bronze quests since they were Silver-ranked members now. I had to explain how the guild assigned quests based on the capabilities of the party and just as they were once Bronze-ranked members, they let lower-ranked members take on the lower-ranked quests so that they can gain skill and advance.

When they went to the guildmaster to sign up, they were informed that Ecks (aka Mr. Wyze), the head guildmaster, wanted to speak to them. He thanked them for taking on the mission for the city watch and though it was not an official guild quest, their actions reflected well on the guild. As the guild liaison with the city government, he wanted to give them some reward for their work (which I will figure out before the next session). I did this to show that they were gaining a positive reputation and to encourage them to take on adventures that weren't tied to the Adventurers Guild.

The group decided to investigate the rift in part because they had encountered it before. Millie and Vrax did some research on rifts and I made up a bunch of stuff on the fly. I had a notion that this would tie into the published Pharaoh adventure, but I needed a hook that would make sense for the stated quest.

They spoke to an aged elf wizard at the Arcane Estates. Normally, rifts close on their own. There are rituals that can be used to close them, but they do not always work, such as in this case. This is because something—some anchor—is holding it open and the only way to close the rift is to venture through it, locate the anchor, and bring it back through the rift. Turning the adventure into a macguffin hunt seemed like the most straight-forward way to give them a clear path to achieving their goal. Having to remove the anchor allayed their fears that they'd be stuck on the other side of the rift.

Despite Eridan's assumption, the anchor is not necessarily an object that was brought from their world through the rift and must be returned. If it were the case, then I'd have to figure out how the anchor got there as well as who brought it and why, and I just didn't want to bother.

Millie wanted to know how they'd find the anchor and she was told to basically just head out from the rift in a straight path that is perpendicular to the plane of the rift and they'd be headed in the right direction. Hey look, you (collectively) ignored my sub-plots the previous session, you short-circuited my adventure this week, just stop asking questions and go out on the adventure already.

Millie was also concerned on how they would identify the anchor, so she was given a vial of a liquid that could be poured on an object to determine if it is acting as an anchor, but there were only 3 doses.

As I was planning the adventure, I sent a note to the group Discord that it would be a multi-session adventure and I asked for confirmation that everyone would be available for the next two sessions at least. After a few days, Vrax's player declined the Google Calendar invitation for the second week without explanation or apologies. They eventually explained they were going on a cruise to celebrate their and their spouse's birthday. I get it, but I hate having to claw information out of my players. Since I don't want to deal with another session where I had to wave over Vrax's disappearance from the adventure, I have to scuttle my original plans and create something that can be completed in one session. This will also mean that the session after that will also have to be another one-shot because Vrax won't be there.

Bronze Quests

Separate Escort Quests to Elkhorn, Orlane, and Sherville: 10gp per member per day, expenses paid.

Rescue folks taken in a raid near Beswick: 50gp per person returned to their family.

Recover heirloom sword stolen from Lady Helshy: 200gp flat fee.

Investigate goblin activity north east of Sheawick: 15gp per head.

Provide assistance in occult investigation in Danford: 10gp per member plus bonus for undead.

Silver Quests

Find more survivors of dragon-induced shipwrecks in the Keys Islands.

in the armpit of the Rift Mts.

Protect the town of Llwdth during its rebuild. (From what, we don't know.)

Did they multiclass?

Track down a couple of rogue wizards suspected to be hiding out near Syraton.

it's getting sand everywhere!

The rift near Hookhill still hasn't closed. We're keeping an eye on it, but if you can maybe find a way to close it from the other side, that would be great.

Gold Quests

Investigate sighting of The White Tower in south-eastern plains—*it keeps coming back?*

Escort Quest to The City of First Light. *—And bring back some sunrise cakes. Yum!*

Steal from a dragon on the western edge of the Estern Mountains in Thornswall.

Platinum Quests

One of the Rhye Idles has disappeared. Find it.

Stop whatever it is that is sinking ships in Dun Bay.

Diamond Quests

The King of Etherwind and Gray Witch have teamed up. *We're boned*

Comments on E&A Issue #5

Roger BW

On Minigames, back in college, I got sucked into a conversation about optimal (broken) character builds for *Champions*. Or worse, their custom ship builds for *Star Fleet Battles* (a game I did not play). Hearing about how to min-max these minigames really sucks the fun and wonder I get out of rpgs. I suspect that if there is a focus in *Battletech* on standard models is because any custom-build system would be exploitable in ways that make tournament play broken (or maybe just boring).

For *Man to Man*, was the expectation that your character would *stay alive* for a long campaign? Does the system design allow for this?

RYCT me, I do think you should get the greatest effect from bonuses or penalties (dice or modifiers) when the initial odds are around 50%. Using GURPS 3d6 as an example, a +/- 1 doesn't mean all that much if you are needing 5 or less or 15 or less. You're already so poor or so good that a tiny benefit or penalty doesn't help or hinder you all that much proportionally. On the other hand, if you need a 10 or 11 less, then that +/- 1 makes an appreciable difference. You are skilled enough to take maximum advantage of the benefit but a penalty can still affect you greatly.

I think many players find rolling bonus dice more fun than adding a modifier, but I could see how bonus dice do not resonate with *Traveller* players. If you have a system that factors in multiple modifiers from multiple sources, adding in another factor with bonus/penalty dice is an "impedance mismatch."

I also think that $34 - 8$ is harder than $26 + 8$. It is an artifact of how I was taught to do subtraction. I can sometimes do subtraction quickly based on "vibes," but it is more error-prone than addition. This is why, when tracking hit points for my monsters, I always count up the damage dealt rather than subtract hit points.

Luck in *Call of Cthulhu* is weird. As a concept, Luck makes sense for *Pulp Cthulhu*, but I don't think luck exists in a nihilistic universe of cosmic horrors. Plus, I think Luck should feel more esoteric and unpredictable than spending points to hit a threshold.

RYCT Dylan, now that you mention it, a woman might be more likely to bring the end to a knight errant's career than a monster or wizard would. :)

Timothy Collinson

I chortled at your agreed-upon motivations in *Rescue in Low Earth Orbit*.

By your description, Chirpers sound like the goblins (or kender) of the Traveller universe.

Michael Cule

RYCT me, too true. I'm old and jaded.¹¹ For the last year, I've been focused on D&D 5e (2024) and have defaulted to my own system for one-shots (what it was designed for, after all). I'm itching for something new. This is not uncommon for me.

Jim Eckman

One of the reasons why most games don't have a growing-up phase is because it would most likely be a boring solo experience. If you just want a table of childhood events, the players should be perfectly capable of describing how their characters grew up.

Based on your comments to Lisa, I have added the *Wildcard Roleplaying System* (sans the usual header) one page cheat sheet at the end of this zine.

RYCT me, *Paranoia* is a game whose humor is lost on me, not because of the PvP, but the joke runs thin after about 30 minutes, if that.

Elf

Welcome!

Our face-to-face group had little luck finding new players for a game that wasn't D&D, so we switched to D&D—the Adventurers Guild campaign I'm currently running and writing up in these pages. I'm looking forward to running something else eventually. I'd love to play something (even D&D), but I'm locked into "forever GM" for this group. :(

Another difficulty is scheduling. Getting 4–6 working adults to synchronize their schedules for a bi-weekly Saturday game is tougher than it should be. But then, I have no social life or family commitments to work around.

RYCT me, your experience with playing *Amber* matches mine. New characters who come in after the initial

¹¹ Some think I'm a cynic, but I'm really a disillusioned romantic. I want to be in love with a game system, but it never lasts.

auction simply allocate points to their stats based on the ladder established by the auction.

I think *all* games “work well with a skilled GM you can trust to be fair,” but the trust becomes more important the more GM fiat comes into play.

Funny you mention it, but my *Wildcards Roleplaying System*¹² uses cards. It is summarized on the last page of this zine. I did some basic probability calculations—enough to know it wouldn’t fall apart—but the playtesting was required to confirm it “felt” right.

RYCT Dylan, please don’t use landscape. I beg you. :)

RYCT Michael, the great thing about bringing Christianity (or any real-world religion or belief system) into your high fantasy game is that you can take the piss out of it. :)

Regarding cross-breeding of humanoid species, you could say that humans are an elf-orc hybrid that can both breed true and cross-breed with either elves or orcs. For an example of the cross-species breeding possibilities, see the *Canis* genus.

Regarding PBM Games, I immediately had the same reaction as you when I read the post you showed.

Regarding 2nd vs. 3rd person rules writing, it depends on to whom the game author is writing. With a solo rpg, 2nd person makes sense. With a game system where players and GMs do different things and have different (though related) concerns, 2nd person might not be a good fit. In *WRS*, I mostly use 3rd person but use 2nd person occasionally when I’m addressing the reader more directly. Based on your comments, I went back and fixed a few inconsistencies.

Mitch Hyde

RYCT me, I like board games (and have a collection of hundreds), but I’m more in the “Care Bear”¹³ camp, preferring indirect competition.

RYCT Jim, I didn’t detect anything in the D&D 5e (2024) rules that encouraged shared world campaigns with rotating GMs. It doesn’t preclude this, but there’s nothing that encourages it. But then, I haven’t read the DMG, so maybe something is there.

¹² Like you mentioned with *GURPS* or *FATE*, I consider it a game *system*, not a standalone game.

¹³ To use a term from [Rahdo](#).

Joshua Kronengold

The text was a bit dense this month. I mean physically. It was a bit difficult to read.

RYCT Patrick, another reason why “GMC” (which I first saw in *Over the Edge*) is a better term than “NPC.” In this way, Connections in Good Society can be PCs, just not the players’ main characters.

RYCT me, Lisa and I went back and forth a lot in *A&E* about the *BESM* genre-dependent skill costs. *BESM*, especially 2nd edition, was a light version in the class of systems like *Champions*, written by the author of *GURPS Vehicles* and *GURPS Mecha*. It is very abusable and needs guardrails.

RYCT Mark about weapon mastery, I generally agree, but I would rather have had it as “maneuvers” that could be applied to any weapon attack. Why does a shortbow have Vex, but a longbow has Slow (which has a different effect than the spell of the same name)? Why not leave it up to the player to decide what maneuvers they know as part of character creation and progression?

We picked the D&D 5e 2024 edition because it was a way to entice players for a brand new campaign and because I was interested in the changes. As with all things, there has been online backlash against it that I don’t understand.

RYCT Roger, Rule Zero and what it does and doesn’t say or imply can be debated. Your response read (to me) as overly combative and directed at the “extreme end” (as you said) of how Rule Zero could be used. What Roger was claiming seemed (to me) to be something else than what you were attacking.

RYCT Michael, some games got so hyper-specialized that they could only be about a very specific thing (or type of thing). They were games in the sense that an escape room is a game—an experience with game-like elements and trappings.

I think you are being overly reductionist in saying that AD&D wasn’t a “full roleplaying game.” How do you define that anyway? Where do you draw the line between a roleplaying *game* versus a roleplaying *system*? (See also Elf’s thoughts in the last issue.)

RYCT Myles, your GURPS math seems to be off. 9 or less on 3d6 has a 37.5% of success, better than 2/9. A 14 or less is 90.7% chance, but in fairness, it is “greater than 7/8” as you stated. Only Average difficulty skills start out

at Attribute-1 and that's if you invest a point. Easy skills start at Attribute+0. Hard and Very Hard skills start at Attribute-2 and -3, respectively. If you don't invest any points into a skill, the default is usually around Attribute-3 to -5.

RYCT Lisa, if "whatever the players want to play," is at odds with what the game is about (or modes of play it supports), it's a problem that game design can't fix.

RYCT Jim, how about a Lucifer whose goal is to call out God on his bullshit? Yes, it's ultimately fruitless against the All Mighty, but someone has to do it. :) Let me posit the following scenario. Lucifer's role was to be a/the satan, not Satan. Over time, loyal opposition and questioning was interpreted as rebellion and Lucifer was cast out and framed as a corrupting influence. To oppose good (as God is perceived) must mean that Lucifer is evil (or so the logic goes). However, Lucifer maintains their original goal and is not evil or even anti-God.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek

I'd add the Gaia hypothesis to your list of humanity's misinterpretation of Paratethys.

The events of The Train Journey South seem both gratuitous and superfluous. It makes sense that Mateo Desrosiers would summon a loa to escape custody, but why bother possessing the engineer? With the Loa freed, it could just linger, casting an unnerving presence onboard the train until it arrives at Mazorra.

RYCT me, did you know "Hawaiian Pizza" was invented in Canada?

RYCT Myles, T. Kingfisher is the name Ursula Vernon uses for her works for older audiences.

RYCT Brian about *D&D B/X* changes, making more lethal attacks do the same damage but just have a higher chance to hit creates the situation where a beginning fighter could take 3 hits from the most powerful monsters. At higher levels, fights would take forever unless you give monsters many attacks. Is it easier to roll 3 attacks that only do 1 damage or to make a single attack that does 3 damage?

Other games, whose names escape me at the moment, use a die progression similar to what you suggested. You could fill in the jump from d12 to d20 with a d14, d16, etc. if you want to use funky dice. Personally, I'd fall

back to something I suggested as an alternative to *Earthdawn* way back in the day:

- 2d10
- 2d10+d2 (or d10+d12)
- 2d10+d4
- 2d10+d6
- 2d10+d8
- 3d10
- 3d10+d2 (or 2d10+d12)
- 3d10+d4
- ...

Saying that fighters start at 3rd level but other classes start at lower levels is a bit weird and not intuitive. Basing the number of hits on the character level is good, but you could then say that Fighters and Clerics get a bonus to their number of hits. It's handled like a class ability—just like wearing armor or turning undead.

Mark Nemeth

I think an important aspect of designing a dungeon is understanding its purpose for being and reflecting that in its design. Not every dungeon is created by a mad wizard. Classic dungeons with rooms placed randomly and corridors that meander for no good reason annoy me. A tomb should probably be mostly linear, but a place where people lived and worked should have multiple paths of navigation.

Lisa Padol

RTCT Dylan, as with *I, Robot*, the original *Foundation* consisted of serialized short stories or novellas that were then compiled into novel form.

RYCT Avram, I could also have mentioned *Young Justice* as an inspiration in last issue's lgtheme.

RYCT Myles, feeling "... a bit cranky if one feels this work is not appreciated," is similar to my feelings highlighted in this issue. It's not the work per-se, I honestly didn't write many things down (I rarely do) and it's not a lack of appreciation per-se, but it's like having a dance partner who just stands in place.

RYCT me, the "official procedure for dealing with" the wild pigs is to have a hunting license and purchase hunting tags (one per pig) and go at it. Given their proximity to residences, I don't think it's particularly safe and there may be other laws at play that I can't be bothered to look up.

A couple of pictures taken during a walk near my home:



RYCT Brian, I'm not familiar with *Eternal Lies*, but the question for me is always, "Why would the NPC talk to these PCs?" especially if they are a villain or otherwise antagonistic to the PCs. Are they obligated to talk in order to move the plot along? I'm sure there are people you don't want to talk to and no one can make you unless they tricked you somehow.

RYCT Mark, the deification of The Doctor was bad, but I liked the transitional period in which The Doctor could lean on his reputation and special skills—like a time travelling, science fiction version of John Constantine.

RYCT Jim, I'd like to see a model of Sanity that works along the lines of memetics where insanity can replicate and spread from person to person. Like psychic prions, these sanity-eroding ideas reform the victims' minds. As noted, this reformation could actually be making them "more sane" by allowing them to comprehend the universe as it truly is.

RYCT Clark, "having an entire entourage" is a problem in a lot of investigation-based scenarios. Having two or three investigators working together makes sense. Five or six strains credulity and makes questioning NPCs very awkward. You can have a large group if they regularly split off into smaller groups, I suppose.

RYCT Mitch, sometimes there are things that the character(s) will succeed at (due to needs of the plot, the lack of time limit, etc.) and a rule I like to use is "Go ahead and roll. You won't fail, but it will inform us how well you did or how long it took you." Suppose you're

looking for your keys or a manuscript you know is hidden in the apartment somewhere. Do you find it the first place you look (critical success); only after you've moved all the furniture, removed all the desk drawers, and cleared all the shelves on the bookcase (failure); or ripped up the floorboards, dismantled all the light fixtures, and broken some plumbing (critical failure)?

Gabriel Roark

RYCT Avram, Troika! strikes me as smooth peanut butter mixed with mealworms and sprinkled with tajin.

Matt Stevens

Welcome back to APAland.

You decide what is a fun activity for you and if you shouldn't waste a moment lamenting about not doing the things—playing the games, listening to the music, watching the television series, etc.—that you don't like.

Well said on simplicity versus complexity of game rules. A simple game that requires too much of the GM can be harder to run than a more complex game with more mechanical support the GM can use to reduce the mental load and maintain consistency. More complex rules can help the players (who bother to read the rules) by clearly spelling out what options and outcomes are possible and expected within the game.

Jim Vassilakos

RYCT Roger about "how precisely would the GM determine the alignment of an intent?" It depends on context. The PCs are traveling down a road through a thick forest. Three humanoids on horseback approach them coming in the opposite direction. Do these NPCs mean to do the PCs harm? Are they friendly? Are they going to mind their business? These are the kinds of questions that a Detect Evil/Good spell could be used for if the spell can detect good or evil intent.

RYCT Michael about *Star Trek*, the episode "[The Chase](#)" in *The Next Generation* introduced a progenitor species as the explanation for the similarities of morphology.

Mark A. Wilson

One of Lucifer's comments reminded me of this Eric Hoffer quote: "Mass movements can rise and spread without belief in a God, but never without belief in a devil." See also my comments to Josh, above.

The following page is the One-Page Summary for *Wildcards Roleplaying System*.

Task Resolution

Abilities have a numerical rank from 1 to 5 (ish) with 2 being average. The Wildcard ability depends on the setting and scenario (or may not be used at all).

Each Ability is associated with a card suit:

Physical ♣ **Mental** ♦ **Social** ♥ **Wildcard** ♠

When the character attempts a task whose outcome is in doubt (and failure could yield interesting results), the player draws a number of cards equal to their rank in the appropriate ability.

The value of the cards that match the ability's suit determines the number of **successes**:

2-10: **1** J/Q/K: **2** Ace: **3**

If the task falls within the character's **specialty**, only the suit color needs to match.

Normally, 1 success is enough, but more difficult tasks may require more successes (up to 5 or so). Easier tasks add a card or two to the draw. For contested tasks, the most successes wins.

Degrees of success is based on the number of extra successes beyond the minimum required:

0 = **Modest** 1-2 = **Exceptional** 3+ = **Critical**

Jokers

If the draw includes a joker of the matching color, something good happens. If the draw includes a joker of the non-matching color, something bad happens. Both can happen if you draw both jokers. The results of a joker are independent of the success or failure of the task.

After drawing a joker and resolving the outcome of the task, reshuffle your deck.

NPCs

Mobs draw a cards based on their strength and take hits based on their size times the number of PCs:

Mob Strength	Cards	Mob Size	Hits per PC
Nuisance	1	Small	2
Moderate	2	Medium	3
Capable	3	Large	4
Formidable	4	Massive	5

Mini Bosses only need to match the color of the card.

Bosses (the big bads of an adventure) do not care about the suit.

Combat

Fights are resolved over a number of rounds. Each round:

- 1) Players declare their characters' actions using simple, concise wording (descriptive or narrative flourish is added after the outcome is resolved). It should be roughly the equivalent of a single shot of a film, a panel or two of a comic, or 6 seconds of "real time."
- 2) Players draw cards based on the appropriate Ability for their actions.
- 3) Characters act simultaneously. Higher results take *precedence* and may preempt or diminish actions that did not succeed as well (or failed).

Hits, Setbacks, Bruises, and Wounds

Attacks do one **hit** per success, but these can be reduced by the successes of an opponent. A hit is a **setback** if the attack was a maneuver not intended to do direct harm. Hits with weapons cause a **bruise** (minor injury) or **wound** based on the number of hits.

Weapon Grade/Category	Hits: 1	2	3	4	+1
0 / Unarmed	B	B	B	W	+W
1 / Light	B	B	W	W	+W
2 / Heavy	B	W	W	W	+W
3 / Massive	W	W	W	W	+W

Each grade of armor reduces a wound to a bruise or negates a bruise. Example: grade 2 (heavy armor) can negate a wound. Boss armor reduces the number of hits directly.

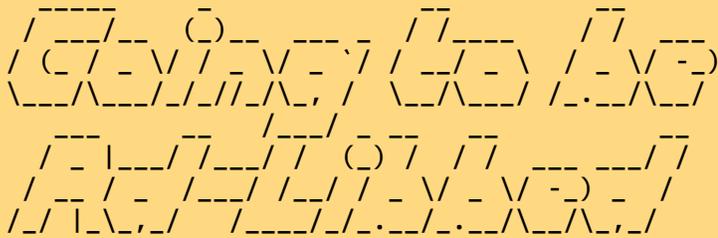
Recovery, Out of the Fight, and Healing

If a character has 6 or more hits at the end of the round, they can make a **recovery draw**. This uses a character's physical or mental ability to remove bruises or setbacks, respectively (one per success). Specialties like toughness or willpower apply to this draw.

Characters that start a round with 6 or more hits are **out of the fight**. Bosses can take more than 6 hits. Minor NPCs take fewer hits and do not get a recovery draw.

After the fight is concluded:

- Setbacks disappear immediately.
- Bruises fade after an hour so (faster with first aid).
- Wounds require long-term medical care (or magical/high-tech care to heal faster).



a zine for *Ever & Anon*
by Avram Grumer of Brooklyn, NY
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email: avram@grumer.org
see <http://grumer.org/>
for social media links
software: Affinity Publisher
font: IBM Plex Mono

Recent Gaming

=====

Dream Askew

Four of us (Briar, NJ, Gabe, and I) from the Park Slope group turned up on Oct 26th to play *Dream Askew*, one of a pair of games (*Dream Apart* is the other) that are published in the same book, by Avery Alder and Benjamin Rosenbaum. This is one (or these are two) of those GM-less, rules-minimal, largely freeform, Narrativist improv story-games, where you spend most of your time framing scenes and improvising dialog, instead of just letting the GM frame scenes while you hunt through your equipment list for something flammable. *Dream Askew* in particular is set in a queer (in the LGBT+ sense) enclave in an unevenly-collapsing world. (The other game, *Dream Apart*, has you play Jews in a *shtetl*.) Each player picks one of six character roles, and there are also six setting roles that get swapped around. Each role comes with priorities to pick from and moves to make, though the moves are much broader and looser than the moves you see in *Powered by the Apocalypse* games.

My goal here with this specific game, aside from getting to know people in this new group, was to get in some focused practice at playing dramatic, character-driven games, something I generally suck at. I'm used to team-tries-to-solve-external-problems-together types of games, not cast-poke-at-each-other's-emotions types. But I figure that the way you get better at stuff you suck at is you practice.

Setup: We did character setup over Discord, before the in-person game. First, I snagged the *Stitcher* role, a largely reactive role that acts as a doctor, fixer-upper, tinkerer type. I held off a few days on providing details.

NJ grabbed the *Hawker*, a sort of trader

or black-marketeer, and named them Proper (they/them). Proper's got some nice dramatic hooks: likes to indulge people's vices, get them addicted.

Briar, hosting the game, and facilitating it, having played it before and owning a copy, took the *Arrival*, a new guy in town: Burton Kelly (he/him), tough dude from Texas, AWOL from the military, up here to find his runaway sister and drag her back home. The only one of us with a surname.

At this point, I filled in the deets for my *Stitcher*: Corey (he/him), wearing a repurposed military trenchcoat with the insignia replaced by decorative patches. His workshop has an infirmary in the front and a space in the back for brewing and preserving, and it's got a ghost. I also discovered that I'd backed the Kickstarter for the game, already owned it in PDF form, and had totally forgotten about it!

Gabe grabbed the *Tiger*, a gang-leader. Named him Duke (he/him), decided he was transgender, and reliant upon Proper for hormones. He also decided that his character talked like an anime cat-girl, a decision he remained committed to, but grew to regret as the session progressed. His gang, the Tonies, was a unionized group of bike-riding delivery workers.

A few more details were invented at the table. When we were choosing the enclave's features, I pushed for "mutant plants," which I had figured Corey could be pickling into valuable delicacies to be traded to the cities for medicines, but Briar and NJ suggested might be hallucinogenic, giving us an excuse to invoke the *Psychic Maelstrom*. Since Corey was already established as preserving food, it made sense for the mutant plant greenhouse to be next to his workshop. I also suggested that Corey might be preserving body parts, which he could maybe use to replace injured parts in living people. This, plus the ghost, gave Corey a bit of a creepy vibe, like maybe

he's got an ugly past. Briar suggested that, with his ex-military coat, maybe Corey was part of the military force that wrecked this area, and is trying to make up for it.

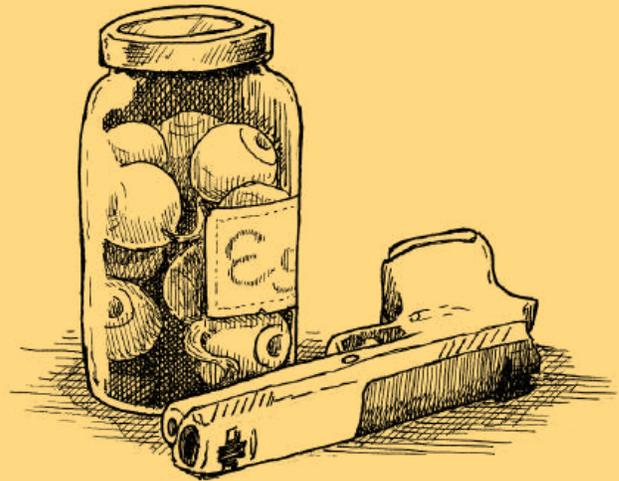
Some other setting details: A train station, with trains that have been retrofitted for steam or coal running on no-longer-electrified tracks. Tunnels and shrines. (Tunnels are always fun, right?) Gabe wanted "running water," and NJ wanted "the ocean," but since we had established that our enclave was in or near Chicago, we went with the Great Lake instead. ("Superior, it's said, never gives up her dead, when the gales of November come early," I noted, to blank stares. Maybe because I'm at least two decades older than the rest of them, but possibly because Chicago is on Lake Michigan.) The conflicts we chose for the enclave were: Politics of the void, scarcity mindset, and hedonism.

Mechanics: The mechanics of the game are very minimalist, almost freeform. You just frame scenes and narrate your interactions, with prompts on your sheet to guide you. Each character sheet has three sets of moves: *strong moves*, which cost a token; *weak moves*, which gain you a token; and *regular moves*, which neither. These aren't *PbtA*-style moves; they aren't triggered by narration. They're basically diceless fictional permissions: strong moves just give you permission to make a strong statement (like "Have everything required to fix or make a thing right away with no compromises or sacrifices," one of the Stitcher's strong moves; or "Kill someone," one of the Tiger's) that the other players have to respect, while weak moves require you to expose weaknesses or foreshadow trouble ("Tinker with an object, leaving it volatile or broken," or "Get high at the worst possible moment").

Each character also has a *Lure*, a thing that other PCs can do that involves coming to your PC, and earns the other PC a token ("Whenever someone comes to you [the Stitcher] with something precious that needs fixing, they gain a token," "Whenever someone offers you [the Hawker] a new gig, or gets hooked on your supply, they gain a token"). So there are a bunch of way to earn tokens, which is important, because you start with none.

Since this is a GM-less game, there are

also six sheets describing setting elements, used to provide the background that GMs normally provide: Varied Scarcities, The Psychic Maelstrom, The Society Intact, The Digital Realm, The Outlying Gangs, and The Earth Itself.



Artwork by Avram Grumer

Actual Play: We start off with NJ framing a scene between Proper and Corey. She picks up on my preserved-body-parts idea, and suggests that Proper is really old, and Corey has been replacing their bits one by one. One of their teeth has gone bad, and they need a replacement. (Proper's appearance is very important to them.) Gabe, picking up the Varied Scarcities sheet, uses the "Spread disease" move to interject that the only matching tooth Corey has in stock is rotten. Corey offers to paint it with enamel, which satisfies Proper, and NJ gets a token. In exchange for the tooth, Corey asks Proper to get him some supplies, at which point Briar, with the Psychic Maelstrom sheet, has the mutant plants speak to Corey's psyche. They want blood! Mammal blood! A few *Little Shop of Horror* jokes are made, and Briar (probably probing to see what she can get me to commit to) suggests human blood, but I talk the plants down to pig blood, which Proper says they can get for me.

Then I get to frame a scene. This point, I later realize, is where I make a mistake: I think I'm limited to using one of the two "Ask the person on your left" prompts on my character sheet, when those are actually for use during character creation, to provide connections between the characters. Instead of coming up with a reason to ask Duke to solve a big problem (playing to the Tiger's Lure, which would earn me a token), I go to get back a bicycle pump he bor-

rowed. The Tonies want to keep the pump, since it makes them more autonomous. Things get a little tense, and NJ, playing The Earth Itself, narrates an abrupt storm. Corey and Duke eventually agree that the Tonies can keep the pump, and Corey gets some free deliveries in exchange.

Gabe frames a scene between Duke and Proper, in which Proper hires the Tonies to slaughter pigs.

Briar frames a scene that has all of the PCs at the train station, so she can make a splash bringing Burton in. Which she does! She's really good at this! Burton shows up in a beat-up Chevy truck that he's somehow kept working all the way up from Texas, and carrying a gun, and Briar does a great job with his accent and body language. He says he's looking for his sister, whom he's traced to our locale, and her name is Hailey, and describes her. We all say we don't know anyone by that name. Burton's very insistent, though, and something of a jerk. Proper suggests looking down by the greenhouse, where people tend to gather, and starts to frame a scene with Proper, Burton, and Corey, but I demur, saying Corey will meet up with them, he's got to pack the supplies that came in on the train.

What I actually do is frame a scene of my own, establishing that Hailey is in the enclave, going by the name Selene, and I can find her in the tunnels. Briar plays Hailey/Selene, and we establish that she does *not* want to go home with Burton, which is obviously the more interesting answer.

I think NJ and Briar might have played out a scene with Proper and Burton at the greenhouse, but I don't remember. Anyway, when Corey gets to the greenhouse, Burton's the only one there. He's a bit spacey, from the plants' hallucinogenic pollens. There's a pretty tense scene in which he insists that Corey knows where Hailey is. I have Corey truthfully insist that he doesn't know anyone by that name. I think I invoke Corey's "Appeal to justice and reason" move, but I don't remember at exactly what point in the convo. I think I also deploy the line "The Eschaton is already immanentized, it's just not evenly distributed" at some point, but nobody else knows what I mean, so I'm repeating it here, where someone might appreciate it. Anyway, Briar has Burton disbelieve Corey, and point his gun at Corey's head. This isn't really a

problem, because every PC has "Get out of harm's way" as a strong move, and I've got a token that I picked up at some point, but I'm dithering about how to narrate it. My first thought is that Corey has military experience, so maybe he can knock the gun out of Burton's hand, but I ask if anyone has any more interesting ideas, and NJ suggests that the ghost intervenes. That's way cooler, so I go with it. The ghost knocks the gun away, which flies through a window. "I'm going to have to fix that," Corey says, miffed, as Burton leaves.

Then Gabe gets a scene for Duke. This is largely comedic: one of the Tonies (NJ takes up this role) is rebelling against the requirement to speak in a goofy cat-girl voice. Briar and I play other Tonies, and we have some kind of union vote, and I forget exactly how this resolves. I think Gabe is a bit apologetic about having a comedic scene right after a tense, dramatic scene, but I point out that's what Shakespeare used to do.

At some point, there's a scene where Corey and Proper meet up to figure out what to do about Burton. Proper's tried to drug/poison him (the Hawker has a strong move: "Lace something with undetectable poison"), but Burton's been refusing everyone's hospitality. (Rude!) We decide that Corey has some preserved hallucinogenic mushrooms he can dry out and grind into powder.

There's also a scene between Burton and Duke, in which Duke tries to tell Burton that his sister had been in the enclave briefly, but had left on the train. Burton tries pulling his gun on Duke, but Duke's gang steals Burton's gun. This ends with Duke promising to leave the gun in a specific place outside of the enclave where Burton can find it, though Proper winds up getting to it first.

The climactic scene, framed by Briar, involves Burton finding Hailey/Selene, gagging her (so that nobody has to play two parts in the scene), and carrying her to his car. I ask how the table feels about flashback narration, and we're OK with it, so Corey has previously swiped the car's spark plugs. ("Tinker with an object, leaving it volatile or broken"; a weak move, so I get to accomplish a goal *and* earn a token for it!) Proper, who's on drugs and is a bit chaotic and frantic, threatens Burton with his own gun. Burton grabs his gun back (nobody can seem to hold

onto a gun in this town), and Proper pulls out another one! (The Hawker sheet has two strong moves that this could be: "Draw a weapon before anyone can react" and "Bring out supplies that no one knew you had." I don't recall which one NJ used.) Corey steps in close ("Take action, leaving yourself vulnerable," a regular move) and blows mushroom powder into Burton's face. This gives Burton an epiphany, and we get to chime in on it. Briar invites Gabe to play the voice of Burton's grandfather, whom he plays as Cotton Hill from *King of the Hill*. ("I killed forty men! You're worthless!") I narrate how the influence of the plants is showing Burton the interconnectedness of all things, and the image of a tree, roots reaching into the earth, where grandpa's grave is, showing that the voice is that of an empty chattering skull, as the branches reach upward to the sky, suggesting open possibilities.

Briar narrates that Burton seems to be opening his mind. Duke sentences Burton to be locked to a post for thirty days, but Proper frees him early, because they like having people owe them favors.

Conclusions: So, I dunno. On the one hand, a lot of the suggestions I made wound up getting actually used and contributed to interesting play. But that's also a thing that already happens pretty often with me; it's not progress.

As far as drama goes, I think I kinda played it timid, here. Corey was a type I often find myself choosing: a technician of some kind, in a reactive role. Possibly I would have stirred up more drama if I'd chosen a more active playbook. On the other hand, Briar prompted me to have Corey take on a more dramatic position (with that blood thing), and I turned it down, so probably the playbook matters less than what you do with it. Some things for me to keep in mind in future games.

None of the three conflicts we chose for the enclave actually came up in play. The drama wound up coming out of character background choices, instead.

Monsterhearts, Session 0

We started a *Monsterhearts* (2nd ed) campaign on Nov 9th. (We're only planning two full sessions after this.) Briar hosted this one, too, and is the GM. Players in attendance were myself, NJ, Erica, and

Johnni. There's a fourth player, Mike, who signed up via the Discord, but he couldn't make the Session Zero.

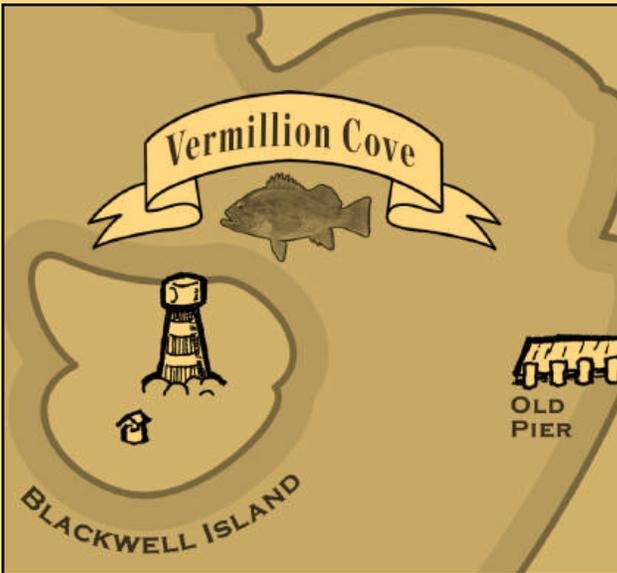
Monsterhearts needs some interesting prep. Actually making a character is quick, not a lot of decision to make, but we also needed to set up a town, and then to populate our homeroom. Oh, and we had a discussion of what issues we might not be comfortable with. I showed up with some X-cards I'd made earlier, out of bright orange index cards, each X lettered in a different style.

The boundaries discussion was interesting. Briar suggested fading to black for sex scenes, since we're a new group that don't know each other very well. (She said she had played a very sexually explicit game with some people she'd known for a long time, and enjoyed it, but it's very different with people you've just met.) I brought up the question of rape, which is something I'm used to having a hard line against. We decided that, because of the nature of *Monsterhearts* (sex moves and manipulation), coercive sex was on the table, but actual physical force was not, and in any event, go cautiously and check in with each other to see that everyone's OK, and keep those X-cards handy.

We picked *Skins* (that's what playbooks are called in this game) over dinner, though some of us came to the table with preferences. I had originally been leaning towards the Witch, but then realized that's the kind of character I usually play, so went in the opposite direction with the Werewolf. I'm trying to force myself to be more direct and involved.

Erica chose the Infernal, NJ the Mortal, and Johnni the Hollow. We left all our other playbook decision to be made later, and went on to town creation.

The town of Vermillion Cove is a beach town on the West Coast, someplace where the mountains come close to the shore. It was a sardine-canning town a century ago, but now it's one of those places where rich people come to spend the summer, and the whole town has to live off of that money for the rest of the year. Not much in the way of job prospects, but the next town over, Tenleyton, has a corporate hospitality industry that some of the moderately ambitious kids hope to get into. (The truly ambitious kids want to get way the hell out, of course.) There are some rich families locally: old money tends to live in



Artwork by Avram Grumer, though the banner & fish are clip art.

the mountains, new money near the shore and the New Pier, with its trendy shops. The middle-class neighborhood lies between them, and the poor folks south of that, near the Old Pier.

We also established some specific spots: Bluestone Manor, in the mountains, is where my Werewolf PC lives; his family are caretakers and groundskeepers. There's a graveyard with an apple tree where NJ's Mortal hangs out. Johnni's Hollow can often be found at The Low Tide, a dive bar near the Old Pier; Erica's Infernal spends time at the tiny library, which has a lot of fishing and golf books, and bodice-rippers, and avoids the graveyard, which is where her demonic patron seems strongest.

We established that we were going to start off at the beginning of our senior year. Some players wanted to explore the summer tourist season, but when I pointed out that they could use flashback scenes to establish cool stuff that'd happened over the summer, they agreed that'd do. Briar also established that at the end of the previous school year there had been a massive school shooting in Tenleytown, the next town over, and we were going to have to be dealing with lingering freak-outs over that.

Also, we established that my Werewolf PC had been hunting and eating deer and turkey in the mountains, and Briar asked if he'd eaten any humans, and man, this is the second game we've played this month where she's asked if my character is a cannibal, and it's not her fault for following where I lead, but what's up with my leading there?

The next step after that was setting up

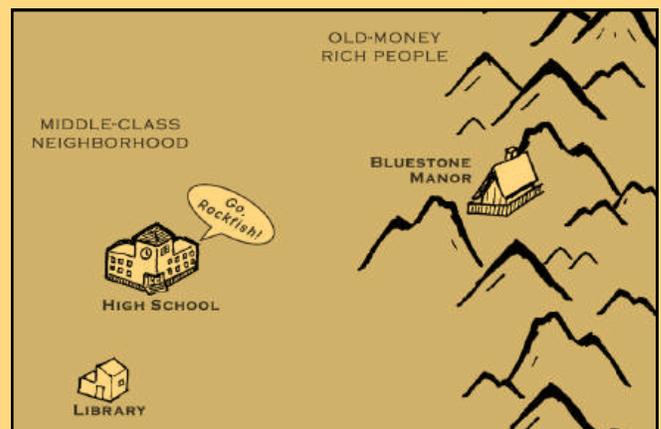
the homeroom. This was huge fun! Briar set down a paper with a four-by-four grid of desks (plus one more for the teacher), and asked which of the PCs was the most popular. Consensus of the group was that it was my Werewolf! So I got to choose where my character sat. Last row, I figured, and wanted to sit next to the door at the rear of the class, but these small-town classrooms don't have those, just one door at the front. So I picked the back corner near the window.

Then Briar pointed to the desk next to that one, and asked me "Who sits here?" Um, that's Pete, um, Pete Alvarez. Then she turned to another player and asked for a fact about Pete. He's hot, but just recently, like he used to be one of those gangly kids, but bloomed over the summer. OK, so maybe lots of students are coming to my PC, as a connection to getting with Pete, maybe in exchange for favors, but maybe Pete's overwhelmed by the attention, so what does my PC do about it? And I said that he tells those people to back off, protecting Pete. "Like a guard dog," Briar said. Yeah, that fits.

And desk by desk we went, filling in the whole homeroom class, each NPC student getting two facts, preferably suggested by two different players, building a relationship map full of potential drama. It is over the course of this exercise that I came to realize two things:

- 1) I've led a sheltered life. My teen years seems to have involved atypically low levels of sex and drug use.
- 2) The other players can all, apparently effortlessly, flesh out NPCs in much the same way that I can easily flesh out abstract social systems, architectures, and technologies. I think my brain is weird.

At some point we came up with names for the PCs. My Werewolf is Steffan Mactire,



Artwork by Avram Grumer

Johnni's Hollow is Blue, Erica's Infernal is Logan, and NJ's Mortal is Laeli Vahad.

We also set up the initial Strings. Strings are an influence mechanic in *Monsterhearts*: Having a String on someone means you have a bit of influence, and you can spend that String to get a bonus on rolls involving them. Each playbook has a pair of questions used to set up influence among the PCs. For the Werewolf, everyone starts with a String on me, because I'm not subtle, and I start out with two Strings on one other PC, whom I've been stalking from a distance for weeks. I chose Blue, the Hollow. The Mortal has to choose a love interest, and NJ picked my Werewolf, so Steffan has three Strings on Laeli.

Briar also asked us each to pick two songs to act as a soundtrack: one for our ordinary selves, and one for our Darkest Selves, the monstrous beings we become under certain circumstances. It's going to take all my willpower to keep from going with Warren Zevon.

We also have to finalize mechanical choices. For example, the Werewolf can choose to be either "a heart-breaker with a mean streak (Hot 2 & Volatile 1), or an unpredictable loose cannon (Hot 1 & Volatile 2)," and I had been leaning toward the loose cannon, but the way the setup turned out, it's clear that Steffan is more Hot than Volatile, so heart-breaker it is!

Another consideration is that the two basic moves that use Volatile are for common RPG actions like doing violence and running away, while the Hot move ("Turn Someone On") is tied to the String influence system. The drama-based influence stuff is what I'm trying to explore, so it's a good idea to give myself a mechanical incentive for that activity, rather than traditional RPG action-fight stuff.

Next session's scheduled for the 22nd. Mike's already chimed in on the Discord that he's picked The Queen.

I used Typst to make a neatened-up version of our homeroom chart, and Affinity Designer 2 (plus some bits drawn by hand and scanned in) to work up our town map, which just goes to show that I'm still divided between the two apps.

Scum and Villainy, Session 3

We had an in-person session scheduled for Nov 11th, but one player had to stay home to wait for a UPS delivery, so we switched

Going to be Ad-Libbed #4

to Zoom instead, which turned out nicely, because the weather was unpleasant.

- * The GM (Gaylord)
- * Harmony Qián, a Mechanic (me)
- * Valsi, a Mystic (Lisa)
- * Von Redwell, Muscle (Gareth)
- * Varilas, aka Vary, a xeno Speaker (Josh)

We pick up where we left off, at Jerek's Junkyard in Holt system. The Aleph Key, that weird Precursor artifact we've been hauling around, has been acting oddly, blinking and draining nearby Way energies. We're not sure exactly how long this has been going on, because we haven't been paying much attention to it, just shoving it out of the way when we need to get something from behind it in the storage closet or whatever. But anyway, it's blinking, and that probably means something. Valsi uses Attune to figure it out: it's trying to connect to the local gates, and since one of Holt's two gates, the Hantu Gate, is one that the Hegemony has never been able to open, we figure that's probably it. The Key is trying to establish contact with the Hantu Gate, and can't. Or something like that. (Holt's other gate connects to Rin.)

Harmony's brother, Kenn, in the 51st Legion, has been sending Harmony an increasingly-urgent series of texts, asking to arrange a meeting. Harmony figures out from examining the metadata on the texts (Gather Info using Hack, rolled a 6) that these texts have been sent from locations getting physically closer to our ship over time.

We also get some news reports: HNN (the Hegemonic News Network) reports that there's a plague on Mem (a planet in Holt system) that affects the native people there, aquatic xenos. Also, House Malklaith (which we still can't pronounce consistently) has announced that all shape-changing xenos must report to the government for registration and a tissue sample.

And job offers: One of unknown specifics from someone named Intal Brel, and another from an arms-smuggler buddy of Von's, who needs someone to smuggle something. He doesn't say what, but when an arms-smuggler wants you to smuggle something, it ain't hard to guess what.

We talk for a bit about what job to take. Vary wants to register with the government, because that's legally required. Harmony, having noticed that two crew members are being offered situations that

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smell like set-ups for getting grabbed, wants nothing to do with either of them, and pushes for the smuggling job.

(Vary: We can't just ignore them!

Harmony: Why not? I've been ignoring my family for years!

Vary: If I ignored my family for years, they'd send someone to kill me.)

The airlock door chimes. It's Intal Brel, in person! He's wearing power armor, because he's a member of the Concordiat Knights, a faction we're on good terms with. We invite him in, and he explains the job he wants us for: He's got a friend named Merry, a Magpie (the same xeno species as Vary). Merry went to a government office to register, and never came back. House Maleficent disclaims all knowledge. We take the job. Brel warns us: "I think some nefariousness may be about." Yeah, thanks for that tip, Brel.

One of the planets in Holt system is Vos, known for its valuable crystals. So valuable that a coalition of the major guilds has put a blockade around the planet to protect it from thieves and smugglers. That blockade was the most convenient government office for Merry to report to, so that's where he went, and that's where we're hoping he still is. Our plan is: We take our ship, the *Stardancer*, to the blockade, Vary goes in to register (accompanied by Von), gets captured, then finds Merry and they bust out.

Older readers might recall the 1998 episode of *South Park* with the Underpants Gnomes, whose business plan went "Phase 1: Collect underpants. Phase 2: ? Phase 3: Profit." Our plan has a regrettable amount of Phase 2 in it. Even with Vary getting help from a contact (a doctor who sets her up with a fake tissue sample), we wind up with just a single die for our Engagement Roll. Fortunately, Josh rolls a 5, so things don't go too badly.

Vary's & Von's shuttle gets redirected to a ship run by the Yaru, aka the Maker's Guild, a group that makes clones. They're taken to a waiting room, where someone takes a sample from Vary, and then tries to separate the two of them. Von resists, but Vary tells him it'll be fine. Vary gets taken to what looks like an operating theater, run by what looks like a doctor. Von is put in the next room, with a window between, and a clone guard.

Meanwhile, Valsi and Harmony are back on the *Stardancer*. Harmony gets contacted by...

my notes say House M, but Kenn is with the 51st Legion. Anyway, her brother Kenn is on a shuttle, asking for docking permission. Harmony grants it, but only lets Kenn through the airlock – the soldiers accompanying him have to stay on their shuttle. Valsi quickly scoots into the smuggling bay with the Aleph Key. Kenn says he wants info about Vary, and is willing to pay. He also tries to guilt-trip Harmony. See, their family had once been wealthy, and now not so much, and her parents had spent a bunch of money on bribes to get Harmony into the Starsmith Guild, which she'd flunked out of. Kenn had to join the military to give the family a hope of regaining their former status. So Kenn tries to make Harmony feel guilty about that. Mechanically, this is an attempt to inflict emotional harm. Harmony easily resists by rolling Insight, her strongest attribute, 3 dice, and tries to use Attune (1 die) to hook up to the Way to get some sense for his motives or vulnerabilities, but wait! Remember the Aleph Key? That mysterious Precursor artifact that's mucking with the Way? Kenn's briefcase alerts him that there's a powerful Precursor artifact nearby!

Harmony tries to reverse guilt-trip Kenn by saying that the family wouldn't be in a precarious state if grandpa hadn't gambled their money away, and it's not her and Kenn's responsibility to fix that, but I roll poorly, and not only does this not affect Kenn, but he flips it back on her by pointing out that she's never even met his kids, and he inflicts some Level 1 emotional Harm, "Feeling isolated." Kenn asks if they can sit down together and have a drink, and talk. Harmony invites him into the galley. I've been trying to find opportunities to make Harmony more of a troublemaker (since someone with that name ought to be one), and trying to get her brother drunk, at the risk of getting drunk herself, seems like a good opportunity.

Meanwhile, on the Yaru ship, the "doctor" has Vary strapped down to a table, and his scanners are showing the result from her tissue sample, alongside another result from a male Magpie. The doc activates a shutter that starts to slide down over the window, blocking Von's view. Von places a detonator to blow the shutter open, but then Josh calls for a flashback: He and Von had previously made Von up to look like Vary, and Vary had shape-changed to look like Von! Switcheroo! Gaylord calls

for a roll, which comes up 5, so the complication is that Vary (pretending to be Von) hadn't known what she was doing when placing the detonator.

Back on the Stardancer, Harmony's gotten into the galley's wet bar. My plan is to get Kenn drunk, and then mess around with his briefcase full of tech (since tech-messing is Harmony's specialty). This leads to some confusion about stakes and Devil's Bargains. A Devil's Bargain in *Forged in the Dark* games gives you an extra die on a roll, at the cost of introducing some new consequence. The consequence occurs no matter whether the roll succeeds or fails, so it can't be something that negates a success. We eventually settle on: The roll determines whether Harmony gets to mess around with the briefcase. (Success: Kenn passes out first, and she gets enough time to do what she wants. Partial Success: She gets enough time to do something, but not everything. Failure: She passes out first, no briefcase access.) The Bargain Gaylord offers insures that they both get drunk enough that Kenn mumbles some interesting secrets, which Harmony doesn't remember after, but Valsi (eavesdropping electronically) does. This sounds like a great deal, so I take it. 1 die of Consort, plus the Bargain, plus a Gambit, plus Valsi Assisting by using the Way to muck with Kenn, brings me up to 4d6, and I roll a critical success! Harmony manages to Hack the detectors in the briefcase so they generate false positives on random ordinary objects, and fills the log of recent detections with a lot of noisy nonsense, so it looks unreliable. She escorts her brother to the airlock, both staggering and semi-coherent ("Oh yeah, well so's your mom!" "No, so's your mom!" "No, *your* mom!"), and he leaves, just in time for Von & Vary to get back in their stolen escape pod.

Wait, did I tell you about the escape? I kinda missed a bunch of that, because I was writing down the bits my character was involved with. Not sure if that thing with the detonator had a payoff. There's something about Vary struggling to get away from a clone guard, and leaving her arm behind as part of a Devil's Bargain. They find Merry, who has no limbs left. I think there's some computer hacking, but I'm unclear on the details. They steal a broken escape pod, and Von manages to pilot it away. Neither of them has any dots in Helm, but Gareth manages to scrape together a

decent roll out of a Gambit and some assistance of some kind, and rolls a 5. The complication is that the pod is leaking. Von stops up the leak with his butt, earning "Frosty butt" harm.

We get Merry back to the Concordiat Knights. Our pay is 8 creds. We spend 1 on upkeep, bank 3 on the ship, and each PC gets 1. We get just 3 Heat. For an Entanglement, we roll something that we manage to avoid.

The info that Kenn spilled while drunk was something about the Way being just a form of technology, which none of the PCs believe.

Vary gets some email, something having to do with her earlier Hack roll, about Maker's Guild plans to develop shape-changing clones that can be used as technological components in combination with Precursor artifacts to do Way stuff.

In Downtime, I have Harmony indulge her vice (Weird) to burn off some Stress by working on a 3-D version of the I Ching, and start a project to develop a schematic to Craft something that'll hide the Aleph Key from scanners like those in the briefcase.

End-of-session news: There are riots on Warren. The Concordiat Knights have announced that they've found an Ur (the Precursors) city in a location they're not disclosing (probably because House Malamute claims ownership of all Ur stuff). The Mem plague continues; HNN says it's been linked to shape-changing xenos.

We schedule the next session for Black Friday. "We'll catch the gray men as they dive from the fourteenth floor," I say to Lisa and Josh, receiving no indication that they know what I'm talking about. <sigh>

Minimally Dark =====

Charge & Dash

I've seen a few attempts at stripping the *Forged in the Dark* ruleset down to its basics. The most interesting to me come from Fari RPGs. They produced a generic game called *Charge* some time ago, which they no longer promote or make available, but has a pay-what-you-want SRD still available on Itch.io, worth looking through if this is something you're interested in.

Like most *FitD* games, it has 12 Actions, though it also provides advice for smaller

lists of actions; as few as three.

Resistances and Gambits are replaced with a *momentum* mechanic. This is a pool of points each PC has. You gain momentum points by making action rolls, 0-3 depending on outcome, but always zero if you spent momentum on the roll. You can spend momentum to Push, or do some other things. When you resist a consequence, that's a *Determination* roll, and you spend momentum points to determine how many dice you roll. This is probably the biggest difference from *FitD*: in *FitD* games, a resisted consequence is *always* reduced, and the roll determines how much Stress is spent. In *Charge*, the *Determination* roll determines how much the consequence is reduced – and it isn't at all on a failure!

Most of the rest of the *FitD* toolkit is there: flashbacks, position & effect (with position renamed *risk*), clocks, etc. *FitD* abilities are here *situational talents*, and there are some generic guidelines for building them, but no pre-built list. Stress is there, but it's been detached from the other mechanics, and reduced to just a damage countdown. There are no Engagement roll or equipment rules, but those are easy to add in if you need them, and if you don't, you can just bring in equipment from some other game that matches the genre you're playing. No explicit Downtime rules either.

There's also an even-more-stripped-down game, built on the *Charge* chassis, called *Dash*. Just four pages long, and two of those are the front cover and a character sheet! Just six actions. Something nice and minimal to start from and bolt more stuff onto as you need it.

Boundless

Like I said, Fari RPG isn't still supporting *Charge* (or *Dash*). They're more excited about their new system, *Boundless*. This is described as a "soulslike" game, which I think is a reference to some genre of video game, and it's designed to make solo play easy. The basic game fits on both sides of a single sheet of paper (US letter size; I didn't see an A4 version), with a small character sheet included! You can download it for free, print it out, fold it in thirds, and grumble about the bits of text that were too close to the edge and got cut off by your cheap inkjet printer. It's apparently part of a larger (100+

page) dark fantasy gamed called *Chronicles of the Boundless*, which I think is still in development.

You can see the family resemblance between *Boundless* and *Forged in the Dark*, just like you can between *FitD* and *Powered by the Apocalypse*, but it's well on its way to being its own thing. Like *FitD*, you roll a bunch of 6-sided dice, and there are multiple levels of outcome. Unlike *FitD*, you count each die that comes up 5 or 6 as a *hit*, and outcome is determined by how many hits you get. Resistance rolls are called *Saves*, and clocks are replaced by pools of dice that shrink over time – each time you roll the pool, you remove up to two dice that failed to hit.

There's a free pirate-themed version of *Boundless* called *Boundless Tides* (A4 size; didn't see a US letter version) that adds in some ship rules, and gives ships and characters narrative tags called *aspects* that both give bonuses to rolls and serve as a hit point mechanic. And there's a sci-fi horror dungeon-crawl-in-space game called *Voidlight* that costs US\$15 for the PDF, so I haven't looked at it.

Still More About DTP Apps

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Canva finally made their announcement about the Affinity suite, and it's a bit depressing. All three apps (Designer, Photo, Publisher) have been merged into a single app, just called Affinity (version 3). The new app is available for free (with a free Canva account), and includes AI features that require a paid subscription.

This might sound good at first, but it's a recipe for eventual problems. Their revenue model has shifted from being supported by users who want to get actual work done, to subscribers who want to use AI features. At some point this will, inevitably, result in attempts to push the former to become the latter.

And while Affinity 3 can open files created by Affinity 2 programs, it doesn't seem to be able to save in Affinity 2 formats, and Affinity 2 programs can't open Affinity 3 files, so I've got an incentive to keep right on using version 2.

Another issue is that the iPad version of Affinity 3 hasn't been released yet. This is a headache for people who do their main work on a desktop, then carry around an iPad to show work-in-progress to clients. And Affinity 3, for some reason,

doesn't have a light UI mode, just dark, which can be a literal headache for people with vision problems.

Maybe I'll give Typst another try. There's something so appealing about having my work saved in future-proof text files.

Comments on E&A #5
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self: ct Josh re *GURPS*, early *D&D*, and how the lack of completeness invites tinkering – With this, I think I've finally explained to myself Marshall McLuhan's theory of hot vs cold media in a way that I'll remember. (A cold medium is one that invites audience participation due to low resolution or incompleteness. A hot medium seems more polished and complete, and like a hot stove, discourages you from fiddling with it.)

Matt Stevens: re *Fiasco* and similar games – I've played *Fiasco* twice, and the first time it worked wonderfully, and the second time it never got off the ground. I think that it works best if you lean into the comedic disaster potential, and think of yourself as a comedian setting up a joke. You're making sub-optimal decisions in the first act so that you can deliver hilarious punchlines in the third. And not just your own – you're also doing setup for the other players, and they are for you.

Remember that time we played that one session of *CthulhuPunk* where we'd recovered video footage of some group's raid on another group's base, and we made up new PCs to use for a single session, playing those dupes who got killed raiding that base? *We*, as players, knew our throw-away PCs were gonna get thrown away, even if *they* didn't know it. But it was fun anyway, wasn't it?

Roger Bell_West: re minigames – If you look around the interwebs, you can find discussions of "lonely fun," the kind of fun you have doing RPG stuff away from the table. Dungeon and map design in *D&D*, starship design in *Traveller*, building complicated characters in *Champions*, painting miniatures, etc. Another term for the kind of thing you're talking about.

yct Jim re a system where you start off

with one skill and improve it at higher resolutions – I think you've just described Ben Wray's *Roll for Shoes*.

Elf: re writing equipment in pre-modern settings – This is something I've been thinking about for a while. It's a common cliché of dungeon-crawling that the PCs are map-making as they go along, but this entirely understates how much of a pain in the butt this would be in a setting where modern pens and pencils haven't been invented! Even just making an ink bottle that can survive being knocked around without falling open would be a challenge to realistic medieval technology.

While the equipment lists in the *GURPS* core book are pretty minimal, *GURPS Low-Tech* lists a medieval "Scribe's Kit" (a case containing quills, a pen knife, bottles of iron-gall ink, and sheets of parchment) for \$50 in abstract *GURPS* money – a few days' wages for a low-class bravo (\$300/month), but about one day's earnings for a minimally-skilled artisan (\$1,120/month). I expect a real medieval European scribe would stock up on quills for free any time they had goose for dinner.

yct me re *Troika!* – It's not that *Troika!* has one skill, it's that it has an attribute called "Skill," plus a bunch of things called "Advanced Skills" that provide bonuses adding to that attribute, which would be called skills in a game which hadn't already used that term for one of its attributes. But since all of them add to the same attribute, and that attribute is rolled rather than set with points, there's a chance to get stuck with a character who's crappy-to-mediocre at everything.

While *Troika!* does have a zillion expansions, it seems to me that most of them come with their own sets of backgrounds, implying that they're for making up new characters instead of having continuing adventures with your old ones.

yct Dylan re using a landscape layout – I've got the same impulse, but the *E&A contributor guidelines* specify "page dimensions of 8.5" x 11" (portrait)." (That's 216x279 mm, for people in countries that aren't desperately holding

onto pre-Enlightenment worldviews by rejecting SI units.)

re second vs third person for game rules – I generally prefer second person, with (as you say) context taken into account, but the distinction is less important to me than not having the rules given in *cop voice*. That's the weird exonerative phrasing newspaper headlines use when a cop kills someone, to obscure the link between subject and action: "Man Killed After Officer-Involved Shooting," that kind of thing. "You must roll 3d6" (2nd person) and "The player must roll 3d6" (3rd person) are both better than "3d6 are rolled to determine..." (cop voice).

Gabriel Roark: yct Zoch re DCC character funnels – *Dungeon Crawl Classics* uses race-as-class, so humans get to choose a class (but not one of the demi-human classes like Elf or Hobbit), while demi-humans just go on in their demi-human class.

Myles Corcoran: re *Offworlders* – Where did you find fan-made stuff? I've looked at itch.io, and just found a GM screen and character trackers. Googling just found me a single Scribd document, uploaded last year, with a few additional character classes (Trucker, Teamster, Captain).

Also, I was surprised to discover that I apparently didn't own a dead-tree copy of *Offworlders*. Fortunately it's just US\$7 (plus tax, shipping) on Drive-ThruRPG, so now I do own one!

Patrick Zoch: Nice page layout! Now I feel like I have to step up my game!

Patrick Riley: re em dashes – Since large language models are "trained" on existing texts, the only way em dashes could get into LLM output is if they're also present in the input. So if real people didn't use 'em, LLMs wouldn't use 'em either.

re that *Cthulhu Dark* GM who let players get away with rolling a die without justification because "players would just try to wedge in a justification anyway" – But the justifications are the point! The entertaining narration is what distinguishes RPGs from just shouting

numbers at each other!

Mark Wilson: As I said above, the one full game of *Fiasco* I ever played was great! I don't recall where we got the playset from or what the title was, but it was set at a science fiction convention, and we decided that the con was running a larp based on *Grave of the Fireflies*. I made the early decision to have my character talk like the comic shop guy on *The Simpsons*, and it was comedy gold!

I've just picked up physical copies of 1st-edition *Fiasco* and *The Fiasco Companion* relatively cheap on eBay, thinking maybe the Park Slope group might like it.

Brian Misiaszek: Really liked the Paratethys idea. It also seems like a neat excuse to have an LLM do your plotting for you, since the entity has no real plan of its own, just LLM-like pattern-matching of human plans.

yct **Brian Rogers** re secondary attacks – I think *Dungeon Crawl Classics* does something like this. Fighters can attempt a Mighty Deed of Arms (disarming, shoving someone, etc) accompanying an attack, and they roll a die that increases in size with their level. If the die rolls 3 or higher and the attack succeeds, so does the Deed.

Lisa Padol: yct **Gabriel** re being able to see that someone in a larp is accompanied by troops – Have you thought of giving them a bunch of helium balloons with faces drawn on them to drag around behind them, as an unmissable visual indicator? Then you could use balloon-popping as a military-scale combat mechanic. Downside, of course, is the danger of someone's army floating away if you play outside.

re Gareth's *Blades in the Dark* game – How did the Heat and Wanted mechanics work if the PCs weren't criminals?

Hm. It just occurs to me that you could adapt *Blades in the Dark* for *Call of Cthulhu*, with Heat and Wanted representing attention from cultists and the Outer Gods.

re *Never Tell Me the Odds* – Yeah, it's designed for one-shots, but has some

optional rules for campaign play of up to 24 sessions.

yct **Myles** re *A&E* issue length – BoardgameGeek has scans of the ToC pages of every issue of A&E. The disty (that's the traditional apa-hack term for the issue as a whole) page limit first turned up in *A&E* #16 (Nov 1976), and it was 160 pages. It dropped to 150 pages in #35 (Jul 1978), but I think that might've been a typo, because it went back to 160 in #36. It stayed there for four years, dropping to 156 pages in #84 (Jun 1982), then 150 in #85. Possibly there were discussions of this in the *Tantivy* for those issues.

Also, there were occasional months where Lee would announce that the following issue had *already* filled, meaning that she would sometimes get over 300 pages of content submitted in a single month!

yct **Josh** re PvP – I've been thinking about this recently, noting that our group seems very go-along-to-get-along. A lot of drama-based games (*Dogs in the Vineyard*, *Smallville*) which we've never quite been able to make work, pretty much require the PCs to work against each other at times, which we're generally reluctant to do. Which is odd, since in the glory days of CthulhuPunk, we were the group that infamously initiated PvP combat while the GM was taking a bathroom break!

But yeah, I noticed, while playing *Dream Askew*, that Briar and NJ, who I think both came into tabletop RPGing through narrativist drama-based story-games, were both quick to get aggressive against other PCs, while Gabe and I, who came in through trad games, were more inclined to try and solve problems, and only really went PvP when another PC had done something to establish themselves as a villain.

On the other hand, I also notice that you were talking about *Good Society*, a game based on upper-class English folks in the early 19th century, and "not pushing back at the time and being dissatisfied later" seems pretty genre-appropriate.

it at the time, but in retrospect, it's really obvious that the *Cortex* dice system is derived from *Dogs in the Vineyard*.

ct me re your *Scum and Villainy* PC – Actually, my notes say "Verilus."

re vices – You can just choose two if you want! It's there in the character creation rules, on page 60: "Each crew member has a way to blow off stress, described by their vice. Choose one or two from the list below, and write in specific details."

yct **Michael Cule** re specialized vs generalized game designs – This is basically the same thing I've been thinking.

It kinda ties in with a thing Jim Henley and Ginger Stampley were talking about 20+ years ago on their old gaming blog, the 20' By 20' Room (long gone, domain squatted, remnants on Archive.org), which Jim dubbed "aerobic narrativism." See, narrativist game designs are about "Story Now," diving into your dramatic premise right off the bat, while Jim and Ginger like to wade slowly into things, wandering around the setting to see what premises look interesting.

Modern games generally are very strongly about their dramatic premise, while trad games tend to portray a setting, and let you wander about and find your own premise. And the wander-about approach has an obvious failure mode when you decide you're interested in something that the GM has no mechanical support for, but the modern solution is to just decide that whatever the game supports, that's what the campaign is about.

Man, twelve pages this time! I guess that'll happen when you have three games to write up.

I actually have *two more* game sessions scheduled this month, but they're after the deadline. Though tonight (Wednesday, Nov 19th) is the deadline for getting one's background songs in for the *Monsterhearts* game, and we're chatting about it on Discord. You'll hear about it next month!

Joshua Kronengold: yct **Patrick** re *Cortex's* dice system – I'm not sure if I noticed

De Ludis Elficis Fictis

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Recently I have mostly been ...

... finishing up Michael Cule's Wednesday evening Runequest campaign with the High Wycombe RPG group. We are Lunar squadies of the 2nd Furthest Foot, visiting the big city of Glamour to receive commendations from the Red Emperor. The big parade finally went ahead, with incident, of course, but we finally got our commendations from the emperor. Plans are now afoot for a new GURPS campaign of trainee mages going to mage college. To fill in this week, we played *Brindlewood Bay*, which I was expecting to not like, as it sounded like it was not my cup of tea, but I ended up having a very fun game, and I think everyone enjoyed it a lot.

The first two weeks of November took me away on holiday to Gran Canaria for some winter sun and relaxation. A couple of light games were played poolside with Mrs Pum: *Splendor* and *Village Rails*. It has otherwise been a particularly good month for board games with *Orleans*, *Castles of Burgandy*, *Red Cathedral* and *Magnate: The First City* played. I've also been digitally reminiscing by playing a little *STALKER Enhanced Edition* on computer. I also tried *Outriders*, but that seems to be just too frantic and fast paced for my aged reflexes now. And I had a little success in November's UK Maths Trade, getting *Tigris and Euphrates* (that I very much wanted, to replace the previous copy I had, but actually belonged to a friend, who finally took it back), *Scout*, and *Hallertau*, and traded away *Euphoria: Build a Better Dystopia*, which is quite good and I quite like, but was unlikely to get played again.

This coming weekend I'm off to the West Country to visit my friends Alex and Kez, and go to GridCon gaming convention in Taunton with them.

Comments

FWIW, as people have been discussing how they make their zines, and mentioning Typst in particular, I do my zine entirely in Google Docs. I make rough notes on my tablet as I read E&A, then refine and tidy on PC, and export as PDF to send.

#5 Brian Rogers: re Quinns Quest, yes, he's quite infectiously enthusiastic. I also enjoyed his work on Shut Up & Sit Down¹ board games reviews, although they tend a little more towards entertainment and less to concise reviews.

#5 Mitch Hyde: Cauldron sounds interesting – do please report all about it.

#5 Elf: RYCT Myles re getting your name right, the amazing book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie points out, “a person's name is, to that person, the sweetest and most important sound in any language.” So I try to treat it as important, remember it, and get it right.

RYCTM re Windows, extended support for Win10 is now free here in Europe (even Brexit handicapped UK!) Unfortunately, I heard about this after I'd already reinstalled two of my three Windows machines with Win11 :-/ Yep, I like to have the taskbar on the left :(There are some apps, such as *Shutup10*² and *WinAero Tweaker*³ that make it easier to stop unwanted Win11 behavior and re-enable some lost features.

Yes I also like group character creation, especially PbtA style with inter-relationships between PCs.

Re Rulebook POV Question, whichever is clearer, which for me, in the example, is 3rd person, as one doesn't have to assume stuff like whether the player or GM is reading it.

#5 Gabriel Roark: RYCTM “the sooner that humanity realizes that we are in this together & learn how to have productive, civil discourse across boundaries, the better off we are all likely to be”, yes indeed.

RYCT Mitch re travel speeds with or without map, as GM I vary travel speed by terrain, with good roads better than tracks and paths, which are better than going cross country. But if you're simply going to the third town along this road (and know its name) then a map probably won't get you there any sooner. If traversing the “wilderness” off the beaten track then a map + navigation skills and abilities will definitely help.

Good point that it seems fair to play demihumans weaknesses as well as strengths.

#5 Myles Corcoran: sympathy on your health woes and my best wishes. Yay for Rocky Horror – I must go see it again sometime.

I like the occasional Brass: Birmingham, although I hated original Brass.

“Last Windows ever”, yeah, I remember that and didn't believe it then. See my comment to Elf about Win 10 extended security updates. Watch out that

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/@shutupandsitdown>

² <https://www.oo-software.com/en/shutup10>

³ <https://winaero.com/winaero-tweaker/>

the Win11 hardware reqs hacks might stop working in a future update.

Thanx for Mausritter campaign info. LOL at “wing it carefully craft my own material.”

Interesting RQ info, thanx.

Re *Fromage*: played it once, liked it a little, but there are plenty of other games I'd rather play.

Agree on security through obscurity not being strong; I had that argument at work a few times.

I look forward to seeing you at Dublin Worldcon in 2029, which I hope to go to!

RYCT Jim re making a note of NPCs, I've taken to doing this as a player, as well as keeping at least summary notes about what we've done and what's happened. As my character sheet is usually a spreadsheet, I now do this in additional tabs labelled “Journal” and “People”, the first people listed being my fellow player characters. This is otherwise hard to just remember (for me, at least) in a once a week game, and it helps me keep track of things. Also, the GM has gone to the trouble of creating this stuff, so I should take the trouble to remember or record it and try to follow what's going on.

#5 George Phillies: RYCT Patrick Riley re 1500 point Society of Ancients armies plus a half-dozen D&D magicians, sounds like the wizards were WMDs and achieved MAD.

#5 Patrick Zoch: sympathy on government furlough, a concept that utterly boggles me and underlines how different to the most of the rest of the world the USA often is; most other places, if the government can't agree on new funding changes then the existing rules simply continue until the new rules are agreed. IIRC, Belgium had no government for 7 months last year, and everyday matters just continued as normal.

I've got the VR version of *Skyrim* and really should get around to playing it; I had a quick try of it and it looked pretty awesome.

re *The Colonists*, it seems to work well with only 2 players, which is the only way I've played it a couple of times. Yes, it can be very long, and I've only managed the first two eras so far.

Interesting idea to use a zine background colour or pattern instead of bright white; it looks nice – I may try that. I hope no one is printing E&A out, or has the option to print without background. My customary colour for gaming is yellow, but you and Avram are already using that. Perhaps a shade of pale red, to be more conducive to late night reading.

RYCT Roger BW, I must take a look at Inkscape for map making. I did look at using an online whiteboard during lockdown gaming, which seemed a good idea, and Roll20 has this sort of feature built in, which I used a little, although I didn't find it particularly user

friendly; other VTTs presumably have similar functionality. I even bought a graphics tablet to plug into my PC to make it easier for me to sketch stuff out, and it seemed to work quite well.

#5 Patrick Riley: RYCTM re initiative, as the ideas I am pondering are for my own rules system, players would declare intended action before determining initiative. I think this is the way in RuneQuest and possibly GURPS. In RuneQuest, for example, aimed blows go at the end of the round instead of normal initiative (Strike Rank) order.

Re exothermic ink, good idea – perhaps a small fire based enchantment on the ink, if alchemy does not do the job.

#5 Mark A. Wilson: we love Taskmaster too.

#5 Lisa Padol: RYCT Brian Rogers re Eternal Lies NPC villain who knows a lot of information, but will only speak to the PCs in the unlikely event that they somehow trick her with a completely undefined, clever logic puzzle, hmmm, agreed, this does sound like bizarre scenario design. And are all the things she knows available by other means? Are they essential to progress the scenario? If the answers to those questions are “no” and “yes” then it would seem the scenario is broken for all but the most unexpectedly cunning players, so I presume that is not the case. If the info is available in other ways, and not essential to progressing the scenario then she would seem to be a way for the most unexpectedly cunning players to just shortcut to a bunch of incidental fluff, which doesn't seem particularly good design either, but at least not broken. Or am I misunderstanding?

#5 Jim Vassilakos: RYCT Michael Cule re mules, I believe that on very rare occasions mules or hinnies are fertile, as has also been observed very rarely in ligers or tigons, just to make the science even more tricky. And on how much science one should mix into one's fantasy, I tend to agree with your implication that less science promotes a more fantastical feel, but being such a logical rational thinker I struggle to do this, at the cost, I often feel, to the fantasy feeling of my games – I try to compensate for that by making the rational aspects of my world a feature rather than a bug.

RYCT Brian Misiaszek re Sanity in Call of Cthulhu, it made me think of Twelve Monkeys as a possible example of how “insanity” might be modelled, or am I remembering the movie wrong?

#5 Timothy Collinson: ah, I spy my friend Kez playing Zilan Wine! It's a small galaxy we live in, it seems. LOL at “we weren't that fussed about the billionaires but went anyway to rescue the dog”.

—====### Everyone else, RAEBNC ###====—

BUMBLING Through DUNGEONS

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ISSUE #6 (E&A #6)

I may be taking E&A #7 off (fingers crossed I can contribute), but will be reading comments regardless. The reason is a happy one: I start a new job next week, though their largest trade show (6 days in Las Vegas) is next month, and I've been asked to attend, so I'll lose a large chunk of my December to this.

A furiously busy month prior as well. Fall is a lovely season, but hectic due to how much people seem to want to do before the big US holidays hit.

We were two months without working HVAC in our rented home and were briefly forced into pressuring our landlord(s) via rent escrow. We really enjoy the space and just moved in in July, so this has been an unfortunate and frustrating turn so soon into our tenure here. Fortunately, it's working again with a new system.

In better news, among other events, we attended the Circleville Pumpkin Show, a lovely town-wide street fair where the common wisdom is to stuff yourself with pumpkin foods. We happily obliged the tradition. We also went on a long bike ride to a place that does pancake breakfasts on Sunday mornings. And spent a day in our pajamas, sore and cranky, after our COVID booster shots, watching *Lord of the Rings* (extended editions) and drinking tea.

Big month for board games too, but I'll discuss that later.

IgTheme: Game Conventions, Good, Bad, Weird

I find some of the behavior I see at Conventions to be a bit foreign to me. I withhold judgment since I begrudge no one their passion, but once, for example, I attended a *Doctor Who* panel at a Convention.

I love *Doctor Who*. But the panel amounted to a lazy slideshow of Wikipedia-style facts and images about the show, and simply reading from cards. I mused to my then-girlfriend that I could have improvised a more interesting presentation. Yet people were losing their minds with excitement. A stock photo of David Tennant or somesuch

would send screams through the hall. This example is indicative of others I could name. So there are modes of engagement I can't quite share in at some of these.

More generally, a lot of people who attend e.g. Origins (which is close to me) are merely there to be sold to, and a conservative haul might be 10-12 games (30-50 in the more extreme cases). I sometimes struggle with the rampant consumerism at these events, often accompanied by the crush of crowds, the smell (which isn't omnipresent, but the Con stereotype fits at times), and more. This sort of environment is not for me.

Yet, I enjoy Cons. More and more as I've learned to navigate them in ways that match my preferences.

Mostly, you need a plan, at least for larger Cons, which means signing up for ticketed events months in advance and creating a schedule for the hours you'll be there. I leave myself some downtime when possible and always have a book and 1-2 creative projects I can noodle on during this time. I largely avoid the showroom hall where most of the purchasing occurs. And I try to meet up with friends for stretches, to play games, chat, get food or drinks, etc. This is how I maintain my equilibrium.

Smaller Cons that focus on gaming are less demanding, and one can stumble through and enjoy oneself, with less of a plan. I don't mind these either.

In my early 20s, I enjoyed Comic Cons, but have drifted away from those interests over time.

One amusing story from one of them, though: Small Con, small city, but they'd managed to get Adam West as the headliner celebrity guest for it. My buddy and I went together.

So we had an ongoing bet with each other and some other friends, wherein we could demand that any of the others do an impression of Mick Jagger on the spot. Failure to do so would result in them owing dinner to the rest.

I sprung this on my friend at the end of our conversation with Adam West. "One more thing, Mr. West. My friend here does an amazing Mick Jagger impression. I'd love for you to see it."

My friend's face was the best mix possible of absolute rage, fear, and genuine admiration that I'd thought to dare him at that moment. And of course, his Mick Jagger impression was basically a "bitter beer face" and some awkward twitching. So he goes through with it, there's a pause, and West looks at me. "Was that it?!" he asked with incredulous disgust.

I stammered out an apology, saying he must have been nervous, and we thanked West for his time.

Walking away, we didn't say anything to each other for about 30 seconds. Then, my friend broke the silence. "I hate you. You're my hero." We still laugh about it to this day.

Anyway, speaking of *Doctor Who*, below are some photos of me with John Barrowman from Origins from back in June. Nice guy.

Media

Watching the extended editions of *Lord of the Rings* for the first time (I'd only seen the theatrical cut) was a treat. They really are just stunningly good movies.

More reading on gaming. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* is extremely long and academic, but also thorough in how it treats the process of developing games. Their cultural context, their experiential qualities and their mechanics.

It helpfully summarizes each chapter at the end with high-level takeaways, so I could read entire chapters when I was more invested (and I was at times) or read the Cliff's Notes, so to speak, when I didn't want the longer version.

Me and John Barrowman at Origins back in June.



There are also commissioned games and an essay on design in them from noted designers. I quite enjoyed proxying and playing one, *Ironclad* by Frank Lantz, who authored the much more digestible (and easily recommendable) *The Beauty of Games*. *Ironclad* highlights some interesting design principles and is also just fun to play.

The game (*Ironclad*) is two concurrent abstract games, one of battling robots, and one of dueling philosophers who are trying to prove their point better than the other. Thus "Ironclad" is a bit of a pun with a dual meaning. You choose one of the sub-games to take a turn in, then your opponent takes a turn for you - with your pieces - in the other sub-game. So gains in one arena will be met with challenges in the other. The two sides subtly inform the other, with philosophy nodes providing armor for the robots and robots blocking philosophy placement. The emergent strategic considerations are considerable, given the relatively low rules overhead.

I've posted the rules (which I hope aren't taken down) over on the game's Board Game Geek page, and it's an easily proxyable game with, e.g. a Checkers board and some generic components of a couple types.

I'd meant to write up some other games here originally, but I may save that for a 2025 retrospective of best finds and such.

Responses to E&A #5

Brian Rogers

Re: "steeped" pun, my character was canonically the only one in the campaign who enjoyed a good pun (I probably mentioned this in the writeup, but can't fully remember), so I got a chuckle out of your response.

Patrick Zoch

Re: cartography, always best to find what works for your creative process, as you seem to have done. I've enjoyed seeing your maps through the years. I enjoy Profantasy's suite (Campaign Cartographer (CC) and related products) since I think it's the most modular cartography program I've discovered, albeit with more of a learning curve than most.

Some others I've seen are better at a specific style, and so introductory map creations from users will look better than those in CC. Yet the best CC I've seen is rivaled only by professional artists. I mostly just use it to make OSR-style black & white maps, but if time were no issue, would push toward similar mastery.

Patrick Riley

Re: superheroes, agreed to an extent. The DC animated stuff is arguably the best superheroic media we've had outside the best comic books. The Spider-Man and X-Men shows from the 90s are also a high point for me in terms of actualizing the idiom I believe was established by the comics.

Still, as archetypes that allow for embellished versions of otherwise human themes, I think they can be excellent vehicles in live-action as well. The serialized Marvel stuff, of late, leaves me dry even as entertainment, but some - like *Logan* or *The Batman* (Pattison), for instance - pause to linger on something deeper that is perhaps better served in the garb of costumed heroes. Or the examples you mentioned, which I agree with.

Re: *Brindlewood*, yes, 'resolving a story' instead of 'solving a mystery/puzzle' is likely the better description of what typically happens. I don't doubt some GMs often have precise clues that do have a "correct" answer, but the story and resolution is not dependent on the players solving it entirely or indeed even partially in the intended way.

Lisa Padol

Re: PbtA RPG systems, I haven't *played* another PbtA system to-date, but I did some moderate research into *Avatar: Legends* at one point, believing I was going to be running it for a group (this never happened).

It grafts some subsystems onto the core PbtA system. And while I don't think I fully wrapped my head around how each manifests during play, I was more intrigued by its mechanical trappings - and how those elements can dovetail into character beats - than I have been with *Brindlewood*.

Joshua Kronengold

Re: Monk/Barbarian synergy, I should be more detailed.

For starters - and this will clear up some of your confusion - we started at level 8 and were allowed a couple magic items of varying rarity. For one of mine, I chose Gauntlets of Ogre Power, which grants me STR 19. Thus I can attack using strength as well as with DEX. This allows me to take advantage of extra damage of the Barbarian's Rage ability, which is solely tied to STR-based attacks, and also to leverage their advantage on STR rolls (Athletics, etc.) when raging.

The (physical) damage mitigation from Rage is also supported by the Monk's ability to deflect considerable physical damage with reactions. And so it's actually somewhat rare for physical, non-magical attacks to do *any*

damage to me. With a Focus point and a failed save from my enemy, I can do damage to them by redirecting the attack, not just deflecting. And so I often *want* to be attacked in melee.

Lastly, Barbarians get a sort of alertness ability that gives them advantage on DEX saves when they aren't incapacitated, and at Monk 7 I just got Evasion, which halves damage from attacks that force a DEX save, and/or eliminates the damage wholly if I make the save.

Taken in whole, it's a bit of extra damage, but a considerable amount of damage mitigation, to the point where I feel like a full-on tank for the group, which is quite fun. My kryptonite is magical, non-physical damage, but even here, I semi-dumped WIS (uncharacteristic for a Monk, of course, but I'm more about brute force than finesse) and have decent CON, so I'm been able to take quite a beating without issue.

Jim Vassilakos

Re: *Brindlewood* and action resolution, I'm not sure I could do a great job writing up different systems in the same situation. But for example in *Brindlewood* there are only a handful of standard "Moves" you can do (actions tied to dice rolls within the PbtA system). And in a mystery setting, most of our Moves ending up being the Meddle Move. Which is fine, but seemed overly broad, given the variable ways problems can be solved in actuality.

Not that D&D is an exemplar at all times in this regard, but there are problems where we could easily brainstorm half a dozen skills that could be used in different ways to resolve a problem. This is mechanically relevant, but narratively so as well, as the response to each could be different. Too much of *Brindlewood* was "we talk at the people in the scene, then make a Meddle Move when it's time to push the plot." Perhaps a GMing issue, but I think a system one at times as well.

Re: Campaign Writeups, I've written excessively detailed reports as well, so I understand the urge. I wouldn't have remembered enough to do that for the Lantern Bearers campaign, but it's fun to do long-form as well, time permitting. I'm glad you enjoyed my shorter writeup though!

Myriad: City of Tiers

Campaign Report

Characters

Talullah Rynn Bahk (Rynn) (Me) - Orc Monk 6 (Warrior of the Elements), Barbarian 2

Palamandrix (Pal) - Gnomish Fighter/Ranger

Louise - Tiefling Druid

Lady Jackie Sintara - Halfling Bard

Greer - Goliath Rogue

Magical Gear: Orb of Shielding (Fire) (flavored as a necklace), Gauntlets of Ogre Power (STR 19)

Character Description:

In Orcish, Talullah means "Leaping Water" and Rynn is a regional name for "Spear." Bahk is a clan name. Tall, lean and muscular, with grey skin and reddish hair. In channeling mystic elemental powers through her body, her skin often displays leylines of elemental energy, depending on what element she is channeling in the moment.

Character reference. Found via Google search.



Backstory:

Talullah was an angry problem child in a rural Orcish village, but showed martial prowess and was sent to train at a nearby monastery, outside the city of Baldur's Gate, to control her emotions. She was an adept student, but would also fly into fits of rage at her teachers and at those she believed to be evil-doers. Her personality existed at the extremes. On a rescue mission with other monks to a nearby town, she ended up burning down a building with some kidnappers inside of it and was sent away. She understood her error but also believed she had purified the world by bringing more peace to it.

In Baldur's Gate, she was briefly enlisted in the city guard, the captain of whom was tasked with sending his best warrior to protect the city's emissaries. Never having liked the unorthodox Talullah, who had befriended criminals to teach them to meditate and also accidentally beaten up innocents in her quest for justice, he sent her on the mission to Myriad under the pretense of guarding the party and its interests. In reality, he simply didn't want to send his most capable soldiers.

Session 1



My name is Talullah Rynn Bahk, of Clan Bahk. I go by Rynn. I am an orcish woman, age 28. At an early age, I was sent from my village to train at a local monastery, with monks who studied the confluence of the body, mind, spirit, and the elemental forces of the universe. I became a star pupil, though I was often chastised for my temper. I learned to meditate to quell these tendencies.

I was sent from the monastery after a rescue mission to a nearby village, where I burned down a house and took the lives of two kidnappers who had been terrorizing the countryside. I argued with my masters that I had done the world a service, but they did not agree. Still, I value their teachings and take them with me.

In Baldur's Gate, I found my way onto the city guard. I do not have many friends, but it is an excellent opportunity to help those in need within the city and bring evildoers to justice.

I was assigned by the guard to be an emissary to a magical city that had recently reappeared after centuries of being missing. The other guards snickered that they were now to be rid of me, but I am assured by my superiors that it is due to my martial prowess that I am being sent to protect the mission. I left two guards with broken jaws before I left. It felt good. They were not kind individuals, and the pain will give them a chance to reflect on their purpose in life.

What does it mean to be at peace? I do not know. I have been taught the way to enlightened equilibrium, but I find myself unable to stay on the path.

I am angry. No, not angry. Anger is shallow. What I feel is deeper, simmering rage against the injustices I see in the world. I want to purge these evils from the world, but in doing so I lose the peace that helps me to refine my martial craft. It is over this that I argued with my teachers.

I have learned to hone that rage into a razor point and guide it through my fists. In this release I find a measure of peace. But it is still rage that drives my actions, not serenity.

And so I meditate that I might better understand this balance, even as I find greatest solace in delivering pain to those who deserve it.

The chance to protect the interests of the city with a new people is exciting to me. I will not disappoint those who sent me, nor myself, for it is only our inner valuation of our actions that truly matters.

The trip to the city - called Myriad - is eventful. A fire elemental powering the flying ship we are on escapes its confines and begins running amok on the ship's deck. We quell it, and I am able to save one of the crew from falling overboard.

I forget myself, though. There are other emissaries. They do not seem to have the same discipline as me, though I am respectful of the fact that I am not the best choice for diplomatic relations with a new people. I have much to learn of the world.

Lady Jackie Sintara is a noble of the city. She informs us that she is our party's leader. This information was not shared with us upon our conscription, but perhaps they merely forgot to tell us.

Lady Jackie tells me that I have been appointed bodyguard along with another, Palamandrix, or Pal. He is a warrior of some skill, though his gruff demeanor suggests that of opportunistic mercenaries I have known.

Greer is a lanky, odd-looking goliath yet is surprisingly nimble. Lady Jackie informs us that he's to be her personal assistant. This again was not told to us, but Greer seems to accept the role happily. He frightens many people. I am familiar with this feeling, though not because I am ugly like he is, but rather because of my imposing size and obvious strength. I could crush most people like mice, though I do not wish to. Regardless, it is a good opportunity to see beyond physical trappings and into the heart of the person.

Lastly, an emissary from the city's druids, Louise, is with us. She is...unorthodox. Her smell is pungent. I must learn to tolerate it, though. This will provide a good opportunity to remain focused through distraction on our journey. She must be a high-ranking druid, in any case. I shall learn more of her as I am able.

We arrive in the city and are greeted by one of the merchants with whom we are to create relations. I trust nothing will go awry, and will ensure it does not if necessary.

We spend the night in the merchant's mansion. Louise tries to view the city as a bird, but finds her efforts blocked by magical wards around the windows. We complain but are told this is the norm for the hyper-magical city, to prevent theft and spying.

A meeting with another merchant family is arranged, and we speak at some length to the merchant here about the strange economy of Myriad. Many things we'd find exotic are commonplace here, and other common items are rare.

This should bode well for trade, though I do not do much of the talking.

The entire city runs on magic. Elementals power many of the city's overarching systems, and for example all food is magically created, not grown.

The city is split into regions, most of which are run by guilds or factions that correspond to different magic schools, such as bards, wizards, clerics, sorcerers and warlocks. Wizards used to be the only magic users in the city, but that was centuries ago.

These factions all have representatives on the city's council, though it is led by someone called Arlon and headed by the wizards.

Later that day we are given free walk of the city, and a day and a half before our next meeting.

END SESSION 1

Player Thoughts

As you have likely already figured out, these reports are being written in the first person, from the perspective of my character.

Rynn is blunt and to the point, and sees this transparency as a kindness. Any unkind observations are matter-of-fact in her mind.

I also made the decision that she doesn't speak in contractions. It gives a sharp cadence to her speech that matches the character well. I am trying to emulate this in my written session reports here, but will undoubtedly slip at times.

I'm enjoying the character thus far. I've created a strength-based monk that leans into some of the strengths of both classes, and also has considerable survivability and damage soak potential.

The backstory implication is that Rynn has been shuffled off by everyone she's come into contact with, but she doesn't always realize this.

I don't want to be the "face" of the party, so to speak, and usually avoid such responsibilities as a player. Lady Jackie foisting various roles on us is good out-of-character fun, since we all sort of accepted our assigned roles in-character without question even though it was preposterously presumptuous of Lady Jackie. Acting as "the muscle" should hopefully give me some chances to intervene in situations where I might otherwise not have anything to do.

Cowman Baloney Face

THE NEVERENDING SAGA #2

A SCREAM INTO THE VOID AS THE SHIP BLASTS OFF
BY MATT STEVENS

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(ARTWORK IN THIS ISSUE BY SCOTT KURTZ, B.KLIBAN)



I managed to lose track of time, so this mini-zine is getting in right before deadline. Onward!

GODWACKING: MEMORIES OF A CONVENTION GAME

Conventions are the IgTheme of the month, so I'll talk about the only convention game I ever ran: "Godwacking" at GenCon in 2003 or 2004.

Godwacking -- name taken from a Steely Dan song -- was a gonzo 3E D&D adventure for 75th level characters. Yes, 75th. I had run a version for my D&D group; for the convention I used a mix of their characters and my own.

The premise was Zeus's avatar went to a new dimension and sired a son, Indra, who later killed him in a Soma-intoxicated rage.* Zeus told the PCs to drag Indra back to Olympus for a righteous spanking.

The PCs landed in the Vedic heaven, got some helpful advice from Varuna, then beat up a bunch of Maruts. Then they faced Rudra with a bow & arrow, and that led to my favorite moment in the game.

Forkman Freezer was one of my old characters, a gnome sorcerer who loved a good time. I upgraded him to level 75, and said that he used epic spells like Solar Eclipse to impress girls in bars. Somehow the player caught his spirit immediately.

He taunted Rudra: "Aw, think we're scared of your little arrows?!" He pulled his shirt open. "Go ahead and shoot me!"

Rudra shrugged and shot him. I checked the stats and asked Forkman, "Can you make a Fort save of 65?"

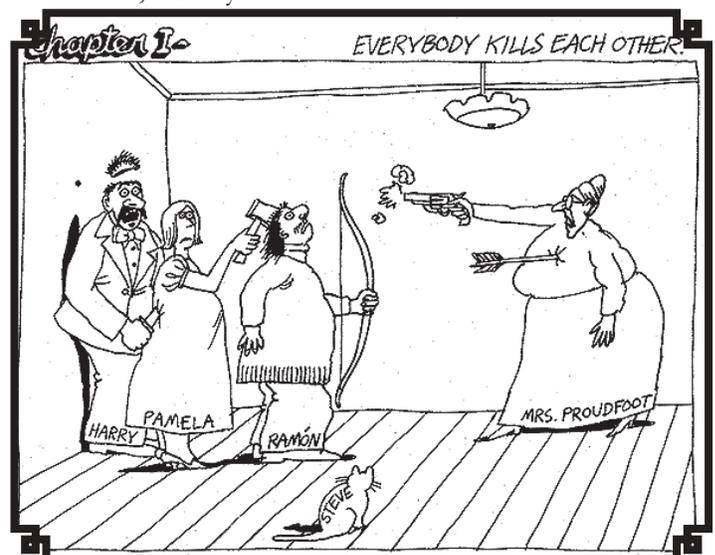
"Uh, no."

"OK! You explode into bloody fragments."

After that they showed a bit more caution.

Eventually they arrived at Indra's palace, and fought him along with other Vedic deities (I don't remember which ones). The fight ended when the Gibbering Orb wizard used an epic spell to trap Indra in an unbreakable force cage. Indra gave up, the dead PCs got True Rezzed and went to Olympus for their rewards.

* In some accounts Indra was the son of the sky god Dyaus Pitar, whose name is cognate with Zeus Pater and Jupiter. So it all makes sense! (Not really.)



REVISED DICE SYSTEM FOR BASIC ROLE-PLAYING (AND RELATED SYSTEMS)

This is an option I've talked about before, so forgive me if you've already heard it.

A classic question with *RuneQuest* and other systems in the *Basic Roleplaying* family is what to do when two characters have combat skills approaching 95%. While attack rolls will succeed 95% of the time, they'll also be parried 95% of the time -- meaning less than 1 in 20 actually connects! This can lead to loooooong fights.

A common kludge, these days, is to compare the actual attack & parry rolls, and say that the blow connects if the attack roll is higher than the parry roll (e.g., if the attack roll was 35 and the parry was 27, and both rolls were under their skill scores, the attack would connect). I really dislike this: It's contrary to the low-roll-is-better spirit of the rules, and it replaces the action narrative ("I hit!" "She parries!") with a numbers narrative ("I hit with a 34!").

I have an alternative: **Don't** use D100 for all of your skill rolls. Use different dice depending on the challenge of your action, and in combat, give players the option to *chose the difficulty of their attacks*, thus maximizing their opportunities to land blows.

So with this alternative you would roll D20, D40, D100, D200, D400 or D1,000 for skill rolls, with D100 remaining the default. As usual, any roll under/equal skill is success, under/equal 1/5th your skill is a "special", and under/equal 1/20th your skill is a critical.

I think this would work better than flat % bonuses or penalties; you don't have to recalculate the chance of success and, more importantly, you don't have to change Special and Critical values whenever the modifiers change.

Fumbles *would* change, but that's easy to fix: Whenever you roll a number in the Auto Failure/Fumble range (shown below), make a second skill roll. If the second roll fails, you fumble.

Action	Die	Auto Failure/Fumble
Simple	D20	20
Basic	D40	39-40
Standard	D100	96-100
Expert	D200	191-200
Master	D400	381-400
Grand Master	D1000	951-1000

In combat, I'd suggest that attackers *chose* the complexity of their attacks (Simple, Basic, Standard, etc., as shown in the chart above). The defender would then have to make a parry/dodge roll *of the same difficulty*. Players would naturally pick challenge dice that are roughly double their skill levels (e.g., if their skill was 50, they'd roll D100), so their chance of doing damage would be close to 25% per round.

One obvious issue is that D40s *don't exist*, as far as I know. Unless someone manufactures them, we would have to use the dreaded D4s, assume 4s are 0s and use them with D10s for the necessary numbers.

NEXT MONTH

Comments on E&A #3-5 (hopefully), a *Top Secret* adventure diagram and God knows what else. Take care!

Attacks of Opportunity

Issue 5, Dylan Capel

Reading

The Bone Ships

Having found the *The Bone Ships* trilogy was available in my library I immediately borrowed the books and devoured *The Call of the Bone Ship's*.

Mild spoilers I had thought that despite going through a lot of dangerous situations the protagonist was remarkable unscathed in the first book. Well by the end of the second book he has lost a lover, a leg, his community, been badly injured, has his vocal cords crushed and acquired a terminal disease.

A lot of the crew are also killed and one of things the author does really well is avoid the sense that likeable characters have plot armour or that anyone may die at any second. Instead there is a real sense of the danger of being aboard a fighting ship and a skill in the writing of introducing characters with a sense that people in the background are being promoted or entering into service for their own reasons. There's not that sense of having a storyline interrupted. New characters are given deft sketches of their personality and are connected into the characters and structures we already know. I think the plot armour is done subtly so nothing key goes unsaid but characters don't often get the chance to flourish.

The book hinges around a mystery and therefore is quite a thrilling adventure as the crew of the ship careen around in search of answers with some great locations.

And so onto the third book *The Bone Ship's Wake*, which is a clever pun. Chapeau, R. J. Barker. This featured torture which is never my favourite part of any book.

I'm coming towards the end now but there were two elements that really stood out for me in this book. The first was that we have external view of the characters for the first time and it provides an interesting contrast about how the characters, who are essentially underdogs, see themselves and the way they are perceived by people who are still within the social structure. What seems reasonable to a bunch of people who are constantly on the run at sea on a warship is shown to be quite terrifying and arbitrary to those on the shore.

The other is a classic age of sail chase that is both life and death and also conducted very slowly over the course of weeks. Both sides have the same wind to take advantage of and the importance of storms and fog in attempting to escape the long sight lines of the ocean are all clear to the reader. With both sides watching one another through telescopes and constantly plotting their speeds it has a chess-like quality where the outcome can become predictable which results in the losing side scheming to regain the advantage before it is too late.

Gamebooks

Valley of Bones starts with some ho-hum captured as slaves and made to fight in the arena. Being kidnapped or shipwrecked is a classic way to have the characters be strangers in a strange land. This is going to morph into an open world book but for the

moment it is focusing on becoming king of the hill in the gladiatorial arena and introducing you slowly to the combat system.

One thing that is a bit different is that there is a romance section. During one fight two of the characters in my party had a bit of a moment, which certainly adds a layer of something different over the implied world.

Links

- Valley of Bones: <https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/316365/the-valley-of-bones>

Comments

Meta

It was interesting to read people's comments about layouts, I understand people not wanting to particularly change their existing setups but, but the inverted z of reading down, down, up, down, down really is boring whatever the claims of the virtual of the small column. I think it might be different if I had a screen that was tall enough to display the entire column but if I want to not use my reading glasses that doesn't really work on a laptop.

I also thought a little bit about a curious holdover in my zine where I feel loathe to leave blank space at the end of my zine despite the fact that in the digital edition where there is no cost associated with the incomplete page there is no reason to worry about that any more.

This issue I tried to start using Typst to create the zine. Partly because of people's recommendations, partly as an attempt to de-Google-ify and do a bit of resistance against big tech.

I immediately fell into a rabbit hole of fonts as my previous choice (Lora) wasn't capable of presenting italics and bold text. I like my chosen alternatives but when you change you're fiddling with font sizes and then days of writing time are being lost.

I think the next step (if this experiment works) is to try and add Pandoc to the mix as I use Markdown as the basis for a lot of my web and other writing and a lot of the Typst syntax feels unnecessarily different or clunky. Creating underlined links for example felt painful.

The only thing I am missing from the Google Docs version of the zine is the grammar checker as often it would pick up clumsy syntax in my initial drafts. Perhaps I'll need to be a bit more disciplined from now on...

Plankwell collective

A bit of a catchup thread...

I felt quite sorry for the Canon having his memories manipulated so forcefully by the Captain. I felt we saw a new side to both characters in this episode and the vocabulary was horrific. The legal meetings were a welcome return to the bureaucracy I think is central to this story. If Gus thinks a lot has happened in four days then he'd be horrified at the number of episodes that have passed, no doubt.

I enjoyed the interaction with the lawyer and I thought it was interesting to contemplate what exactly Plankwell is trying to achieve at this point as he seems torn between leaving and knowing that something is amiss here.

I kind of agreed with Conrad and the gurus of pacing regarding the revelations about the nobility psychers. The first reveal was very exciting and a kind of *Aha!* moment but then there was too much information given. From a drama point of view it would have been better to let a few questions brew about how exactly in the palace is a psionic and who isn't.

I immediately thought that the Imperium's nobility makes a lot more sense if they are also psionic. It then makes the rivalry with the Zhodani a lot more intriguing as you have the hypocrisy of the same system of government: one open, one covert. It'd make for a hell of a conspiracy theory.

The AI situation is also quite interesting from a psionic point of view as the machines I presume are immune to psionic influence. By putting Olav in a robot body I thought there was an idea of creating something quite immune to Zhodani influence but more adaptive than a robot. Presumably though such things would be an equal threat to the psionic nobles.

Amika's romance sub-plot feels like a little playback of unhealthy current day relationships with chat bots.

The apology scene for the guards was interesting, we all know Gus is generally sympathetic but from a story point of view being able to kill off the entire conspiracy possibility in a single scene due to mind reading. The question of who is failing who and culpability with systems of oppression was an interesting one to raise but there's not really a character that embodies that idea or forces the characters to interact with the concept. Unless of course Major Tribon is being set up for an entry here.

Are we about to have a lot of detailed pouring of dispositions to the Tribunal looking for clues about what is being hidden here?

Lisa Padol

I very much agree with Pendragon having interesting failures outside of combat. One of our funniest (and most characterful) so far was a knight, recently injured in battle witnessing some younger knights and squires playing a dangerous game of knife play around the hand, eagerly giving it a go to demonstrate her skills with the blade and then promptly stabbing her hand, passing out and going to the infirmary and completely missing the battle celebrations.

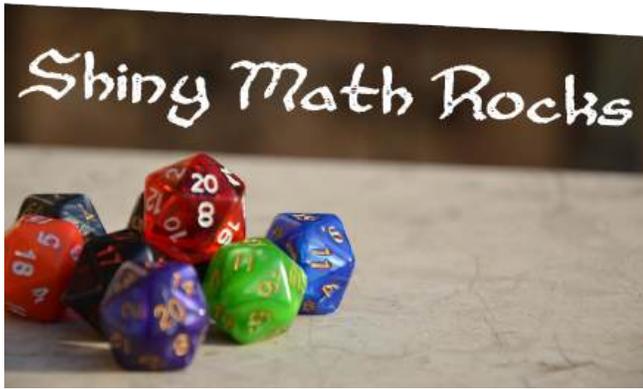
Combat feels quite different with your character, renowned for their skill with a sword, failing to scratch peasants with knives or being unceremoniously dismounted and almost kicked to death before they can be rescued. It still might be an interesting story but the Arthurian overtones don't quite match up.

Cloud Emperess wasn't that lethal for us but we didn't take on anything with didn't have an advantage over either in terms of numbers or positioning.

Matt Stevens

Your friend's childhood drawings had a lot of charm but he really seemed to have a bit of a hatred of noses.

Regarding games like *Fiasco*, the point is to create a character who believes that despite all the evidence *they* will successfully perform the heist. It's not a game about people who have good judgement and accurate perceptions of risks and their abilities. Playing that kind of deluded, self-destructive character doesn't appeal to everyone though.



SMR Issue #2 November 2025

[Erica L Frank](#) (call me Elf); [Eris Lord Freedom@itch.io](mailto:Eris.Lord.Freedom@itch.io)

Wanderhome

My Tuesday game group is starting a Wanderhome game, and we're all hyped to try it. We were looking for something different, a break from our current Dresden Files Accelerated game, and I suggested Wanderhome, which I'd picked up in several bundles:

You own this game

- [Download](#) Included in [TTRPGs for Palestine](#) 1 year ago
- [Download](#) Included in [TTRPGs for Trans Rights in Florida](#) 2 years ago
- [Download](#) Included in [TTRPGs to Support HIV+ Children in India](#) 2 years ago
- [Download](#) Included in [Indie Bundle for Abortion Funds](#) 3 years ago
- [Download](#) Included in [TTRPGs for Trans Rights in Texas!](#) 3 years ago

- The game: possumcreekgames.itch.io/wanderhome
- The free starter version: [wanderhome-playkit](#)
- Expansion set, semi-official additions from the Kickstarter: [wanderhome-stretch-goals](#)
- Additional content, mostly unofficial made by other players: itch.io/physical-games/tag-wanderhome

Wanderhome is a GMless (or, GM-optional) game set in a pastoral world of talking animals, built on the "Belonging Outside Belonging" system (also known as "No Dice No Masters"), with no stats, no combat, no conflict resolution system of any sort.

There's a token economy. In most BOB systems, you get a token by doing something that leaves you vulnerable or inflicts a disadvantage, and you spend one to change the situation in a way that favors you. That is not how Wanderhome works.

Get A Token Whenever You:

- Inconvenience yourself to help someone else.
- Give someone something you hold dear.

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- Do something kind without getting anything in return.
- Leave an offering to a small or forgotten god.
- Speak your true feelings on a subject.
- Take a moment to bask in the grandeur of the world, and describe it to the table.
- Take a moment to watch a tiny moment of beauty, and describe it to the table.
- Take a moment to marvel at something no one has ever seen before, and ask the table to describe it.

Spend A Token In Order To:

- Provide a solution for an aspect of a material or immediate problem.
- Ease someone's pain, if only for a moment.
- Keep someone safe from the difficulties of the world.
- Allow someone to connect with you on a personal level.
- Give something that has the potential to change someone fundamentally.
- Reveal something hidden about the person in front of you, and ask them what it is.
- Tell the table something important about the place you're in
- Listen to the shared wisdom of the small and forgotten gods, and ask the table what they tell you.

There are other ways to gain and spend tokens; each playbook (class, roughly) has an action they can take that earns someone else a token, and many of the kith (npcs) have traits that give tokens.

Examples: The Exile can always ask: "Can I tell you a story about my home?" They get a token if they say yes. A *many-faced* shapeshifter may be able to

look exactly like another character. If someone wants to spot the difference, they must spend a token.

We've had two pre-session-zero sessions – the whole group hasn't been available for a few weeks, so we've been designing characters and poking through the rulebook, because it turns out that “rules-light” and “no combat” does not mean “no structure to the storytelling, just vibes.” There's a lot of worldbuilding in the rulebook, and a structure to locations and NPCs, and a style of play that we're trying to figure out.

Because although this group is fluent in both Fate and Monster of the Week, none of us have tried a game where the basic premises include “there will be NO COMBAT. Anywhere. This is a world recovering from war and everyone has decided Not Doing That Again.”

The characters are on the road together, and each of them is looking for their home. Some may be eager to find it; some may be planning for a long time traveling with no specific plans to settle, ever.

Why are they together? Well, the playbooks cover some of that. Each playbook has a different set of questions. These are the Teacher's:

Ask 1 to the left and 1 to the right.

- What did I teach you when you were younger?
- What have you shown me about the world?
- How do you reassure me when I'm at my wit's end?
- What do you know that I can't hope to understand?

After sorting out our characters (or, mostly; we had two people wanting to play The Peddler, so one switched to The Caretaker, but the other one has now switched to The Smith from the stretch goals and we're waiting to see if the first wants to switch back), and poking at the rules to try to figure out how the token system works in actual play, we've been trying to figure out how the player dynamics work. With no GM to say “you've been talking enough; it's someone else's turn,” how do you manage the spotlight? How do you negotiate where to go next, if the party doesn't agree?

(The answer: You work it out. Presumably you all want to play together. Figure out how that works for your group.)

We threw around some ideas – one of the players is an actor, and improv groups have methods for this kind of thing – but mostly decided we're winging it for now. None of us want to own/control the (virtual) table; none of us want to be the constant center of attention; all of us have said it's okay to interrupt us.

We have the option of a temporary or rotating Guide (it doesn't use the word “game master”; the Guide is not “in charge” and can't directly affect the players) who will play the locations and kith.

One thing the other regular GMs are looking forward to: Since the players are also playing the various kith, there can be NPC conversations that aren't just the GM talking to himself.

One of the players said he'd play this either with people who've never played ttrpgs, or people who were veterans of many systems over many years. My thought: I absolutely would not try this game with someone who discovered D&D less than 5 years ago via Critical Role. (If I wanted them to try Wanderhome, I'd first ease them into more player-controlled games with a Powered by the Apocalypse game like Monster of the Week, and then try Fate where the players actively collaborate on worldbuilding.)

Wanderhome is a game about low-tech road trips. How many road trip stories do you know that are focused on combat? On what conflicts people had and how they were resolved? It's not that combat can't happen (although it's likely to be very rare), or that other conflicts don't happen (theft and retribution, jealousy and recriminations, angry drunk wants to punch the world) – but they're not *important* to the story. There's no mechanics for them for the same reasons there's no mechanics for sharing the wonders of the world in D&D. It can happen – it can happen a lot, if the group wants – but it's not the point of the game.

It's been a few weeks since I started this – and our group has not officially started playing yet. We've all chosen playbooks and filled out the basics, but we've been missing at least one person per week and we want to start this together.

We have sorted out some things. We had a worldbuilding session where we just asked questions about the world and decided on the answers.

- Is there money? There used to be; now most places use barter, although the old currency is still recognized and some places will accept it.
- Are there/have there ever been humans in this world? No.
- Language(s)? We all speak “common” or whatever; we are not dealing with language difficulties.
- How long ago was The Great War? About 20-ish years – long enough that plenty of people remember it but we have a whole generation who's grown up without exposure to war.
- How long do animals live? Aaaah... we're putting them all in human years.

- How big are they? Roughly human sized, maybe ranging from hobbit-ish size to troll-ish size.
- Are there flying bugs big enough to ride? Sure, for the smaller critters – 4’ dragonflies; 3’ grasshoppers that can leap over trees; LALALALA fantasy world we sneer at your cube-square law.
- What kind of magic is there? Mythic, not structured – there are magic items but spellcasters are very rare.

And so on. The important part is, we sorted out that we don’t need any specific “lines and veils” list – we know our general content range from past games; none of us want to bring in Extreme Gore or Actual Sex, and we’re all good with “this minor thing bugs me, can we do something else?”

We’ve been holding off on the “ask each other these questions” part of character creation until we have our full set of players. We are so looking forward to actually getting started with the gaming.

Wanderhome Natures

Since the group is planning on playing Wanderhome and none of us have played anything like it, I looked up some of the additional content. We decided to allow the “Guest Playbooks & Natures” that was published as a stretch goal for the kickstarter, since those were approved by the original creators. And while I downloaded all the additional free content I could find, we’re less sure about using those.

I started listing all the natures. (That’s “location descriptions.” Each nature has a brief description, three things it can do (one of which can grant tokens), a cluster of potential aesthetic elements from which you pick two, and some folklore. For the last two, there’s always a “make up something yourself” option.

The main book has 36 natures: 6 of each of the 6 categories. (Comfortable, Verdant, Liminal, Sprawling, Lonely, Desolate)

Garden

A *garden* is a [comfortable] place where everyone has plenty and the world is overflowing with gifts. *When you arrive at this place, decide what this place has in abundance.*

This place can always:

- Describe the abundance all around us.
- Threaten the health and vitality of the abundance.
- Ask: “What do you need most right now?” Give them a token if they can’t find it here.

Choose 2 aesthetic elements:

- ☼ Trees overburdened with fruit
- ☼ Outrageously large gourds
- ☼ Prismatic butterflies
- ☼ Carefully-trimmed hedges
- ☼ Irrigating fountains
- ☼ A kind soul unfamiliar with the hardship of the world
- ☼ Something else of your own invention

Choose 1 folklore about this place:

- ☼ The peach tree’s prophetic blossom
- ☼ The old god in the old tree
- ☼ The burning of the corn woman
- ☼ Something else of your own invention

There is no nice, simple collection of fan-made natures. There are an additional 18 in the guest playbooks PDF (although they mostly don’t mention what categories they are), and... over a hundred more scattered around itch.io, sometimes on their own as game listings, sometimes mixed in with a playbook or module setting. Some are better-designed than others. I have a spreadsheet with almost 250 natures listed.

*A **geyser** is a **verdant** place where buried secrets and bubbling hot water rise from the depths.*

–Yes, good; we can add geysers to our world with this description.

*A **trove** is a **lonely** nature full of treasures, trinkets and other fascinating things that could never be found elsewhere.*

–Okay, we can also use this.

*The **Jam Factory** is a place where animal-folk work together to create something for all to enjoy. When you arrive at this place, decide what makes this factory different to any other you’ve ever seen.*

–This may be more specific than we will want.

Also, what kind of nature is this? Comfortable, like a workshop? Sprawling, like a carnival?

*The **tree** is a mysterious location, full of the weight of the past and its trauma. It is a grim and misty place, and the Tree itself dominates both literally and emotionally. The bark is heavy and cold and smooth, and difficult to climb. From the trunk project the handles of axes, swords, saws, and knives, their blades swallowed ages ago by the knotted wood. And every one of them had failed in its purpose. The Tree still stands.*

–Um what? This is... this is not “tree” as a location; it’s some specific concept for a tree that the author is sharing. It’s interesting, but not something where you can say “this village has a **tree**,” the same way you could say “this village has a **garden**,” using the nature from the main book.

Solo TTRPG: Call from the Past

I joined a group that's focused on "we'll pick a solo game every month, play it separately, and talk about it on Discord." For October, they picked [Call from the Past by magenta bird](#), since it's a spooky-themed game.

It uses a deck of cards and 2d6; the premise is that you have inherited your (creepy) family home, and as you explore it, you discover lost (creepy) family secrets.

The premise is good. The actual game is not well-written; I'm pretty sure English is not the author's first language, and some of the phrasing is odd. But it's a simple enough system that it wasn't hard to figure out.



Call from the Past: solo witchy exploration game

I wasn't sure how to submit a playthrough into to a game jam, and wound up converting it to a short story.

[Family Home... Deadly Secrets](#)



The link includes both the converted-story version (about 4500 words) and the raw playthrough, with dice rolls and notes from the game rules.

I spent more time trying to find pictures for the listing on itch.io than I did converting the playthrough to story format. (I didn't change much of the text, just reorganized the formatting, fixed the sloppy writing where I stopped writing in sentences and just threw down bullet points, and so on.)

The title is hokey. It's not meant to be impressive or even particularly compelling; it's "I had less than 72 hours to convert a raw playthrough doc to something I could post on itch and not feel horribly embarrassed about it later."

I'm aware that E&A allows for game writeups. I'm not entirely sure that includes solo games, where the line between "game" and "just fiction" gets pretty thin sometimes.

IgTheme: Game Conventions

The good, the bad, and the weird.

I have more thoughts on this that are probably going in a later issue, because it's the evening of the 20th and I haven't found time all month to write for this.

My first gaming convention was DunDraCon, in... 1988 or so? Maybe as late as 1990? I met a couple of guys at the bus stop on my way there, later found them in a game of *Illuminati*, and hit off a long-term friendship. Dated both of them in turn; they were both part of my life for several decades after that.

My other notable gaming convention: Origins 1994, in San Jose. We (Chris & I, one of the guys mentioned above) picked up a copy of *Immortal: The Invisible War*, hot off the presses (it was supposed to be there Friday but didn't arrive until Saturday afternoon). Very shiny. Mostly black with white text. I heard later that it "didn't get the attention it deserved" – it had good reviews, but not many players.

Note to indie game designers: Make sure your character sheet isn't black-with-white-text and colored sections. Color printing used to be expensive.

We went to a few panels, and heard the running reports of the Starfleet Battles tournament, which ran overly long. Apparently the two finalists were both scout-evasion type ships and were circling the edge of the board rather than engaging. At one point the judges were talking about shrinking the gameboard by one hex every few turns just to force them into direct conflict.

I got my Black Lotus card for Magic the Gathering signed. I still have it. I gather they are now worth an absolutely ridiculous amount of money.

I have attended very few gaming conventions; they were often running against sci-fi conventions I was attending, and otherwise, I had limited enough

money to not go, especially since I dislike the most popular games.

I don't play D&D or anything like it. I don't like survival-focused games. I don't particularly like gaming with strangers. I like the game convention atmosphere and the dealer room, but for the ones that are focused around "sign up for a 6-person game with a GM whose play style you don't know and where you have no idea if any of the other players is actually That Guy, You Know, The One Who..." I am not convinced I would have more fun doing the actual gaming than I would just hanging around in the public areas.

I do check out the gaming areas of non-gaming conventions. I was a panelist on the gaming track at Worldcon in Seattle this year, and I'm trying to get LACon to provide some solo TTRPGs in its open gaming area. And possibly I'll be a panelist again; it's fascinating seeing Worldcons start to acknowledge that gaming is a part of the science fiction fandom community. (Most of that is focused on video games, but Seattle had a lovely panel about solo TTRPGs.)

I'm considering going to KublaCon next year, since BayCon is no longer on Memorial Day weekend. (I can't do DunDraCon anymore; my slash fanfic convention is either that weekend or close enough to it that I can't do both.)

No Comments on E&A #5

No comments; still reading; this month has been overwhelmingly busy. I am going to pretend that somehow the rest of November and beginning of December will be less busy and I will have more leisure time to enjoy reading gaming fanzines. Riiiiiiight.

Still trying to sort out something like a schedule for reading & writing for this. Monthly seems... awfully fast.

That said, I may have more time soon. My "5 maybe 6 online games a week" have slowed down. One has outright canceled (GURPS SCP Foundation); one has not met in a few weeks and may be stopping (Forged in the Dark); the two on Saturday, I'm going to quit because I'm not really enjoying one, and the other is mid-day and I've just found a volunteer group that meets on Saturdays (Bay Area Alternative Press, aka BAAP pronounced Bay-App) and I'd like to get involved with that. It wouldn't need to be every Saturday, but it's not viable to do every-other-week of the Fate-Fantasy game.

That leaves me with two: Soon-to-be Wanderhome on Tuesday nights, and going-to-be a pirate-focused GMless game ("[Beneath Pirate Flags](#)")

on Friday nights. (And the once-a-month or so GURPS game in person.) I would like to believe that's substantial free time. I'm sure it's not and I will waste it doing frivolous things like shopping or dishes. Or maybe learning to drive.

(Who am I trying to kid. The MDZS Big Bang just opened with several dozen stories. I have six new novel-length fanfics on my ereader. I have never even considered Wei Wuxian/Nie Huiasang as a pairing before. I have so much reading to do.)

My WIP folder has three different [Untamed/Mo Dao Zu Shi](#)-related RPG projects: A mystery for Brindlewood Bay, a Jumpchain writeup for the world, and an adventure writeup for [Protect the Child](#). That's in addition to the Quill setting for it that I've already published.

I am perhaps a bit obsessed with this series? (No. I am not obsessed. I have a perfectly reasonable amount of interest in the show/animated series/books/fan-made content related to these characters and their world. They do not take up more than 20% of my waking hours. Certainly not more than 30%. Plz ignore the more than 500 fanfics on my ereader.)

...I am very glad I don't play D&D so I don't have to figure out what [this](#) is about:



Nephilim Builds | Wangxian [Wei Wuxian & Lan Wangji] (Mo Dao Zu Shi)

I promise there is actually a complex and compelling story about them. They haven't captured widespread fandom interest just because they're pretty.

(But they are very pretty.)



THE DRAGON'S BEARD

DECEMBER 2025

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I can be found as pdzoch at
boardgamegeek.com,
rpggeek.com, enworld.org,
fantasy-grounds.com, discord.com,
and boardgamearena.com.



FURLOUGH FILLERS

Seven week of government furlough has ended and I headed back into the office and spent a few days just picking up the wreckage of neglect. Everyone was glad that the furlough was over and was eager to get back to work on tasks that appear neglected while we were gone. None of the deadlines changed and we lost a lot of time to get projects completed. We have a lot of catching up to do and less time to get it done.

No moss has grown beneath my feet while on furlough. House maintenance, cleaning, and minor repairs remained top priorities unless it required a specialist to be hired. Those will have to wait until paycheck start flowing again. I finally got our iRobot Roomba properly working. At first, it took forever to get our floor mapped properly. The robot got stuck all the time, so it had to be rescued. I would get a notice on my phone that it was stuck and I had to find it and rescue it – it was usually stuck under the couch or cabinet. It was stuck so often, we named the robot Timmy and the alert on my phone Lassie. It did not help that the house was always full of people all hours of the day and keeping everything off the floor for a full day was a major inconvenience, so someone would invariably need a chair back on the floor, drop their bags in the middle of the floor, or move guards that I put down to keep Timmy from crawling under the couch and cabinets again. By the time I got the floor properly mapped and labeled, I could have vacuumed, swept, and mopped the floor ten times over. Now, I can finally schedule Timmy to vacuum select rooms on scheduled days, so the vacuum runs are shorter and only parts of the house are inconvenienced instead of the whole house.

My daughter got her car back from the shop and she was thrilled to have her own car back. The entire back end looks new and drives great. Unfortunately, during one of my errands, I was rear-ended. It was rainy and foggy on a country road, and at an intersection known for fast traveling trucks. The damage to my vehicle was minimal; much more was done to the vehicle that hit me. The other driver was at fault and was significantly apologetic for the accident. My

car will be in the shop for the next month. I hope I have it back before Christmas.

I hosted the Battle of Agincourt in 15mm miniatures using Medieval Tactics rules for my local wargame group – pictures later in this zine. I finished building the terrain for that game and knocked out some more for my Bolt Action game. I also use the forests for my D&D wilderness games. Pictures also later in this zine. I started painting one of my Bolt Action armies, a United States Parachute unit from the 101st Airborne Division. I hope to have them finished soon. If I am lucky, I will get a German unit done before my son comes home from college for the holidays and we can get a game or two in.

My Saturday D&D game on Fantasy Grounds Unity completed four of the [Dragon Delves](#) adventures before moving back to our regular game. Dragon Delves was only meant as a break for our regular DM who was preparing to run the [Tomb of Annihilation](#) on FGU. My Sunday OSRIC game on Fantasy Grounds Unity wrapped up its exploration of the [Secrets of Bone Hill](#). Our choice for the next adventure has been a challenging process. The group conducted a poll on Discord and it came down salvaging a shipwreck (X1: The Isle of Dread) or clearing a Dwarven mine (L3: Deep Dwarven Delve) – of course, we do not know which module for sure is being run as the DM only describes the mission type and location. We chose the shipwreck because it was closer that the mine and we figured we could collect some treasure before proceeded the rest of the way to the other side of the map. It turned out that we could only book passage one way to the island where the shipwrecks were and the shipwrecks were actually not on the island but on reefs miles away. Disappointed that we could not reach any of the reefs easily, we trekked a portion of the island for two weeks – the length of time our supplies would hold out and when we scheduled the ship to pick us up. We found nothing in all that time, not even much wildlife to enable us to live of the land longer. Feeling that we were not equipped or resourced to explore the vast island, we departed the island and reassessed our mission. We took another poll and decided to leave the island and proceed to the Dwarven mine, much to the dismay of the DM who was not prepared for that adventure. Much of what went into our decision was our reluctance to strand ourselves on an island without means to depart or sustain ourselves. There would be no healing or leveling up while we were there, no purchasing of supplies, and we simply did not have enough gold to invest in the exploration.

I stalled on *Skyrim*, again. I enjoy it immensely, but it takes an investment of time that I am spending on other project. Not much board gaming either. I am still playing on Board Game Arena, but not much it hitting the table. I had wanted to dedicate a whole day to just playing a solo game and knocking out a bunch of plays, most likely [Arkham Horror: The Card Game](#) or [Fallout](#), but I never got around to it. It was a missed opportunity to rack up some plays at the table, even if it was just by myself.

I'm halfway through the *Black List* and – though I am still enjoying it – it has taken some unexpected turns in the story and character development that is causing some dissonance with character consistency and believably (no matter how much I try to suspend it). I'm sticking with it and will see it through the end, though at a much slower pace now that I am back at work.

THE CONFLICT OF GOLD AND EXPERIENCE

Gold is Experience. Experience takes Gold. And a vicious cycle ensues.

An unexpected session occurred lately during my OSRIC game recently when the DM was growing visibly and audibly frustrated by the delays to proceeding on to the next adventure by the disjointed leveling of characters by the players. I was somewhat surprised by this as the DM was an ardent supporter and enforcer of the very rules that resulted in the situation that frustrated him.

Part of what exacerbated the situation was the DM's insistence that we keep game mechanics out of the player discussion at the table. This means class, levels, hit points, alignment, bonuses, etc. out of the discussion. This is understandable to allay suspicion of deceit and dishonesty of any thief character, though having thieves' tools and being the primary lock-picker and trap disarmer pretty much gives it away. Though it does create some funny scenes in game such as the one character who claims to be almost every class in the game at one point or another.

OSRIC and AD&D share the same experience point system. Experience is gained for slaying monsters and gaining treasure. Treasure earns experience at 1 gold piece (gp) value to 1 experience point (xp). Once a character has earned enough experience, the character can train to advance a level. Training takes 1-4 weeks (plus any additional modifier the DM adds) to train. In AD&D 1st Edition, the cost is 1,500 gp per current level, per week, which could result in a 6,000gp cost just to reach 2nd level. In OSRIC, the cost is 1,500gp per level

earned, which is better, but also requires additional money for cost of living each week during training (which is only an issue if money is tight). But here is where the conflict starts.

Characters of different classes require different amount of experience points to advance a level. The thief requires the least xp to advance – only 1,251xp for 2nd level – while the paladin requires the most – 2,751xp for 2nd level. Since gold is required to advance a level, and gold is xp, characters reach xp thresholds simply by gold alone. This is true for every character in their first advancement to 2nd level. At a training cost of 3000 gp, which is also 3000xp, character need not slay any beast to earn xp, just steal its gold for it (though a paladin may loathe such an act).

Level	Training Cost Gold	Aggregate Gold	Thief XP	Paladin XP	Cleric XP	Magic-User XP	Fighter XP
1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
2	3000	3000	1251	2751	1501	2501	2001
3	4500	7500	2501	5501	3001	5001	4001
4	6000	13500	5001	12001	6001	10001	8001
5	7500	21000	10001	24001	13001	22501	18001
6	9000	30000	20001	45001	27501	40001	35001
7	10500	40500	42501	95001	55001	60001	70001
8	12000	52500	70001	175001	110001	90001	125001
9	13500	66000	110001	350001	225001	135001	250001
10	15000	81000	160001	700001	450001	250001	500001

I put together a chart showing the cost in gold to train and the xp need to advance the level for a handful of classes from AD&D 1st edition/OSRIC. The yellow band is the range of xp that exceed the cost in gp of training the level; the green band is the range of xp that exceed the aggregate cost in gp of training all the level and all previous levels.

For a thief, the xp earned from the gp necessary to train the first time is enough to actually advance two levels. Notwithstanding that two levels could not be advance in the same training period, but there would be additional cost for each advancement. This requires a consideration of aggregate xp of the aggregate gold required for all training progression.

For some classes, it will be many levels before the cost of their advancement in gold is less than the experience points they earned from gold. For the thief, it is not until 5th level that the cost to train 5th level, 7,500gp, is less than the xp required, 10,001xp. Unfortunately, the aggregate training cost in gold to progress from levels 1 thru 5 is 21,000gp, earning enough xp to be six level. It is not until 7th level for a thief that the total gold acquired does not earn enough xp, and the thief finally has to slay some monsters to earn additional xp to reach the next level.

The rules explain that most monetary treasure would be sunk into training in the early levels. I think this would have been fine if that was the whole story, but it misrepresents the

impact and importance of gold in the game. The gold economy, which inexplicably has no impact on the rest of the economy in the game world, is not consistent with adventuring life. Not only is gold required for training up a level, it is required to purchase equipment and powerful (often magical) items to survive greater challenges to reach the next level. The greater accumulation of gold through adventuring for surviving further adventuring creates greater xp that requires more gold to pay for training costs.

One way to mitigate this problem is to multi-class, which is what all the thief characters did: one is a thief/magic-user and the other is a thief/fighter. Multi-classing forces some of the excess xp earned through gp to go to another class. A thief/fighter who acquires enough gold to train 2nd level in a class (3,000gp/3,000xp) is only 249xp from gp in the thief class and is still short 500xp from reaching 2nd level in fighter. But, 3,000gp will be needed train 2nd level in fighter soon, which will result in enough xp to train in thief again but without enough gold. It's a small mitigation.

But all this is not to complain about the gold-to-xp-to-training cost mechanic. Players go into the game knowing the rules, mechanics, and economy, and expect to carry enough xp to be a higher level than they pay to trained for a couple of levels, but it eventually levels out at higher levels if they survive that long.

The situation that arose a couple of weeks ago would have comedic if it hadn't raised the ire of the DM. Our group of six characters, all but one of who are multi-class, had a couple of characters with enough xp to advance in one of the character's class. Unfortunately, no one had enough money on their own to pay for their training. Being good and cooperative players, we decided to pool our resources and loan (will give for the greater good of the party) gold to each other to pay for training. When more training was needed than we had gold, we had to discuss priorities for the party, which got into discussion about class (and skills) and levels (which impacted costs). It was a discussion that the DM did not particularly like because of the meta-nature. THEN came the discussion about some characters having so much xp that they could advance multiple levels and haven't trained in one of the level yet because there was not enough money. We, as a party, began looking at our treasure and loot to determine which could be sold to raise money to pay for training. Selling off some magic items gained us enough money to start paying for all players to advance a level in one of their character's classes. Meanwhile, the DM was trying to keep track of how long each character was training (ranging from 2 to 6 weeks) and deducting cost of living from characters during this time.

Then the cascading occurred. As magic items were sold, gold was generated. As gold was generated and divied out, xp was generated and divied out. As xp was now earned from the gp of sold magic items, characters started having enough xp to advance a level in the *other* class their characters had. And that required more gold, which required the selling of more magic items, which generate more gold and xp, and so on. And it required characters to spend more time training (and additional 2-6 weeks) resulting in the passing of almost four months in game time while characters trained, sold gear, and trained again in another class. It was the second round of training management in the campaign that seemed to send the DM to peak testiness.

At some point, we simply ran out of treasure we could part with, ran out of gold, and a couple of players had to proceed on the next adventure with characters with enough xp to advance to the next level, but not have the training to use that level's abilities. I ended up using about half of the session just managing party assets and training the group as best we could prioritize and afford.

As annoying as the gold/xp/training cost issue is in the beginning levels of the game, it was the DM's own frustration that bothered the players. These were the nature of the rules and mechanics and the DM was enforcing them deliberately (including other bothersome features such as encumbrance for coins). Perhaps it was the use of so much of the session in training management, but it was between adventuring and part of the preparing for the next task in a big town selling, buying, and training. I feel that if you are going to embrace and enforce the pain of a system, then it should be borne with some sort of grace as well.

AD&D 2nd edition removed the cost of training levels, and even the optional rule was reduced to 100gp per level per week at worse. Then again, it also eliminated the xp value of gold coins, except as an optional rule for non-magic treasure. When playing AD&D 1st edition, I did not charge players to advance levels. However, it was most likely a result of either carrying over automated advancement from Basic D&D or simply missing the rule in AD&D than any prudent decision to adhere to Gygax's intent on keeping the characters poor.

Given the flaw of the gold/xp/training cost mechanic in AD&D 1st Edition, I am somewhat surprised that OSRIC retained it, but I suppose that is the intent behind old school rules – embracing the nostalgia of the original games, warts and all. Just don't get frustrated when you stare at all those warts when you look into the mirror. You knew they would be there.



THE BATTLE OF AGINCOURT

For the anniversary of the Battle of Agincourt, I hosted a [Tactica Medieval](#) scenario of the battle for the Leavenworth Wargame Group at Gators Game and Hobby in Leavenworth. Used the 15mm miniatures I painted over 30 years ago. They still look great. Everyone had a good time. French emerged victorious despite the lethal fire of the English Longbowmen. Henry V was driven from the field.



The forces are arrayed at Agincourt. English at bottom (red) and French at top (blue). The English longbowmen have not set their stakes yet.

(Shown also is some of the forest terrain I worked on in preparation for this event.)



The French side. Many knights dismounted already. The English side. Henry V in command in center.



The French advance under withering fire of the English Longbowmen. Duke of York is about to be driven from the field. Henry V is facing the advancing knights on horseback attack led by D'Alencon, who would route the English king in the next round.



COMMENTS ON #5

Brian Rogers – My wife will be happy to hear that you agree that she is right.

Matt Stevens – RYCTM Re: “Tag” tables in *Two-Fisted Tales*. I think a table of “outward physical signs” is still a good idea for fleshing out a character. Personalities might not always be demonstrated in a short time. While by Big 5 Personality table for NPCs would provide a full character personality trait work-up, most would not be evidenced in a short exchange. Only through a longer engagement, like an enduring or important NPC, would they become fully experienced. However, short engagements often need something readily distinguishable in order for players to remember the NPC. This generally boils down to specific behaviors, most of which are some sort of quirk of the character – a limp, over-sized hat, drawl speech, a tattoo, pet lizard – easy things for a GM to quickly represent in role play. While it may make a character somewhat one-dimensional, it is all that is needed for short encounters with passing NPC to prevent them from being completely dehumanized as individuals.

Roger BW – Chocolate covered ginger? People will put chocolate on anything! I’ve heard of chocolate covered bacon, and as much as I like bacon and chocolate, it does not sound like something I would like.

John Redden – After a short internet search, Daddy Rolled a 1 is [Martin R. Thomas](#). TTRPGkids [has an interview with him on their website](#).

Gabriel Roark – Re: Dungeon Crawl Classic funnel survivors. In DCC, players typically make four 0-level characters and roll for an occupation in addition to their ability scores. The occupation determines starting weapon and includes race – default is human, but some occupations specify dwarf, elf, or halfling. While the starting occupation may suit the ability scores very well (a high intelligence score for a wizard’s apprentice), sometimes it does not (a low wisdom score for a healer). Survivors of a funnel get to “advance” to 1st level in the class of their choice. Here is where the players can select a class more suitable to their abilities (or rather, more suitable than the other players and someone has to perform the role). This process creates some unusual combinations, such as the high strength wizard trained in swords or axes, or the high dexterity fighter trained in staves. Not everything is a perfect fit. DCC does not strive for balance. Failures can be pure painfully funny and catastrophic, while successes can be amazing beyond belief and achieve world changing impact of epic levels. It is a game where extreme rolls

result in extreme outcomes. Fatalities are high, but so are the rewards, which is part of the fun. I have never had a character survive past 2nd level. If a player has no character survive a funnel, they simply create a 0-level character and advance the levels as far as necessary until they reach the level required for the game group. I haven’t played any high level character, but it is something I look forward to just to experience the outer limits of the extreme successes and failures. I’ve seen convention games where the GM runs multiple sessions to carry players from a funeral in the first session and advance the characters through the levels for each subsequent session throughout the convention. Players who drop in simply get an NPC of the appropriate level. I was impressed by the convention game series design and management and thoroughly enjoyed it enough to buy the books and play more often elsewhere.

Myles Corcoran – Glad you enjoyed the Retreat report. Boardgamearena.com is a great place to try a board game before buying it. I am surprised at the number of games being added to it all the time. Some games are better on BGA than on the table, which is something I am starting to look out for. I can’t buy everything, but if I find I enjoy the game more on BGA than the hassle of trying to get the game to the table, setting it up and managing the play, then I need to just play it on BGA and not make the purchase. My need board game purge will consider when I am getting the most plays of a game – if I am playing it more on BGA than my own table, then it is a candidate for finding a new home. I do like that BGA often includes solo play for many games. It helps me learn the game quicker allowing me to sort out the strategy and mechanics while it manages all the set-up and upkeep during a solo play. It helps clarify some rules that I might not fully understand just by reading the rules. There have been more than one time I see a move and I ask, “wait, how did that happen?” or “why isn’t the game letting me do that?” and I discover the clarification of a rule “Oh, so that’s what that rule means.”

Lisa Padol – Re: Shining as an orc. Asking what I meant by that is a really good question. Even under 2024 D&D rules, the bonus for orc characters lean into their durability in a fight. They get temporary hit points when they use a dash action; great for a quick health buff when rushing into a fight. They also keep 1 hp when they are dropped to 0 hp, which keeps them conscious longer; great for staying alive long enough to either heal themselves or escape. My orc also happened to have great strength, so any physical attacks would be more effective. I felt that this made my cleric more than just a walking 1st aid kit, a fate often suffered by many cleric players. Since clerics can wear heavy armor, their protection often lends to their presence in the front line even though they are not as durable as a fighter. My orc on the other hand, became not

only a well protected cleric in the front line, but a durable one and a lethal one at the same time. I was hoping for a vision of a front-line fighter that the rest of the characters would be surprised to discover that the orc was also a healer. Instead, fate deemed the attack rolls to be low, and heal rolls to be high. He was a good cleric. His orc was merely cosmetic. Re: Storybrewers Discord. My daughter know about the site, but has not joined. Chances are she just hasn't found the time to add it to her schedule to enjoy. Re: Chocolate bar brand. The company name is Schokolad, though the specific name of the store we made the chocolate is names Chocolate Kingdom, who makes their own chocolate. It was a family business started by Herman Bar who left Germany in 1938 to attend a pastry school in Switzerland, then moved to Argentina to start a chocolate business. His son-in-law (Bernie Schaked) move to the US in 1985 to open the Schokolad Chocolate Factory with a franchise model based in Orlando. Chocolate Kingdom was the first and local franchise factory in Orlando.

Jim Vassilakos – Re: [Rock Hard: 1977](#). I'm not sure the game is a good for character generation ideas as much as it is an idea for character ideas in general. It does a good job thinking through not only the various types of Rock Stars but also the managers. No real details are provided for stage hands, radio personalities, or corporate entities. The latter are essentially non-existent; the players can get a record deal, but nothing in the game describes from who or how one company would provide a better deal than any other. I really like the idea of an rpg on the subject. Challenges facing the band would not only be their own personal demons and competing bands, but the other NPCs such as groupies, roadies, leeches, their own managers, radio stations, venue owners, and even the big corporations themselves. I can't help but think of the *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart Club Band* movie and the Big Deal Records, the cult leader Father Sun played by Alice Cooper and the Future Evil Band played by Aerosmith. Or the movie, *Wayne's World* and the band Crucial Taunt, the effort to free her from the underhanded television producer Benjamin Kane and the convoluted plan to land a record deal with Sharp Records. Dare I mention, *This is Spinal Tap*? I would be very interested in seeing your game if it ever made it to the front burner. It seems to be a theme not well explored in rpgs.

Everyone Else – RAEBNC. I simply ran out of time and there is much of great value to comment on, if for no other reason than to say that everyone has some great content that I enjoy reading immensely. I am also happy to see new contributors and several returning contributors. Keep it up!

BOLKT ACTION TERRAIN

In addition to the forest terrain I completed for my Agincourt game (see previous page), I worked on other terrain in preparation for WWII warfare in Northern France.



Above is a collection of bocage terrain made from 1/8" mdf cut into 1" wide strips, mounted with 1" square foam (salvaged from some packing material), flocked with Woodland Scenics blended flock, and topped with some mixed trees I got from eBay (not the best quality tree, but I got a lot for a low price), and some Woodland Scenics lichen. I like how they turned out.



The rest are building models in 1/56 scale (28mm) from Warlord Games. The first are a couple of ruined buildings from a Band of Brothers set. I mounted them on mdf board for stability and added grass flock and bushes. Below are a couple of bunkers from a D-Day beach landing set. It came with lots of obstacles (dragon's teeth, "Czech hedgehogs", and

barbed wire posts). Not sure how I plan to prepare them, whether as individual obstacles for flexible placement or grouped for easy placement.



I'm turning my attention to painting the soldiers this month. Pictures next issue!



The PHOENIX NEST



SOMEONE ELSE'S LEGACY: Where do you get your ideas?

This month, rather than blow my own trumpet (which was getting a little tedious), I would like to praise the genius of one of my friends.

John Dallman is someone I've known for a long time though I can't tell you where we met¹. He's part of Roger's Cambridge circle of gamers nowadays. He takes part in the monthly Sunday games and most important here is the co-editor with Roger of an intermittently published GURPS zine THE PATH OF CUNNING.²

Roger and I discussed his work on a GURPS game called THE INFINITE CABAL on the podcast in a section on a topic I was wittering on about in recent months in these pages, how much in depth background you need for a setting and when you should firm it up.

¹ Probably at one of the game conventions I discuss in the IgTheme.

² Available free at <https://tekeli.li/path-of-cunning/>

**A zine for EVER & ANON 6 by
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After that I went back to re-read the accounts of THE INFINITE CABAL in THE PATH OF CUNNING to clear up just what John had done to create a plausible and believable Secret Behind It All in his campaign and there I came upon one of the most transcendent descriptions of creativity in RPGs (and similar artforms) I've ever found.

John was detailing the various odd issues that came up in a campaign featuring Isaac Newton as a Cabal Grandmaster, various competing multiversal conspiracies and the sort of intellectual speculation that a bunch of middle class gamers in Cambridge are likely to come up with. There was a moment when he needed to come up with a plausible if pseudo-scientific explanation for why Basque is such a peculiar language.³

What happened next was that: "The inspiration of immersion struck" and he had the solution.

³ THE PLAIN PEOPLE OF E&A: As you do. We've often wondered about that ourselves.

Do you know what he means? I did the instant I read it and I realised it was something I have been doing for a long time, first as an actor and then as a 'forever GM' for two groups.⁴

It's being so there in the situation or in the particular character that you can draw without thinking on the right thing to say, the thing that makes most sense for the character, for the situation, for the imagined world that you can just pull a Right Answer out of your brain without having worked it out beforehand.

It's a thing you can only achieve when you are in The Flow, in the moment and flying along. It's when you forget the mechanics and the preparation and the anxiety working up to the start of the game session and go with.

As far as I know there is no way to get there but practice, but learning how to be ready to let the lightning strike.

I shall treasure that phrase. I may have it inscribed on my ceiling, the way Montaigne had his favourite sayings on the roof of his study so he could always look up and draw inspiration from them.

I am even ready to discover John found the phrase somewhere else but for now let me thank him for the gift and let me put it down here in the fanciest font my computer will give me.

The inspiration of immersion

THE WAY OF THE WORLD

The first snows of the winter have fallen and even reached as far south as High Wycombe though the ground was clear by the time I got out of bed. I think it looks like a winter where I will spend as much time as I can avoiding going outdoors.

Which isn't good for my health, I know. I plan to counter that by finally consenting to going on the weight-loss injections. I resisted for a long

⁴ They let me out of my harness often enough that I shouldn't complain.

time but the new Diabetic Nurse at my doctor's is young, pretty and cute, three factors that somehow made the idea look more appealing. We shall see how it goes over the next nine months. I have instructed the Wednesday night group not to offer me the nibbles they share amongst them for at least that long.⁵

CUNNING PLANS AND OVER-REACHING AMBITIONS

The Glamour game (writeup continues below) has come to an end. I put out a Prospectus to the Wednesday Night Group after going through the notes I have from previous Prospectuses. (Prospecti?) I was depressed to see I had no new ideas to offer them but pleased that every last one of the things I proposed got at least one player giving it the highest rating. I may be doing something right.

What got the most support was a proposed GURPS game returning to the city of a Thousand Gates I outlined a few months ago. AEGIS: THE INSTITUTE is a magical school story with students coming from other worlds to attend the Best Magical School In The Multiverse. I can see elements of THE MAGICIANS in the idea but also GURPS IOU and wackier things than that. Still doing the outline and the game system details. I'll let you know.

We are still in the stage of negotiating the basic character generation and background that we need. I wanted a rather more risky path to magical power than the players were willing to go for. It is also a challenge to the rules to tie together a group of people coming from different parallel worlds to a City Between The Worlds. Hopefully we will get to a first session before Christmas but we've yet to reach Session Zero.

⁵ TPPoE&A: And how do you think you are going to manage Christmas, eh? ME: Shaddup you!

GLAMOUR DAYS AND NIGHTS

Player Characters:

Alan as ESHAN, a Seven Mothers worshipping Nobleman with a lot of social skills

Graham as VOSTOR a worshipper of the Lunar war god Yanafal Tarnils with a dark secret.

Drak as JARATHIR another YT initiate with a Big Sword.

Martin as SANDENE, a (female) scout/sniper because some people have to be different. But still worships YT. But not as different as...

Pum as KEANUS another heavy infantryman who worships Humakt just to prove the tolerance of the Red Goddess.

Non Player Characters In this Episode

VISHI: A High Llama riding pygmy by origin and a slave in Vostor's family since he was five. Sent to keep an eye on the Young Master and not let him put his foot in the politics. Too late for that, as it turns out.

MAHEDRES: "The fellow from across the way" An Illuminate who skedaddles while off screen. Grandfather of SOR-ETTE (remember her?)

KRISHNAN: Another Illuminate. Who does not skedaddle. Also Off Screen

PHARNASTES:THE CHIEF OVERSEER: A very important (and much overburdened) investigator.

SEND VALU: An Imperial favourite and temple renovator. *Arbiter Elegentum*

A VISIT TO THE BATHS, A TRIP TO A TEMPLE.⁶

They slept in late the next morning and Vishi brought them breakfast and a news summary. There was no sign of Vostor. his actual employer and owner.

There had been no official news had arrived in Glamour about the disaster⁷ to the south though you will recall that the party had some unofficial advanced notice. The newspapers (according to Vishi who reads and abstracts the reports during his morning shopping) were full of denials.

SANDENE: Hang on! He can read New Pelorian?

ESHAN: Better than me!

VISHI: I was educated by the Teelo Nori Temple. They're very big on making sure that slaves can read and write. Orphans especially!

ESHAN: Makes them more useful. Very useful if you join the bureaucracy.

VISHI: There are a lot of freedmen who made their way up by being... recruited to the bureaucracy. And since I was being trained as a servant to an upper class household they felt it was necessary.

KEANUS: How can they say nothing happened?

JARATHIR: No, no, what they're saying is there's nothing to worry about.

VISHI: Reassurances rather than denials.

Jarathir wanted to try sending his companion hawk back to Furthest discover what was going on. The GM pointed out it was an Awakened companion and a family Heirloom not a familiar or allied spirit. It would probably go but might not be that enthusiastic or that fast. Jarathir decided the risks were too great.

JARATHIR There's still a dragon about somewhere. And if that was Orlanth's Ring the Middle Air might not be a safe place.

⁶ 06 August 2025

⁷ Literally a disaster since it involved misbehaving stars.

The significance of the early apparition of the Ring was the subject of much speculation by persons of no great Celestial expertise and the Star-Seers had secluded themselves in order to work out just what it all must mean.

JARATHIR Probably just boding. Not anything in particular just general boding.

Vishi said that there was likely to be more official news tomorrow. He had heard rumours from "persons attached to the eastern legions" that they are about to be recalled and sent to the eastern front. (Which is where the Empire faces the horse nomads. The party was from the southern border where the Empire faces the hill barbarians. To the west the Empire faced the sorcerous monotheists. And to the North it faced the Ice Gods and battled them to keep the winters mild. The Janitrix had served up there.)

VISHI: Oh and my master is 'taking a day'.

JARATHIR Did he tell you to fuck off?

VISHI: He told me not to poke my fucking nomad nose into things. And he went off with somebody.

SANDENE It's the only nose you've got.

VISHI: Yes, sir. I'm quite attached to it. I have smoked fish and barley porridge for breakfast.

JARATHIR You do know we're not used to this degree of variety.

VISHI: If you're going to return to the front and live off the same rations for seasons at a time then I feel that your taste buds should be given a chance to learn while you're not on duty. And you're here in the capital of the Empire which some of the most famed chefs in the world....

JARATHIR And none of them made this porridge.

VISHI: No I made the porridge

JARATHIR And it is noticeably nicer than the porridge we normally have.

VISHI: Thank you, sir. Try the smoked fish: there are three different varieties.

GM: I should warn you about Body Horror Stuff. It's right at the top of my notes. Warn them about Body Horror Stuff.

GENERAL MUTTER: What's Body Horror?

DRAK: Things like transformations, people melting...

PUM: Oh, yuckiness

DRAK: (Nodding) Cronenberg.

MARTIN: Nothing I haven't seen at work.

DRAK: There's probably Cronenberg stuff you haven't seen at work.

GM: Chaps sticking their hands into television screens and melting into them.

Martin told a story about a police officer who forgot to wear protective gloves while handling tabs of 'E'. Pum told a story about police officers left to guard an 'E' factory getting high just on fumes.

GM: I never had anything that dramatic happen to me while working. I got bullied by a Lieutenant Colonel once but that is part of the risk of working for the Ministry of Defence.

Having nothing much better to do that day (Eshan's next appointment at the Office of Detached Forces wasn't till the next day.) they decided to go and experience the Baths. But before that Vishi knocked on their door and told them that Chief Overseer Phranastes was there to see them. He showed the police officer in and discretely closed the door: they suspected he was listening.

CHIEF OVERSEER PHRANASTES:

(Puzzled) There's one missing.

SANDENE Sleeping it off somewhere.

COP: Ah right.

JARATHIR: Taking one of his allowed days off.

COP: Of course, it is his right. Damn him. I wanted to thank you and I wanted to ask you to do me another favour.

KEANUS *(Faintly)* Yay...

COP: The tunnel we followed yesterday ended up going directly underneath the Temple Of Uleria. The Temple of Love in the Red Light district.

JARATHIR Maybe that's where our colleague is scouting the district.

KEANUS We may bump into him at any moment.

COP: The Temple of Love has recently had a refurbishment by one the Emperor's favourite

companions, a man called Send Valu. He is in the Emperor's favour and therefore is somebody I cannot directly investigate. And therefore I'm not going to try.

ESHAN: I hope you're not asking us...

COP: I'm asking you if you are willing to go into the Temple through that tunnel to see what you can find. I told you yesterday that we withdrew because there is a warding across the tunnel. I believe I have a sorcerer who is capable of turning off the warding long enough for you get through.

JARATHIR Is that the Temple's warding? Because that feels like we would be violating the Temple of Uleria. And violating Uleria is not high on my list of things to do.

COP: I do not have access to Storm Bull barbarians for reasons which will probably be obvious to you. (*Turning to KEANUS*) You're not a Storm Bull are you?

JARATHIR (*Offended for his team mate*) No. He's also not a barbarian.

ESHAN: We're all from Tarsh.

COP: Yes, yes. I do beg your pardon.

JARATHIR An easy mistake.

COP: I have strong reasons to believe there is a Chaos infestation there.⁸

JARATHIR A dangerous infestation? Unsanctioned? Inappropriate?

COP: My belief is that the warding is not by Uleria.

JARATHIR But it might be associated with the Temple is what you're saying.

KEANUS He didn't say that so we don't have to think that.

JARATHIR: It's one of my problems. Several senior officers have told me that I keep thinking.

SANDENE: Stop it.

COP: As long as you can turn it off during combat. I am working for the Emperor and I am asking you to do this⁹. This will be a volunteer mission and I cannot order you.

JARATHIR And it would not be unofficial.

COP: It would not be unofficial. It would be backed by my authority. Whether that...

JARATHIR Bears any weight in the circumstances... We will hope not to test.

KEANUS But if necessary, we can say we act under your authority.

COP: I'm not going ask you to lie when questioned and deny my authority. (*He nodded to the Truth runes on their uniforms*) But I would ask you not to use my name as a Battle Cry. I want you to go in this evening, after dark.

JARATHIR Oh, so we *can* go to the Baths!

They were instructed to meet the sorcerer and Phranastes himself at the Insula next door that evening: it was still being treated as a crime scene.

As they were preparing to go out, Vishi came up to Jarathir and said he hoped he didn't offend if he gave him some information.

VISHI: You remember the gentleman across the way: the one whose daughter said was Illuminated? I was out doing errands and I saw him coming along arm in arm with the other gentleman in this building who is said to be illuminated. They were chatting away merrily. And when the gentleman across the way saw that the Overseer was waiting at the gate to be let in... He turned and skedaddled, sir. I thought this might of interest to you given your interest in the topic of um Enlightenment..

JARATHIR And not because of your tendency to spread every single piece of gossip you can find.

VISHI: I don't have a budget for entertainment.

KEANUS Let me buy you a dice.

VISHI: My master has several.

They got out the local tourist map and decided to avoid the Baths of Venerabilis (Senators and other upper crust types) and the Baths of Robustus (sadly decayed from their former magnificence) finally settling on the Baths of Magnificus (intended for the average citizen of Glamour which they felt they might just squeak in at).

Jarathir showed off his knowledge of fancy baths and Sandene mentioned strigilation.

⁸ He appeared embarrassed about how to proceed given the Empire's tolerance of Chaos.

⁹ **KEANUS** The Emperor!

The Baths of Magnus, tiled in red and black and a haven of peace and tranquillity especially at the start of the day when customers were few. The people who took their money offered to launder their outer garments while they took their ease in the baths.

BATH MINION: Three lunars apiece. For which you may take your ease and advantage of our facilities.

ESHAN: They saw us coming.

BATH MINION: Excuse me sir, we do not haggle here. This is the Capital!

The GM made a very good Luck roll for them and asked them to nominate someone they could meet in the baths.

DRAK: I have no pigging idea. The Emperor? That would be useful because we could then leave Glamour.

This was lazy of the GM but led to questions about whether the baths were mixed sex (there were two parallel lines of baths until they met at the swimming baths at the end) and actually managed to get the GM's aged brain working.

Across the swimming baths from them was a good looking man of aristocratic appearance, entertaining a group of hangers on and sycophants. This was Send Valu, (according to a passing socialite) the Emperor's confidante, "fashion adviser" and the man who had recently refurbished the Temple of Uleria.

JARATHIR He's an interior decorator who's a Good Friend of the Emperor.

Eshan appraised him and got the impression that the fellow was covering up a secret worry about something. False laughter and pretended confidence would fool most people but not the eagle eyed officer. And for a moment when some well connected person was grovelling to him, Send Valu had an expression of contempt and disdain.

Eshan decided to practice his swimming and the Movement Rune was with him and he did a spectacular dive followed by a breaststroke across the pool and back that would have qualified for the Olympics if anyone had thought of them.

People gathered to congratulate him including the aforementioned *arbiter elegantum*.

Send Valu said it was 'magnificently done' and made a classical literary/mythological reference, comparing Eshan to some Emperor of yore who had swum across some impressive gulf on some important occasion.

Eshan, flattered, provided his name and lineage (both clearly Provincial). He was invited to a party that evening with a chance of being introduced to "Higher Society". Asked where the party would be he was told "In my newly restored Temple of Lurve." (Yes, that's how he said it.)

Eshan dithered for a moment but politely declined. "Well, let my Secretary know where you're staying.... Give him a token. This will pass you through the outer guardians and into the inner temple. Anytime. I do like a good swimmer."¹⁰

Eshan went back to his comrades and told them about the encounter. They debated sending the officer into the Temple via the party. This was determined to rely on Eshan's acting ability which they had less confidence in than his other skills.

Sandene heard an argument between a soldier and his girl.

GIRL: You said we'd get married this time!

SOLDIER: I can't! I've got duty. We're forming up and marching out tomorrow. I don't know what the flaps about... There are all sorts of rumours... I've got to go. It's duty.

¹⁰ I probably should apologise for the Creepy Gay character.

GIRL: Well, can't you get permission to marry me now? You've had my body. You've had your way with me.

Sandene got the impression that both of them were lying. He had no intention of making it permanent and she just wanted to get some money out of him by embarrassing him at the last moment..¹¹

Sandene sniggered audibly and the entire squad turned and looked at what she was looking at. The soldier took offence at that.

SOLDIER: You got a problem?

SANDENE: No, but you have.

SOLDIER: What do you mean by that?

Sandene knew that the regulations actually allowed soldiers to ask emergency leave to marry and could quote it by number. The soldier had repeatedly said he could not. Eventually the couple went away.

Eshan recognised the soldier's unit¹² as being the Redland Corps, an eastern front cavalry unit. They were in town for the celebration. Which would now be less magnificent.

GM: Would you please get yourselves organised and off down a hole.

In the cellar of the building next door the Overseer introduced them the sorcerer who was going with them, by name Voluminus. He chastised them (verbally) for sniggering. "It's his chosen name!"

The sorcerer (who seemed to have heard this sort of stuff before) was wearing a set of robes three sizes too big for him.

DRAK: Ah, it's an aspirational name. Or he's tapped himself in SIZ.

COP: He will provide you with both a way in and a way out. These two lads (a couple of Grey

Guard members) will be guarding him in the sewer tunnels while you're inside. I will be somewhere else and somewhere deniable.

Jarathir reported the conversation Eshan had with Send Valu and the 'strange coincidence' he was throwing a party that evening.

COP: He throws a party every evening. How did you know?

JARATHIR: He (*Eshan*) got an invite. He has lovely thighs.

Phranastes drew the soldiers to one side away from the sorcerer and his guards.

COP: I have been interviewing some people who have attended those parties. They report feeling drained and unwell afterwards. I strongly advise you not to indulge inside the temple unless you have some protection up.

JARATHIR I don't mean to be crude but feeling drained is quite often...

COP: More so than is customary. Also reports of mood swings and outbursts that worry me more than a little. Good luck! Oh, and if you have to retreat the way you came flash this light down the tunnel twice and Voluminous will raise the barrier again.

VOLUMINOUS: I can only do this for ten minutes and not be detected so I'm going to stop as soon as you're through. Don't dilly dally.

They trudged down a tunnel and across some sewers. The bridges were marked with red and black Watch tape. EVIDENCE and DO NOT TAMPER.

When they got to the end of the tunnel it went forward into a crackling barrier of energy.

The sorcerer told them to wait there and did weird and incomprehensible things with his staff and his mind. When the hole appeared in the Wards in front of them, the squad went forward careful not to touch the edge of the tunnel where

¹¹ Looking back I'm not at all sure this bit fits in the generally less puritanical Lunar Empire. Even the Orlanthi are strict on adultery but not fornication.

¹² TPPoE&A in the swimming pool? How? GM: Hush! (*A pause for thought*) He was wearing unit tattoos. TPPoE&A: Uh huh. Right.

the protective field still sparkled and when the sorcerer restored the field, looking a little fatigued, they nodded to him and went forward.

The tunnel turned upwards after a little way and came to a large circular space remarkable for the following things:

- 1) It was circular or rather hemi-spherical.
- 2) There was a spiral stone staircase in the centre of the space going upwards.
- 3) There were three more circular tunnels going off in the other cardinal directions. All the tunnels looked like the same sort of gnawed tunnels made by the Krashtkids.

There was something moving on the surface of the stone dome that was the ceiling. The dome was about 40 metres across, so that made the roof 20 metres up. Whatever was clinging to the ceiling was trying to use the small amount of cover the staircase was giving.

There followed some combat. You know how difficult I find writing combat of any length. This was a mess of Strike Ranks, dice rolls, spells and defence. Fun at the table. Not so much reading about it.

The thing on the roof in the first chamber was another two krashtkids.... Which didn't give them much of a problem. I should start swamping my players with them. Jarathir got stung by one's tongue for not very much.

GM: Please do not trivialise the evil Chaos Monsters.

From the top of the spiral staircase, there was a sound of moaning. Jarathir could not tell if it was pain or pleasure. When they got up there they found there was a woman stuck to the ceiling with the gloop (pratzim) produced by the krashtkids. There were four small moving things beneath the gloop which were stuck to or

perhaps in her flesh. They looked like baby krashtkids.¹³

Eshan could resolve that she was in fact enjoying this. Jarathir was of the opinion she would live for a while but his limited medical knowledge told him that it would be a very difficult task to unentangle the parasites from her flesh. They tried Disruption spells to kill the squirming things. She cried out in protest as they did so. Eventually, the wriggling things died and she passed out.¹⁴

Keanus looking up saw there was a wooden barrier across the staircase. He heard a skittering sound from the other side as of chitin on stone. He found a handle that looked like it would open it.

The noise turned out to be the hooves of a broo with a club who whacked at him. Parrying it with his shield made his arm go numb. There was another broo in the next chamber up and again they did not give Our Heroes much trouble. The first passed out due to losing an arm and then bled out while they dealt with the second who lasted a little longer but succumbed to losing his left leg. Their goddess Thed didn't respond to their pleas for Divine Intervention.

This upper chamber was tubular, a broad cylinder, rather than domed: straight up sides along which a spiral staircase went up to the next level. There were also large round iron (!) doors to North and South. In one corner was a large cage in which something huddled.

The thing in the cage was a woman dressed in dirty rags. She had dirty straw in her cage. With his strength still enhanced by magic Keanus got the cage open by snapping the lock. They sent the woman down the stairs to wait for them down below.

Checking the iron doors they found them to be locked. The tougher of the two broos had a set of keys at his belt. They decided not to investigate

the next week that she had died whilst they fought their way up to the Temple and they never had to face the problem of getting her unstuck.

¹³ This is the Body Horror bit.

¹⁴ And they failed to remember to go back and pick her up off the ceiling. I forgot to remind them. I ruled

the other side but headed up the staircase and found their way through the door up there.

On the other side was what was clearly a luxurious room in a temple. Their guess was they were now at ground level. There were closed doors presumably leading to other areas.

The room was hexagonal and there was a statue in the middle of the room of a female deity of some sort. They weren't to know this (and they never did figure it out) but this was the Chaos goddess Seseine the Goddess of Temptation to whom the temple had been rededicated.

There was a warrior woman guarding it: she carried an iron quarterstaff, usually a sign of Rune Level beings.

WARRIOR WOMAN: Hello intruders. Have you come to worship?

Jarathir muttered 'Nos moroturi' and then tried to witter on about the monsters they had found in the basement and the people who had been kidnapped until the rest of the party had come up to join him. She started putting up magic at that point.

"Stay away. Do not come closer if you value your soul."

I made the characters roll against their highest Passions as they came closer to the statue.

WW: You have a strong love for your family. You would not want anything to happen to them.

DRAK: She's clearly using some sort of mental attack. But I just lost two thirds of my family and only found out about it yesterday. I was going to lose my shit anyway.

GM: Would you prefer to be demoralised or berserk?

DRAK: I'll go berserk thanks.

She scattered some moon dust on the floor and called forth a Lune, a Moon elemental. Tend to drive people Mad.

What was irritating was the GM had forgotten that Eshan had access to Dismiss Lune from his cult.

She got a blow in on the Berserk Jarathir but he didn't even feel it. His puissant blow was turned aside by her iron quarterstaff. Keanus came up a little behind and wounded her slightly. Eshan cast Dismiss Medium Lune as the Lune came up to engulf him in madness and it overwhelmed his Shield... just before vanishing.

Jarathir, still frothing, struck her hard in the head and they heard her call upon Cacodemon (which told them she was probably an Ogre) unsuccessfully before dying.

Jarathir was still trying to overcome his frothing madness, trying to sate his feelings by mutilating the corpse of the Ogre Lady. The others could see that there was still a sparkle of magic around him and a similar sparkle could be seen around the statue.

Sandene tried Dispell Magic on Jarathir. He came round with blood all over him and a satisfied ache in his sword arm.

SANDENE Are you yourself again?

JARATHIR Who else would I be?

SANDENE A frothing at the mouth Lunatic.

I've seen this before in battle and it always ends badly for the people around them

JARATHIR I think I got a little upset.

GM: Alan, make your Loyalty Emperor roll. (He succeeds) You are not swayed in your loyalty by the visions of the Emperor as a raucous, drunken clown and a sybarite. You may continue your attack and even use Loyalty Emperor to augment your attack.

Eshan went forward to smite the statue with his shield and managed to snap the statue away from its supporting pillar. Through the doors they could hear the sound of dismay and anger.

JARATHIR Sir, does this count as a successful adventure and we should leave?

ESHAN: Yes, time to leave.

They took the head of the Ogre and her iron quarterstaff and departed before needing to make embarrassing explanations.

When they got to the first chamber the woman on the ceiling was dead from her wounds¹⁵ and the second woman they rescued was already with the sorcerer and his guards as the temple wards had gone down when they destroyed the statue.

Phranastes couldn't identify the female deity but knew that Cacodemon didn't have a female form.

DISTRACTIONS:

The shocking discovery of a new rule we hadn't noticed: that duration of a spirit magic spell had been reduced to two minutes (10 melee rounds) from five minutes.

Drak and me getting into a geek off about the number of genders in Orlanthi society (6) and Lunar society (3).

The mystery of Donald's Ear. *GM: (Of the speculations that followed) That will not be on the writeup because I might want to visit America again someday.*

IGGY'S THEME: I've Been To A Marvellous Party!

...which is a quote from a song by Noel Coward and was the title of the review of the very first CONVULSION back in.... Let me look it up...1992... My Word.

It was not the first game convention I ever went to. I'd say it was the start of the Second Age of my Game Con-going.

¹⁵ This was in fact a retcon. They forgot to go and get her and the GM forgot to remind them about her. It was ruled the next week that she had died while there were fighting their way upstairs and they didn't have to get her unstuck.



In the First Age I'd attended events organised by Games Workshop in London such as Games Day (see badge) but they were one day events in big central London halls like the Royal Horticultural Society or The Methodist Central Hall. They were great for the things they sold and the chance to meet people: I've played games I never would have played otherwise and spent more money than I could afford.¹⁶

My wo5rst moment was when I put my copy of EMPIRE OF THE PETAL THRONE in the Bring and Buy and some comedian just stole it

The Second Phase started with CONVULSIONS OF THE TRILLION TENTACLES, my first weekend gaming event and my first introduction to the wonderful world of LARPS which give a frustrated actor a chance to chew scenery and improvise heroic deeds. (Also to wander around in confusion and boredom when I couldn't can't figure out what was going on nor what I was supposed to do.)

That experience was one part of triggering the rebirth of my role-playing enthusiasm, the other part being the emergence of more 'indie' spirited games.

The Third Phase was the later part of the 21st Century which was still fun but overshadowed by Getting Older.

¹⁶ I honestly can't recall how I afforded all these outings on the budget of an infrequently employed actor and jobbing layabout. I probably tried my parents' patience but I don't recall actually borrowing money from them.

And through all three phases there was Stabcon up in Manchester. I can't recall where I first heard of Stabcon from. It might have been Dave Rowe or other Far Isles friends. Stabcon took place initially in one of the student halls at Manchester University and later moved out to various sites in Stockport when the second bunch of organisers took it over. (It's now transitioning to a third team.) It was originally a convention for DIPLOMACY players (hence the name) and then became a general board gaming event and finally mixed in some RPGs. It was and is a cheap and cheerful event with groups of players who come back year after year sometimes to continue playing RPG campaigns that only get together every six months. (I wonder what it feels like to do something on that timescale. I would probably still leave everything to the last moment.)

There are no fixed or preplanned events. You turn up with your games and see who you can get interested. GMs put up notices and ask people to sign up. If you're looking for a board game you can wander about trying to find a session that's just starting or you can set up a game and tout for players.

Almost all British conventions are at least a little like this. Only American imports have all games preplanned and recruit players on line beforehand. I did attend one Gen Con UK for a day and it felt like a foreign land to me.

In the years since 1992 I have spread myself around one day cons, weekend cons and the *sui generis* Stabcon. I am getting old though and going away for a weekend puts a strain on my system. My big if-I-win-the-Lottery fantasies have been modified so that the Big House In The Country that I buy has a large hall attached where I can get the cons to come to me. But still they are fun even if I am less fun in them.

Ah but I remember all the times I took part in the big Gloranthan LARPS (Once playing a giant!) and the Tsolyani meal I improvised... All

those games, most of them good, some of them great.

COMMENTARIAT ON E&A 5

An Overall Comment: We have clearly been exploring the enhancements that colour can bring to our contributions. I do appreciate it though I probably won't do much of it myself.

BRIAN ROGERS: My sympathies to you and your poor nose. // Re Having Responsibility Dumped on You: If you will volunteer.....// Re Dented Supers: I think Supers Medicine is probably a whole other specialisation. Or several. Who does the Martin Manhunter (and other 'last of their kind' heroes) turn to when they have head cold or insomnia? Superman didn't grow up on Krypton: does he actually understand all the issues of his variant species' biology? Batman has a Doctor who he trusts with his secret identity and the writers love to give him potentially career ending injuries.

MATT STEVENS: Welcome Back! // I Googled 'Redistricting jobs'. Were you perchance a "Political Mapping Analyst"? I had no idea such a trade existed but I can see why it might be in demand, especially just now. // Was your experience with FIASCO with the first edition (which was great and had huge amounts of dice) or second (which was not so good and had lots of cards)? // People think PATHFINDER and 5e are too complex? There's hope for GURPS and RQ yet!!¹⁷

ROGER BELL_WEST: RYCT Me: The conspiracy you found turned you off was one of the seeds I took to make my Yrth my own. It's funny what one person will delight in. The only thing I always turns me off in RPGs is incomprehensibly dense mechanics. EXALTED I'm looking at you! If I can crack it open and rejig it to a system I like I will often do that. But if I cannot grok it in any way I have to leave it alone. // Re ARS MAGICA: Need? I feel like quoting King Lear. Again.

¹⁷ TPPoE&A: ECLIPSE PHASE? EXALTED? ME: Let's not get carried away here...

*“O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life is cheap as beast's.”¹⁸*

RYCT Myles Cocoran: I've never seen 'tick hunting' much in RQ games. Switching weapons in the height of a fight is risky enough that it only happens after weapons break or get dropped. I *have* seen non-combat occasions when they said: "I've already got a tick in Intimidate. Let's try Charm."

JOHN REDDEN: RYCT Avram

Grumer: I have a vivid image of someone Violating The King's Foot. The expression on Charles' face! // **RYCT Lisa Padol:** "It's been a long time since I was introduced to a new game system." And *that* conjures up:

"John, this is QUESTWORLDS.
QUESTWORLDS, this is John."

"Hi John!"

"Hi QUESTWORLDS!"

"I'll just leave you two alone to get better acquainted."

I must get my imagination back on the leash. Did you know that when introducing someone to someone else you present the lower status person to the higher status person? It's "Your Majesty, this is the Slobbovian Ambassador," and not "Your Excellency, this is His Majesty King Charles the Third, by the Grace of God...." Etc.

Another piece of information I've never used yet but I feel the day is young.

MITCH HYDE: You can never have too many Evil Men. //

ERICA L. FRANK: Welcome Elf! Pull up a chair and get comfy! // "I gave up playing AD&D before second edition." "I haven't touched D&D's mechanics in decades." Is it too soon to declare you my new soul mate? // Ah, and there goes that idea. I have not your

¹⁸ Act 2 Scene 4,

enthusiasm for solo gaming. Computer games solo are fine but writing stuff for me is either writing stuff¹⁹ or preparing for games. Mostly the latter nowadays. I tried THOUSAND YEAR VAMPIRE but didn't get very far. Maybe you'll persuade me to try some more but I doubt it. // The trouble with games directly from published sources is that not all the players are going to be as acquainted with it as the ones who are enthused. I've been both the enthusiast and the person who has no clue what's going on and neither are entirely comfortable. The BUFFY games we played when the series was still on-going or just finished were the only time this worked for us. **RYCT Me:** I never saw Tolkien in Yrth: it's too urban for that. (There's just one town and one city in the Fellowship's trip outside the Shire. Plenty of ruins and inhuman fastnesses of course.) I never looked in any detail at any of the published DnD settings even Grayhawk which was around but not I think in a published state when I was playing DnD. // My brilliant scheme made Dwarves altered humans but changed to suit their environment enough to no longer interbreed with other humanoid species. Yrth's version of Gnomes are agricultural, surface dwelling dwarves and were derived from the Dwarves. (ANCIENT ALIEN SPECIES: The Mushroom Farms aren't providing enough protein. Can I create a new variant? The Elves don't want to be farmers.") **RYCT PUM:** At least Windows 11 doesn't have annoying animated paperclips. Or is AI more annoying than that **RYCT Joshua K:** GURPS 3e was substantially less abstracted than 4e is and I was irked at the transition, feeling that it had become more like HERO which is a game system I bounced off. I am surprised that you couldn't get a group which played Champions to look at GURPS.

GABRIEL ROARK: RYCT Me: In setting up the Next Thing I felt I had to bring the basic structure of how they would learn magic to the player's attention and it did mean that many of the ideas I thought Cool were decried as Mean. I will get my creative urges satisfied by building surprises into the City and the Faculty. Doing

¹⁹ TPPoE&A: Shall we show her your pile of Unfinished Novels? ME: (Dignified Silence)

the review beforehand does produce some inane/random questions which I can use for inspiration: Martin's question about True Names is going to fuel a central feature of the setting.

MYLES COCORAN: RYCT PATRICK

RILEY: Is 'Cranial Trauma Attitude Readjustment Technique' the same as Pratchett's Inverse Phrenology? **RYCT**

MARK NEMETH: I have never been a parent but the fact that I can remember my own childhood means that I find reading about threats to children upsetting. In many ways I am still the child ducking behind the sofa to avoid seeing the monster on DR WHO. I do have to pause when reading new material by T. Kingfisher because of the feeling of helplessness her horror situations evoke. But I can go back to the book because she's just that good.

GEORGE PHILLIES: RYCT Me: I just played a game of BRINDLEWOOD BAY with the Wednesday night group and I was very much faced with the problem of keeping a bunch of isolated clues coherent without having an overall theory behind them. Even harder was keeping in mind that it was Not The GM's Place to decide what the explanation was. That was up to the players and the dice. // Yes, but the basic idea was enough to establish that Elves, Dwarves, Orcs and Humans were, at some level, cousins. Even if some of them did come from different universes. (Perhaps the one occasion I had an NPC Human/Giant crossbreed was one of the weird exceptions.)

PATRICK RILEY: I could see a game about being servants of Dream (ghosts, dreams and mythical figures) who do errands for him but more mundane characters have a shorter tolerance for the high weirdness of the series.

RYCT Me: Did the builders of the Pyramids look up at them and say: "Well, it will never look as good as the Really Old Stuff"? // I promise I have enough to do griping about word choice and grammar to criticise anyone's choice of punctuation.

PUM: RYCT Me: Your version of the Luck=HP, CON=Life Points idea looks highly workable to me and I think the experience would

be somewhere between GURPS and RQ in lethality. I've been used to those systems for so long that I don't get the attraction of being invulnerable until the very last moment.

DYLAN CAPEL: I find reading a physical copy easier on my eyes and brain than digital. I bought a physical copy of MAUSRITTER so I would be able to finish it. // For me my Great White Whale was the GREAT PENDRAGON CAMPAIGN. I now accept that I won't ever try that again. There's just too much of it and too much time to get through and too many ways the characters can fail. It shouldn't matter that the game is so focused on the Knights and yet somehow it does.

AVRAM GRUMER: I seem to recall that there was an early DnD novel in which the inhabitants of the world just assumed that all worlds must have hexes of varying terrain. "How would anyone know where they were otherwise?" QUAG KEEP? Or something else. // **RYCT Joshua Kronengold:** GURPS presents the default Super Set of ideas and mechanics out of which you are supposed to create the Operating Sub Set for your own needs. There are plenty of alternate mechanics (and lots of GURPS nerds who will propose them to you if you look at the SJG website for issues of PYRAMID and proposals on the forums) but you need only use what you need. The skill list turns out to be friendly in use because of the provision of default values for most of the skills so you can learn them in the campaign and build them up with earned experience as well as in game training. You should concentrate on getting a few skills that will give your character a role and a chance to shine and understand that just because you can do A really well it doesn't always preclude you doing B in addition. // If you want a list that will put you off ever creating a character look no further than EXALTED.

BRIAN C MISIASZEK: Looking at your proposed new 'source of all the horror' I am a bit puzzled as to where the horror is. How am I supposed to feel my flesh creep when I hear the news that there is an ancient, powerful and inhuman thing beneath all our feet? (And have

you read the Professor Challenger story WHEN THE WORLD SCREAMED?) //

LISA PADOL: Thank you once again for organising the *Festschrift*. We all hope Lee enjoyed it. // ‘A GOOD SOCIETY hack for Military SFF’. Lots of meals in the Wardroom. Lots of staff meetings. Lots of Unresolved Sexual Tension. Oh and a few Courts Martial. //

RYCT Me: I have URBAN SHADOWS somewhere. I’ll see if I can dig it out. // The City in the volcano was going to be part decadent home of a once great civilization and part a place to put ancient mysteries that were better left alone. // I am going to let the history of Aegis (a much more pleasant place) develop from what my fancy conjures up to keep the players interested. I have used MICROSCOPE with this bunch of players but only to wrap a game setting after ending the campaign. // I started with CITIZENS OF THE EMPIRE and then used the characters from the LARP (which I took part in once) to flesh out the background. I’m not sure I would do Glamour the way they did if I were starting from scratch but I was happy with most of the material. (I sidelined the idea of using broos as toilet attendants though.) CITIZENS is a nice little setting though with a bit too much in the way of jokes derived from British SitComs of the last century. // WHEN THE CLOCK BROKE does take things back to the 1960s. It details the neo-Nazis who were around before it became respectable and IIRC details the early moves of the extreme right into computer networking and decentralised organisation. // My problem with BRINDLEWOOD BAY was not incorporating the pre-written clues but rather when they had enough clues keeping my own ideas out of it. (Which were just sufficiently different from theirs to make me think: “But hang on they haven’t really incorporating....” Bad GM! I think I suppressed in the final round up and used the bit they missed to create a complication in an allowable way but my ego was bruised.) // I have said things like that clearly sometimes but I prefer to keep the Big Bad in the background until the last moment by story based means. // I

think my problem is that they wheedle well. I am firm in my own mind what I am depicting but their own mental pictures are always a lot more optimistic. // Re Eloi and Morlocks: It’s possible THE TIME MACHINE was in my mind when I came up with this. // RQ:GLORANTHA allows you to augment rolls with Passions and Runes which gives a feel partly of PENDRAGON and partly of what is now QUESTWORLDS. //

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: RYCT Me:

My ideas about inter-species breeding actually started with me wondering/worrying about why Kryptonians and humans can interbreed.²⁰ That explanation ran through an ancient civilization (Atlantis) so I didn’t want to repeat myself. The central idea that I resolved upon was to consider all the worlds that contributed to the Banestorm refugees were variants of Earth and had a common past that diverged at some point, even the ones with divergent geography. I can’t recall in what order the war between the ancient aliens and the dragons and the genetic alteration technology got added to the mix but it made sense. I was anxious to avoid any explanation for the world of Yrth that boiled down to “Because Magic!” (Though I will admit that “Because Alien Super Tech!” is only a variant of that.) I dislike the trope of magic and science being incompatible with a passion and wanted if not scientific accuracy at least scientific verisimilitude. // My players often complain that my bad guys take several tries at killing due to unfair use of common mechanics. // A lot of modern designs (especially Forged In The Dark) feel more like a straightjacket than a vehicle to wonderful new things.

JIM VASSILAKOS: RYCT Me: I should indeed keep the possibility of sterile interbreeding in mind for Yrth. Perhaps to account for why Human/Giant crossbreeds are not more common.

MY LAST WORD IS: STRIGILATION. If it was good enough for the Romans it should be good enough for you.

²⁰ TPPoE&A: They can? ME: Oh yes, the writers say so!

Engines & Emulators #5

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Trip Report: Lake Geneva, Wis.

In late September, about a month before my wife and I moved to northern Portugal—we've now been here four weeks—we organized a weekend trip to Lake Geneva, Wis., arguably the birthplace of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The arrangement was that we'd spend the weekend exploring the history of the resort town (largely built with Chicago money), stay at a historic hotel, and enjoy dinner at a good restaurant. What my wife didn't fully realize was that that exploration would include many sites and sights related to *D&D*, TSR Inc., and roleplaying games.

I prepared an itinerary and walking map based on the *Adventurer's Map of Lake Geneva* information available on the Dragon Days festival Web site (<https://www.dragondays.org/amolg-initiative>) and multiple other sources. I didn't obtain my physical copy of the map from TLB Games (<https://www.tlbgames.com/products/adventurers-map-of-lake-geneva>) until after our return home.

I recommend that you procure a physical copy for yourself before you travel if you plan to go to Lake Geneva; the information-rich, large-format fold-out map would have been a welcome resource. My 15-page cobbled-together printout was helpful but occasionally duplicative and repetitive given the multiple sources on which I drew. Ironically, we went to Lake Geneva just a couple of weeks before Dragon Days itself. I'll have to return to experience the hullabaloo firsthand in the future.

What follows is documentation of much of our walking tour, roughly in the order in which we pursued it. I've wanted to do this for a long time.

After driving to Lake Geneva from Madison—about an hour and a half drive—our first stop was the location of TSR Inc.'s fifth headquarters, 281 Sheridan Springs Road. (<https://www.dragondays.org/lgam-28>) It's located at the northern edge of town and made a convenient starting place. Now a vintage home goods and estate sale shop called Unique Home Decor and Consignment, the building is open to the public, so we

were able to go inside and imagine what the office and warehouse space might have been like when TSR was based there.



281 Sheridan Springs Road



Right next door, a short distance away, was TSR's sixth headquarters, 201 Sheridan Springs Road. (<https://www.dragondays.org/lgam-29>) A very large,

sprawling complex, the site marks the company’s boom and eventual bust, as well as Gary Gygax’s departure from the company. The building now houses Custom Service Plastics Inc. (<https://csplastics.com>)



201 Sheridan Springs Road



Because it was about lunch time, we decided to check out Next Door Pub (<https://www.nextdoorpub.com>),

411 Interchange N, a nearby tavern—and at one time a hang-out for employees (<https://www.dragondays.org/lgam-30>)—for a bite to eat. When there are special events and TSR reunion gatherings in Lake Geneva, former employees usually meet at the Next Door Pub at least once.



I don’t really remember what we ordered for lunch at this late date, but I might have gotten the Pub Club. Regardless, the food was quite good, the prices reasonable, and the staff friendly. The place, while excellent, is nothing special, but I can totally understand it having been a TSR lunch joint and afterwork drinks standby.

Following our midday meal, we went to Oak Hill Cemetery, 1101 Cemetery Road, to locate Gygax’s grave and pay homage to the man. (<https://www.dragondays.org/lgam-31>) The information we had was pretty inaccurate, but utilizing other online sources—and thanks to my wife’s skilled triangulation using buildings located in the backgrounds of photographs—Caitlin eventually found the gravestone.





I hadn't brought any spare dice with us, so I didn't leave an offering in the chest of polyhedrons—but many other people had. After leaving the cemetery to head downtown, American Legion Hall Post #24 (<https://www.dragondays.org/lgam-18>), 735 Henry St., served as a brief stop on our way to one of two locations preceding the bulk of our walking tour.



The Geneva Lake Museum (<https://genevalakemuseum.org>), 255 Mill St., is located in an old Wisconsin Power & Light building. (<https://www.dragondays.org/lgam-21>) In addition to the museum's general exhibits—which focus on Lake Geneva history, including local cartoonists and other interesting tidbits—there's an exhibit that concentrates on TSR and *D&D*. The docents were very friendly.



In one of the display rooms, there were multiple editions of Tom Swift novels by Victor Appleton, as well as Pee-Wee Harris books by Percy Keese Fitzhugh. A display focusing on local actor Kerwin Mathews featured lobby cards for *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* and *The 3 Worlds of Gulliver*.



Titles include *Tom Swift and His Flying Boat*, *Tom Swift and His Electric Runabout*, *Tom Swift and His Airship*, *Tom Swift in the Caves of Ice*, *Tom Swift in Captivity*, *Tom Swift and His Wizard Camera*, *Tom Swift and His Aerial Warship*, *Tom Swift and His Motor Cycle*, and *Tom Swift and His Big Dirigible*.



The TSR exhibit, titled “The Wizard of Lake Geneva,” mostly focused on the company’s published output rather than the life of Gygax or the company, though there were some items detailing *D&D*’s history and professional correspondence. There were very few photographs and little focus on other people behind the game—though one display case indicated active control of the approved narrative history of *D&D*.



With the Gygax family still actively involved in managing Gary Gygax’s estate—and different branches of the family not always agreeing on what should be done, how, or by whom—I’d imagine that any exhibit focusing on TSR or the legacy of Gygax and other contributors would be challenging to navigate and negotiate.

Additionally, Wizards of the Coast’s ongoing business interests would also come into play because the intellectual property and trademarks are still in use. So the exhibit is relatively sanitary. In the gift shop, one can purchase several books about the history of the game. Those might have included Ben Riggs’s *Slaying the Dragon: A Secret History of Dungeons & Dragons* and Jon Peterson’s *Game Wizards: The Epic Battle for Dungeons & Dragons*.





Rather than walk to the Lake Geneva Public Library (<https://www.dragondays.org/lgam-25>), 918 West Main St., we moved the car in order to find several other sites nearby. Parking was pretty tight. The library features a large dragon sculpture in front of the building, an Appendix N reading nook with a wide array of relevant reading materials—a highlight

of our time in Lake Geneva—and a throne in which visitors can sit for a photograph.



Outside the library in Elm Park (<https://www.dragondays.org/lgam-33>), near the end of a walkway along the waterfront heading away from the beach and swimming area, a memorial bench honors Gyax. We sat on the bench imagining Gyax sitting or reading



Outside of the entrance to the hall, there are two commemorative paving stones of interest. They're worth looking for even if you can't gain entrance to the hall. *Fight in the Skies* was included in the Geneva Lake Museum exhibit.



Our walking tour took us past several notable homes that weren't necessarily important

photographically. (I took pictures, but I'm not including them in this fanzine.) Those locations included houses lived in by Brian Blume (<https://www.dragondays.org/lgam-15>), Gygax as a child (<https://www.dragondays.org/lgam-02>), his grandparents next door, Rob Kuntz (<https://www.dragondays.org/lgam-17>), and Gygax and his wives (such as <https://www.dragondays.org/lgam-32> and <https://www.dragondays.org/lgam-10>).

One residence that I deemed particularly important was an apartment building in which Dave Arneson had lived. Located at 830 Wisconsin St. (<https://www.dragondays.org/lgam-16>), the building housed Arneson for 11 months while he worked for TSR. David Megarry, who had also relocated from Minnesota, lived with him. Rob Kuntz has written a couple of important books that detail Arneson's contribution to *D&D* and roleplaying games more generally. They are available from Kuntz at <https://threelinestudiostore.com>.



830 Wisconsin St.

Back downtown, the site of Hotel Clair (<https://www.dragondays.org/lgam-24>), 772 W. Main St., served as TSR's fourth headquarters, as well as a location of the Dungeon Hobby Shop. This is likely the location I was aware of—but never visited—when I first encountered the game as a preteen.





772 W. Main St.

On the waterfront, the Riviera (<https://www.dragondays.org/lgam-26>), 812 Wrigley Drive, features a memorial tile near the fountain.



One of the more important stops on the tour was the post office in which TSR's P.O. Box was located. The Lake Geneva Post Office (<https://www.dragon>

[days.org/lgam-22](https://www.dragondays.org/lgam-22)), 672 West Main St., was open, fortuitously, and we were able to look at—and touch—P.O. Box 756. That might seem strange, but I'm sure fanzine fen will be able to appreciate that moment. Just imagine how much fascinating mail arrived at that box—and how many fannish friendships and professional relationships were fostered thanks to that mailing address..



Lake Geneva Post Office



330 Center St. (<https://www.dragondays.org/lgam-11>) was also an important location. Considered by some to be the birthplace of *D&D*, this is where Arneson and Megarry first demonstrated Blackmoor for Gygax, Ernie Gygax Jr., and Rob and Terry Kuntz. Given Blackmoor's contributions to the game, one could argue that Minnesota was where *D&D* was born, but in name—and with TSR as a corporate entity—Lake Geneva is where the game took commercial form and life.

Apparently, you can visit the building, arrange to play a game there, even stay overnight nearby. (<https://www.birthplaceofdnd.com>) I had reached out to the

current owners before our trip to see if we could at least come inside and look around, but nobody got back to me. They might be more amenable if you're scheduling a paid game session or overnight stay.



330 Center St.



This triprep doesn't touch on every stop on our tour or include every photo I took, but it's a good representation of the day, which ran from before lunch to mid- to late afternoon. Having done our share of walking, we decided to head toward the hotel and progress to the less fannish part of the weekend.

We spent the night at the French Country Inn Lake Geneva (<https://www.frenchcountryinn.com>), W4190 West End Road, which, while it's located in Lake Geneva, is actually located on Lake Como. The guesthouse and part of the main house were constructed in Denmark in the 1880s. The building was displayed at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition before serving as an ice storage house, a private hunt club, and eventually a hotel with multiple owners over the decades..

As the Lake Geneva Hotel, it became a getaway for

Chicago-area gangsters such as George "Bugs" Moran, Baby Face Nelson, and members of the John Dillinger gang. A speakeasy called "The Sewer" was hidden beneath what is now the bar for the hotel. Clyde Deighton's book *Murder at the French Country Inn* was inspired by the location. It's a very comfortable hotel, with wonderful views of Lake Como. We enjoyed our night there, as well as breakfast the next morning.



Baby Face Nelson slept here



Lake Como

For dinner that night, we drove to the far end of Lake Geneva to Pier 290 (<https://pier290.com>), the only restaurant on the shore of the lake—not just with a view. Located in Williams Bay, it's a quality eatery adjacent to a working dock.

Imagine my surprise when, shortly after our weekend trip to Lake Geneva, I received in the mail a print copy of Michael Dobson's *Random Jottings 22 Omnibus*. In that "199"-page squarebound issue, Dobson published an article titled "Alea Iacta Est: Throwing Dice for Fun and Profit," in which he

recounts his experiences working for TSR, in Lake Geneva, in one of the buildings we stopped at first upon arriving in town! Why, he might have even eaten at the Next Door Pub while working there.

If you'd like to obtain your own copy of *Random Jottings 22 Omnibus*, you can write to Dobson at 26 Saint Peter Circle, Lititz, PA 17545-2235; editor@timespinnerpress.com; <http://www.dobsonbooks.com>. You can also just download it from <https://efanzines.com/RandomJottings/RandomJottings22Omnibus.pdf>, but Dobson is worth writing.

I did. My LOC is on p. 59 of his fanzine.

Comments on Ever & Anon

My apologies for not including mailing comments in thish—and for missing last month's distribution. With the move to Portugal at the end of October, my time has been occupied in other ways, but I wanted to contribute this Lake Geneva triprep sooner than later because it occurred immediately after filing for the September distribution. It was a wonderful trip.

I hope that you and yours are well. The holidays are approaching!



—Teddy Harvia

Ronin Engineer for Ever & Anon #6

by Jim Eckman,
Mountain View, CA
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Notes

Last issues books were:

1) RAH The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, 2) AN Judgment on Janus or Catseye 3) RAH Starship Troopers 4) AN The Beast Master 5) AN Ice Crown 6) RAH Glory Road

IRL

Finished art show, starting on some new projects.

IgTheme

I find that the crowds, noise and distractions exhausting, I can only take a little of this at a time.

Worlds of Wonder

In addition to having a character generation system that's flexible, you need a way of describing worlds that can handle a broad range of details without getting overloaded. An automated fueling stop next to a gas giant may not need much detail at all while they made a GURPS supplement out of Jack Vance's Tschai – Planet of Adventure. Having run Tschai as an arc in one of my campaigns was fun, I haven't read the GURPS supplement, but its probably a nice addition for GURPS Space even if you wind up not running it. So a world might just be a paragraph or 128 pages, that's a wide range and I doubt that most of us want to write up 128 pages for what winds up to be a fuel stop.

The way I normally design my basic filler worlds is simple, a name and location, a brief physical description and then an overview of what you might run into on the average.

Baden-Powell X, Y, Z

This planet was originally settled by a group of highly idealistic humans that set out to find a planet that would allow them to implement their code of honor. No inhabited planet naturally wanted to change theirs, so the settlers discovered one instead. The code that these people follow is based upon the Old Earth Boy Scout organization and the people of Baden-Powell have changed the name to the Scouts so as to avoid sexist overtones.

Baden-Powell is possibly one of the most pleasant planets that exist in human space. When the original settlers found this world the climate and geography combined to make the planet very unpleasant. By the use of elementary weather control and some nuclear mining, they soon had the climate under control, and then turned it into one giant park and forest reserve.

Baden-Powell weathered the collapse of the Terran Imperium with few issues, they were prepared. Locally they have the best technology and their academies and libraries are famous.

So long as a visitor is pleasant and well mannered the Scouts will welcome them with open arms. (this left out a couple of PCs)

There is one unique custom. Scouts often wear small badges that show mastery of academic studies and vocational skills.

I was hoping that this planet would become a resource like Miskatonic University in COC, the players visited a couple of times to exchange some information but didn't make any serious connections. I would make this world sound a bit sinister if I used it in the future, more like L.E. Modesitt's Ecolitan center.

Growth X, Y, Z

This world is similar to the Rockies of Olde Earth and is inhabited by a colony of Ursoids. Not much else is known of this planet.

One player was running two Ursoids, Fluffy and Buttercup, and wanted a planet that they could claim to be the exiled rulers of. They then tried to convince the party to help them retake the throne. Midst the outburst of profanity, the least profane was "A planet full of people like you? Do I look @\$%-ING stupid?" We were using Space Opera, a furry friendly game system where all the furry folk had more build points than humans. A long time ago I asked one of the designers? Beta testers? why humans are so sucky and they commented that "Humans are the cockroaches of the universe".

This world was never used.

Prison Planet (unnamed) X, Y, Z

This was a disposable world, with a one line description. It wound up sucking up about six weeks of play. The story created on the fly is that the prisoners were followers of an obscure cult leader from 20th century Earth named Ayn Rand. Much silliness ensued.

Reactions to Issue #6

Denizens of the Library #4 – Brian Rogers Sounds like you have been drafted into the theater. Speed Centaur is for? Old school D&D character classes, nostalgic. For somethings Traveller is OK.

The Seedling #52 – Mark Nemeth Your "Robert Heinlein versus Andre Norton" section reminded me of Richard Hugo's "Krebs/Snopce" categorization of poets In my case its the haves and have nots.

Firedrake's Hoard #3 – Roger Bell_West GURPS character generation The Fantasy Trip's simpler version of this works well even for novices, GURPS splits it down too much IMHO. That being said, if a group is GURPS savvy, I'd use it. Star Traders, sounds interesting. Also agree, PCs are not normal. Thanks for typist info.

Reddened Stars #3 – John Redden Great link for hobby history, simplified GURPS is ITL;)

Children's Interactive Fiction, Pt 6 – Pedro Panhoca da Silva & Camila Lourenço Panhoca

Yes!

Dreadsword #4 – Mitch Hyde Great game reviews.

Bugbears & Ballyhoo #43 – Gabriel Roark Yes backstories could handle this, I just think it would be interesting as part of PC generation. Skating accident, ouch!

Twisting the Rope #5 – Myles Corcoran Good point, retiring Traveller characters might be broke!

The Rhodomontadulous Promenade – George Phillis Re: Norton's older books are obscure.

The Phoenix Nest #5 – Michael Cule Agreed, once Heinlein could no longer be edited, his books became a red hot mess.

The Dragon's Beard #90 – Patrick Zoch Starship Troopers the book was fairly real.

Quasipseudoludognostication #5 – Patrick Riley Traveller PCs are the weird ones.

+Attacks of Opportunity #4 – Dylan Capel I like your idea for a Traveller campaign.

Bumbling Through Dungeons #5 – Mark A. Wilson My sympathy on your job search.

Going to be Ad-Libbed #3 – Avram Grumer Good point on book versus PC characters, PCs have to be more flexible since they aren't in novels which are 100% railroaded. I do like the characters having a reason to run other than they felt like it. RAH 100%. Thanks for Typist info.

Age of Menace #242 – Brian Christopher Misiaszek Fabulous material again. Catseye does have a very similar start, I'll have to reread it.

An Unlooked For Zine #4 – Lisa Padol Comments on sanity or maybe mental fortitude, stress levels etc. Not happy with COC either for general gaming. More thoughts at a later date.

Accidental Recall #4 – Joshua Kronengold Re: Norton, I do find her worlds wondrous as well as well as Jack Vance's and others. Also she blurs between SF and fantasy in many of her works. Heinlein is better with people, but his worlds not so much.

Traveller PBEM: Plankwell, Ch 50 – Vassilakos, Collinson, and Rader I do feel that many Traveller campaigns tend towards military SF as a model, which makes them feel more current rather than a strange, unknowable future. Societies like Ian Bank's the Culture or Charles Stross' Glasshouse are far weirder.

Everyone else: RAEBNC

Next issue

Read more on current SF RPGs, finish sorting and scanning Wanderer.



Issue 243

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Age of Menace

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From Our Last Episode...

November is always a darker more deary month up here in southern Ontario. The more colourful autumn leaves have now entirely changed and fallen, leaving just various drab shades of brown flung over half bare sticks of trees.

Not long after I last wrote lastish our daughter, Lauren got her LSAT results back. She had worked her heart out all summer preparing for her re-write in October. She had written it last year, and got a 164 (79th percentile), and with her high GPA as well as other academic and non-academic activities she could probably have gotten into any Canadian law school she wanted to. But she really wants to go to the *University of Toronto* and wanted to guarantee this chance. She'd been anxiously waiting for the results and they finally came out October 24th at 9 am. She scored a 170, placing her in the 95th percentile! She was delighted, and we couldn't be prouder of her dedication and hard work.

In other news, our beloved 14-year-old rescue dog Sadie (78 in human years) recently gave us quite a scare. A few weeks ago, she had a lump removed from her nipple area, and the pathology came back as an apocrine (sweat gland) adenocarcinoma, a rare form of cancer in dogs that can be locally invasive. We feared the worst, as she'd been losing weight and seemed to have less of her usual spark.



However, her chest X-ray was clear, showing no sign of spread, and under sedation the vet discovered a couple of cracked molars that may have been the real reason she'd gone off her hard kibble. A dental extraction was just done 2 days before deadline and we're hopeful that once her mouth is comfortable again, our formerly energetic old girl will feel more like herself. For now, Sadie continues to enjoy her new soft food, the warmth of home, and all the love and gentle attention we can give her.

Habana Horror: *The Mazorra* (Part 4)

Horrors of the Mazorra: a 1930s Pulp Cthulhu scenario (cont).



Nov. 1930: Brillante fiesta en el Hospital de Dementes de Mazorra (Capt. Gandia & Director Machado)

RECAP: Chaotic Arrival & Woman's Dept. Tour

It was 9:00 a.m. when the Investigators arrive at the *Hospital de Dementes de Mazorra's* Visitor Rail Platform. They may be breathless, bruised, and

visibly shaken from the aftermath of their supernatural battle aboard the train with **Mateo Desrosiers** summoning a manifestation of Baron Samedi (or more precisely, *Baron Kriminal*)¹.

The *Mazorra* staff and hospital officials had rushed towards the passengers debarking the train in a flurry of alarm. Guards shout conflicting orders, orderlies try to keep back anxious visitors, and several officials demand explanations before anyone has even caught their breath. First aid was provided to those who need it—and after the injured or deceased Brujah/Bokor and any injured passengers/guards are taken away. A few nurses cross themselves when they see the state of the wounded.

At the insistence Visiting Investigators, they went on the first leg of their official inspection. Dr. Ramagosa begins their tour in M2 (the *Women's Department* medical hospital), before guiding them through several of the adjoining Women's Dept Pavilions and met several patients Whatever the Investigators witnessed in M2 or the nearby patient Pavilions, or how they behaved while witnessing things, will leave impressions on the *Mazorra* staff. By 11:00 a.m., when they arrive at the *Staff Canteen* for the scheduled brunch, the atmosphere has shifted among their tour-guides:



Dra. Gilda Ramagosa becomes overly formal, clipped in tone, even a little cold. She clearly realizes the PCs saw more than she intended. She now worries about repercussions but refuses to speak openly about it.



Dr. Arturo Vilela has quietly observed which Investigators the delusional patients responded to most naturally. He files these observations away with clinical precision for later use.



Sr. Enrique "Ricky" Morales, the Machado government liaison, watched them closely on the wards. He regards them with a mix of respect and caution. If the PCs avoid mentioning what he said on the train, he is impressed by both their discretion and their compassion.

11 am: Transition to Brunch

With the tour concluded, Dra. Ramagosa—visibly relieved—hands the role of guide back to Ricky. He explains that a light brunch has been prepared for them in the nearby Staff Canteen, where tables have been set aside for their group. Afterward, he will take

them through the Children's Ward Pavilions and then the Men's Department, with time later to freshen up in the Visitor's Quarters before a formal 7 p.m. supper with senior leadership, including the elusive Director Machado.

The Staff Canteen Brunch (south of I, next to B2)

The Staff Canteen is a modest, one-story yellow building with white shutters open to the late-morning air. Inside, the dining room is bright and simple: long wooden tables, pastel walls, a few paintings, and high rafters where small birds flutter in and out through the open windows. A buffet offers bread, pastries, eggs, sliced meats and cheese, fruit juice, water, and steaming café con leche.

Several staff members already sit at scattered tables, nurses, clerks, and orderlies, quietly talking or reading newspapers. A pair of canteen workers move briskly among them, clearing plates and refilling coffee. Their curious glances follow the Investigators as Ricky leads them toward the reserved tables.

Toward the back of the room, a roped-off section bears a handwritten placard reading *Reservada*. Ricky steps ahead to unhook the rope, gestures the Investigators inside. Several tables have been pushed together into a long square and covered with a crisp white tablecloth. Chairs, plates, water glasses, and neatly wrapped cutlery await each guest. Small placards indicate assigned seating, ensuring that every Investigator, PC or NPC, sits beside selected members of the *Mazorra* staff, setting the stage for conversation, alliances, and subtle probing beneath the polite social veneer of brunch.

Legend – Clockwise from North-Left (Seat 1)

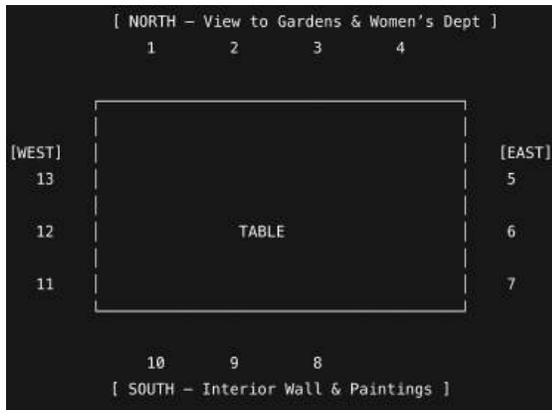
NORTH (1–4) – facing away from Women's Dept

1. **Dra. Gilda Ramagosa** – *Mazorra* Psychiatrist
2. **[PC] Flash Duvall** – US photojournalist
3. **Dr. Arturo Vilela** – *Mazorra* Child Psychiatrist
4. **[PC] Dra. Isabela Coutinho** – Mexican parasitologist (*The Fading*)

EAST (5–7) – open French doors, morning breeze

5. **Dra. Elda Real y Oro** – Clinical psychologist, Children's Pavilion
6. **[PC] Inspector Hargreaves** – UK private investigator with occult experience
7. **Dr. Ramon Zorrilla** – Intense neuro-psychiatrist; unnerving curiosity

¹ A bit of retconning on my part.



SOUTH (8-10) – interior wall with paintings

8. **[PC] Alejandro Vargas:** Wealthy Cuban searching for his half-brother
9. **Chief RN Beatriz Montalvo:** Veteran, utterly capable yet watchful 47 yo RN
10. **[PC] Hermana María del Sagrario** – Spanish RN/ former Nun on mission of vengeance for her late sister who died inside the Mazorra.

WEST (11-13) – toward kitchen/service access

11. **Sr. Ricky Morales** – Government liaison, *host* of the brunch seated in SW corner to observe everyone (secret mission? document corruption)
12. **[PC] Dra. Jacqueline Ellery** – US Psychiatrist & undercover reformist for League of Nations
13. **Dr. Santiago Prats** – Young idealist Mazorran MD (& secret A.B.C. member)
14. Empty.



RN Beatriz Montalva



Dr Ramon Zorrilla

Ricky welcomed everyone with an effortlessly warm-if slightly strained-speech: "Mis amigos, after such an eventful arrival, perhaps a quiet meal will restore spirits. We'll soon continue with the rest of today's rápido tour, but for now, eat, drink, & breathe. presence honours Mazorra"



Dr. Santiago Prats



Doctora Elda Real y Oro

If any of the Investigators ask about the 14th place setting, Ricky's provides a smooth, almost instant deflection: "Ah, sí, that was simply prepared in case the Director arrived early." He'll look down, mutter something softly then looks up with a smile. "But he had an unexpected matter to attend to."

A successful *Listen* roll (N difficulty) from an Investigator who speaks Spanish will have heard "Nunca lo hace" <He never does.> A successful *Psychiatry* Roll at N difficulty will correctly interpret his smile & flick of the eyes to mean "...please don't pursue that."

And if any of the Investigators points out aloud that 13 of them have just sat down for dinner, one of the women seated whom they have not yet met will say: "I'd rather not test that superstition today," after making a quick sign of the cross. Ricky will hasten to introduce her as *Jefa de Enfermería* (Chief RN) Beatriz Montalvo.

Brunch Conversation Topic: The Train Incident

After the Investigators have filled their plates and taken their seats, a woman they have not yet met speaks up. She is a poised, professional-looking figure with a light coffee complexion, neatly pinned dark hair, and strikingly large brown eyes. Her crisp short lab coat bearing the stitched name *Dra. E. Real*, a pale striped blouse buttoned to the throat, a dark skirt, discreet jewelled earrings, and a small gold crucifix at her collar. Her left hand bears no wedding ring.

She regards the Investigators calmly, then says, "We have heard... two very different accounts of your arrival this morning. People fill in the gaps when frightened. I am curious: which version do you believe?"

Ricky, recovering quickly, introduces her: "Dra. Elda Real y Oro is our clinical psychologist."

If the Investigators hesitate or ask, “*What version?*” then Dra. Real will smoothly outline **Report #1**, and **Dr. Santiago Prats** will jump in almost immediately to share **Report #2**.

Conflicting Report #1: “Mechanical Disaster & Panic” from railway staff and a few orderlies. A mechanical failure near the Mazorra spur caused the train to lurch violently. Luggage spilled everywhere, including some of the nitric oxide tanks from the anaesthetist travelling in the car with the Brujah, causing them to crack and leak and leading to a fight among those confused by the gas. A few passengers became hysterical, possibly drunk or delirious or affected by this medical gas. There was mention of a “man in an opera hat” but only as a hallucination seen by frightened people that became amplified in the retelling.

Conflicting Report #2: “Cursed Brujah Attack” is circulating through superstitious orderlies, guards, and Mazorra switchboard operator Teresa Pacheco. According to Mazorra’s more superstitious employees, a dead spirit that trailed the Haitian *brujah* prisoner boarded the train, and Mazorra’s already-troubled grounds only strengthened it. Several passengers swear they saw a tall dark man with a skull’s smile standing at the end of the car—a restless *muerto*, a Guédé in a top hat. Some now whisper the spirit may have followed the train into the asylum itself.

- **Dr. Vilela** will immediately confirm that there *was* indeed a Haitian *brujah* or *bokor* on the train, “a man with TB & intense delusional beliefs.” He adds, “He was admitted this morning, and if still alive is resting now in the TB Pavilion, just north of our little Mazorran cemetery.”
- **Dra. Ramagosa** arches a brow across the table to Dr. Zorrilla: “If the Brujah is lucid enough to speak, *you* should evaluate him, Ramón. This seems rather close to your... interests.”
- At the word *brujah*, **Dr. Zorrilla’s** eyes sharpen, unable to hide his interest from Dr. Ramagosa or anyone else. He says smoothly: “Haitian *Vodou* differs greatly from our Cuban *Santería*... I would be most interested in examining his belief system firsthand, and as soon as possible.”

[Keeper’s Note: The Investigators’ own version, if they give one now becomes **conflicting account #3**. Each staff member quietly studies the discrepancies before adding their view. Pick and choose or use all of the NPC Reactions below:

- **Dr. Santiago Prats** (*earnest, thoughtful, hands loosely clasped*) “Fear of TB contagion can unsettle even trained men. Guards trying not to breathe deeply may have grown dizzy, anxious... panic spreads quickly in close quarters.”

- **Dra. Gilda Ramagosa** (*matter-of-fact, wiping her glasses*) “Fatigue and fumes conjure illusions far more reliably than spirits.”
- **Ricky:** Unless those spirits are from one of our famous bottles of Cuban Rum!
- **Chief RN Beatriz Montalvo:** (*muttering, crossing herself discreetly*) “Not all illusions come from smoke, or rum. Medical gases can twist a mind in moments.”
- **Dra. Elda Real y Oro** (*measured, academic*) “Children report monsters every day. And yet adults are rarely more rational when frightened.”
- **Dr. Zorrilla** (*leaning forward, hungry for detail*) “Even so... three separate accounts mentioning a *sombrero de copa*...a ‘man in a top hat’? That is most unusual, no?”
- **Dr. Vilela** (*attempting to sound authoritative, but rubbing his temple*) “Mass hysteria is more contagious than tuberculosis. A ruptured gas cylinder explains far more than any vengeful spirit. And if one person talks about a top-hat, all will add it to their story!”
- **Dra. Ramagosa** (*again, clarifying the clinical angle*) “And once panic begins, it cascades. Fumes, fear, chaos, it all feeds on itself.”
- **Dr. Vilela** (*softening*) “The mind under fear can produce its own ghosts.”
- **Dr. Zorrilla** (*intensely interested*) “What *exactly* did he look like, the dark man with the hat? And did he speak?”
- **Ricky Morales** (*quickly, trying to lighten tension and steer away from danger*) “Our TB ward will *not* be part of your tour, my friends. We cannot have visitors falling ill. You put a coughing Haitian mystic in a crowded railcar during a political crisis and expect *calm*? Madness is contagious!”
- **Chief RN Beatriz Montalvo** (*firm*) “Whether superstition or sickness, the passengers were genuinely terrified. We shouldn’t dismiss that.”

The conversation does not quite resolve since someone drops a plate behind them, and all Investigators who fail a POW roll flinch with the others. A few nervous chuckles ripple around the table.

Conversation Topic #2: Rotating Dialogue

As the brunch unfolds, each Investigator has the chance to speak with the Mazorra staff member seated beside them & vice versa:

- PCs to seek information about their personal reasons for coming to Mazorra.
- NPCs Mazorra staff in turn to probe the PCs’ intentions, backgrounds, and political leanings.
- Subtle recruitment attempts (A.B.C., reformists, working here at the Mazorra).

Investigator	NPC (L & R)	Key Info	NPC Opinion
'Flash' Duvall	Dr. Vilela	Mazorra corruption starts at the top; Dr. Llerena a Porra member & he & Yaniz stealing supplies. carries gun 'for safety' Vilela will provide more names on a private interview	Unsure if Flash wants truth or a story to sell.
	Dra. Ramagosa	++ Distrust of Capt. Gandía & his hand-picked <i>Porrista</i> guards	Thinks she can trust Flash but 'should talk in private.
Prof. Isabela	Dr. Zorrilla	Invited to see his Santería pharmacotherapy research; romantic interest? Mentions Dir. Machado having affair with his secretary.	Sees her as a fellow seeker of hidden truths.
	Elda Real	Foreign visitors asking re: children; use them as tools/ weapons	She sees too much, attracting unwanted attention.
Mr. Hargreaves	Dra. Elda Real	Blonde China Doll rarely speaks; his missing person?	Rugged, good looking, wealthy. Pity he's so old (is 58).
	Dr. Zorrilla	Interest in supernatural is for self-experiment!	He can be used for his own knowledge of supernatural
Sr. Alejandro	RN Beatriz	Missing records; copies on private microfilm in Dactyloscopy lab	He is rich, but motives unclear in why tracing brother now
	Dr. Prats	Fellow A.B.C.; must speak privately.	Knows the A.B.C. signs. Must speak privately,
RN Hermana María	Sr. Ricky	Ricky is protecting someone in Children's Pavilion; a pt or Elda?	'I trust her, but if told everything she would be a target too.'
	Beatriz	Devout, terrified; knows about her sister on how she reacted to her name.	She seeks vengeance, but if she goes after the Persian Executioner will likely die. That cannot happen!
Dr. Jacquelin Ellery	Dr. Prats	Says he saw Dr. Llerena sneaking narcotics out of the pharmacy with RN Yániz, but he can't report it without risking his life (both Porra members)	She can be trusted as an ally to A.B.C. if she survives stay
	Ricky	Ricky has hidden motives; secret anti-Machodoist? Says the Mazorra about to explode and he has to protect something or someone	Highly suspicious; here to inspect, not tour. But for whom?

- Rumours about the ongoing national strike, the unrest in Havana, and the strange atmosphere in the asylum.

[Keeper's Note: Go around the table. Each PC speaks to **one** adjacent NPC only. Pick L or R; no cross-talk. Have a brief chat, and reveal just what the chart above shows. This to model how dinner conversations are really like, not an info dump; Investigators can share what they learn later.

[Keeper's Note: If there is a pause in the conversation during the meal, the three Investigators seated facing the windows will also have opportunities to notice unusual activity inside and out with A and B].

A. Those Investigators Facing North

- **Alejandro Vargas (N)**
- **Hermana María del Sagrario (N)**
- **Inspector Hargreaves (E, peripheral view)**

A successful *Spot Hidden* or *Listen* roll notices something uncanny: a column of patients marching southward in crisp military formation, their leader barking sharp commands in a voice the carries. They carry no firearms, only brooms, rakes, and sticks held like rifles on drill. If the Investigators remark on

this, Dr. Prats or Ricky chuckles and waves it off as the "Army" of their self-styled Napoleon, *El Genero*.

B. Inspector Hargreaves, is Facing East. A successful *Spot Hidden*, sees slower moving procession: a tall, gaunt figure in white-and-blue robes moving across the grounds, hand lifted in solemn benediction. Staff and patients alike pause to bow their heads; a few even sink to their knees in prayer, some touching their heads to the ground. If the Investigators haven't met him yet, Chief RN **Beatriz Montalvo** instinctively makes the sign of the cross and quietly identifies him: "*That is Héctor, the Mazorra's Madonna-boy.*"

C. Thos Investigators Facing South (The Painting)

- **Flash Duvall (S)**
- **Dra. Isabelle Coutinho (S)**

A successful *Spot Hidden* from either one reveals that one painting on the south wall is markedly different from the others. Its colours are more saturated, its figures more sharply rendered, as though the paint has not yet fully dried. If any Investigator approaches it, they'll find the signature of Mazorra's celebrated prophetic artist, **Srta. Isabelle Domínguez Varona**.

The painting shows a section of the Mazorra grounds under a harsh, slanted afternoon light: a dirt service road, leaning Royal Palms, and the crumbling wall of

the wall that surrounds the Mazorra. In the midground, two sharply detailed figures stand out against the muted background is a young woman in a simple convent dress and a frightened young man standing protectively before her. They appear cornered against a low stone wall by two indistinct, shadowless figures. The light falls wrong, the shadows don't match the sky, and the scene feels charged with menace. A *Spot Hidden* roll made specifically by Investigators Alejandro Vargas or Hermana María reveals something deeply unsettling: the two figures bear the unmistakable features of their own missing relatives. If this is mentioned aloud, or asked about in private, Ricky, RN Beatriz Montalvo, and Dra. Gilda Ramagosa will each acknowledge knowing the painter and can promise to arrange an introduction tomorrow.

At the end of the meal, Dr. Zorrilla assures them that he and Dr. Prats will guide their tour of the Men's Department immediately after Dr. Vilela completes their planned ninety-minute walkthrough of the Children's Ward.

All the men stand as the female staff rise to make their farewells. Ricky gestures for Dr. Vilela to lead the group back toward the main roadway. RN Beatriz Montalvo excuses herself briefly, noting she will join them but then head off to her own quarters nearby.

Meals End & Departure for the Children's Ward (CW) Tour

With a polite nod, Dr. Vilela rises and leads the Investigators and Ricky toward the older precinct near the main entrance, the district of the east main gate, the Director's Manse, the Superintendent's quarters, and the Medical Staff Pavilions (all green) and the Children's Pavilion (yellow).



The buildings here show faded but authentic Spanish-colonial elegance. Clustered nearby are the children's school, the nursing school, dormitories for

the student nurses, and the Chief Nurse's residence. The Mazorra chapel, a relic of the original plantation, rises above manicured lawns, clipped hedges, and a modest playground.

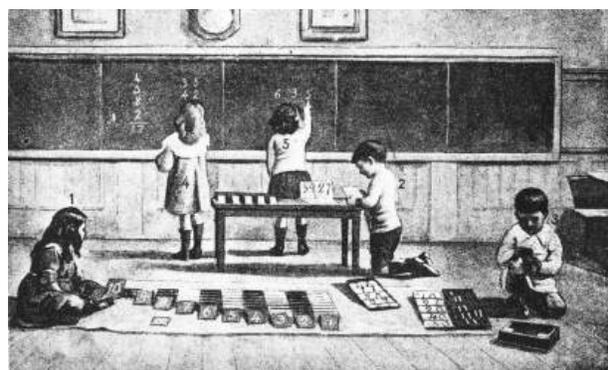
About thirty children, ages five to early adolescence, run and shout under the watch of teachers, nurses, and a few smiling, unarmed guards. The area is fenced, but the gate stands unlocked; a guard opens it at once for them all. As the group steps inside, Vilela's whole manner loosens; his shoulders drop, voice brightens.

Switching easily into English, he says, "Child psychiatry is finally becoming its own field. Here you will see the same troubles adults suffer, *nervios*, nightmares, restlessness, but also moral disorders, conduct issues. There are many epileptic children whose fits are now understood as illness, not possession. Some are simply 'backward,' born with weak minds or harmed early in life. Each tells a story of Cuban society and of the sorrows of their homes."

Observation Room

Inside the ward building, he guides them up a narrow stair to a dim hallway. "This observation room I will show you has a one-way glass mirror lets us observe without being seen. Doctora Elda Real y Oro, whom you all met at lunch, is one of our child psychologists and is inside recording what she sees. Please, we must speak in low voices."

He taps softly, and after a call inside, he opens the door. She is seated watching through the mirror in a darkened room a classroom where several children are doing things. Doctora Real turns slightly in her chair when the door opens.



She offers the visitors a warm, professional smile and sets aside her pen, stopwatch, and annotated clipboard. "Bienvenidos again. If you carry valuables, please place them in the baskets on the shelf behind you. Because of Hermes."

If asked to elaborate, Dr. Elda Real explains lightly: “Last month a visiting surgeon left his pocket-watch on that counter. Hermes reduced it to sixty-three pieces before anyone noticed, arranged by size. He then reassembled it in under an hour. It keeps better time now, but the surgeon never leaves anything unattended.”

A Spot Hidden notices Vilela has already deposited his watch, pen, and, overly casual, even his fully loaded 0.38 revolver. A **Hard** success sees a discreet engraving on the watch: *Para A.V., con amor, E.R.*

What the Children Are Doing

Behind the glass, the children move with **an uncanny stillness** between moments of activity:

- A girl is making odd shapes on the chalkboard
- A boy writing math on the board stops mid-equation, staring at something invisible drifting near the ceiling, then calmly resumes. The numbers look disturbingly like early calculus.
- On the floor, one girl arranges numbered tiles into a sequence they cannot quite make out
- Nearby, a small boy dismantles an ornate cuckoo **clock**, its gears laid out in precise spirals while the wooden bird rests like a specimen.

“Hermes,” Elda murmurs when they notice this boy. “He wished to understand how the bird sings. He will put it back together. Eventually.”

Entering the Classroom

Vilela motions the group into the classroom.

Ricky lingers a moment with Elda; their voices drop. A **Listen (Hard)** or **Psychology (Regular)** may catch a fragment: “Elda... the situation in the capital is changing fast. Have your things packed. Be ready to leave—with the records—at a moment’s notice.”

After entering the room, three children immediately run up to hug him, bumping into the others before an orderly in a bow-tie gently shoos the three giggling children aside.

Inside, the Investigators may quietly circulate:

- **Simona B.**, a thin girl of eight, sketches a human figure in purple crayon, **full of holes**, not spots. The holes are not empty but reveal deeper anatomical structures; veins, arteries, muscles, and even bone.
- **Marie Maria Santamaria**, a blonde blue-eyed girl ~5 with one lazy eye draws the same looping

chalk shape again and again, each iteration more perfect, a human Spirograph

- **Marisol “Solita” Quiñones**, the little brunette girl on the floor is aged 8. Looking at the tiles, they go 1 through 9, then two symbols no one recognizes (Ϝ and Ϝ), before converting the row into a neat base-12 grid no child should grasp. If asked in Spanish what she is doing she’ll say “Solo estoy viendo por dónde va a caminar la gente después.” <I’m just figuring out where people will walk next.>
- **Hermes Valdez**, the small boy from earlier dismantling the cuckoo clock, sits alone. He has set aside the gears and is instead rapidly disassembling a fountain pen. With a start, one Investigator realizes...it’s **their** pen! (or any other object they had not put in the basket.

◦If they shout, Hermes startles; pieces spill, ink splatters.

◦If they stay calm, he beams, reassembles it in under thirty seconds, and hands it back with pride.

Ricky will tap at his watch; time to move on to the next leg of their tour.

Children’s Ward NPCs:

Doctora Elda Real y Oro

Clinical Psychologist, Children’s Pavilion
Age: 31 **Nationality:** Cuban
Languages: Spanish 85%, English 55%, French 30%

Dra. Real is a poised, soft-spoken clinician with a light coffee complexion, large dark eyes, and meticulously pinned hair. She dresses with quiet elegance beneath her short lab coat: striped blouse buttoned to the throat, dark skirt, jewelled earrings, and a discreet gold crucifix. Notably, she wears no wedding ring. Calm, analytical, and unfailingly composed, she can seem almost detached in the observation room, yet her empathy with the children is unmistakable. Her voice is low and musical, warmer still when speaking with Dr. Arturo Vilela.

Keeper Notes

- **Traits:** Balanced, perceptive, gently authoritative; her stillness can be faintly unsettling.
- **Motivation:** Protect her patients; advance her research into transgenerational trauma.
- **Private Studies:** Afro-Cuban spiritual traditions and their psychological echoes in children.
- **Secrets:**
 - She wishes her professional relationship with Dr. Vilela were something ...more.

- She conducts quiet séances with Solita & Simona B., convinced the two girls can glimpse several hours into the future, though the children never explains how beyond, “That’s where the light comes through.”

Hermes “El Desarmador” Valdez



Age: 11
Nationality: Cuban
Languages: Spanish 25%

Hermes is a small, intense boy with **Down syndrome**, a coffee-coloured complexion, bright white teeth, and perpetually grease-stained hands. He was found as a newborn on a Havana-bound train and raised in the Valdez Orphanage, from which he takes his surname. After he half-dismantled a Porra officer’s car, he was sent to Mazorra “for Idiocia mongólica,” not for the compulsion that defines him: Hermes can take **anything** mechanical apart.

Beds, locks, radios, engines—he reduces them to immaculate arrays of parts arranged with almost ritual order. He never believes he has done wrong; he beams proudly, certain his “good work” is helpful. He always carries a small screwdriver tucked behind an ear or into his smock, and has the unnerving habit of holding screws and tiny parts in his mouth—then calmly spitting them back out when needed.

Dr. Vilela protects him fiercely, having once fired a warning shot to stop an orderly from striking the boy. Hermes is friendly, obsessive, deeply literal, and loves chocolate and Cuban baseball.

Pulp Talent – Preternatural Mechanist: Four times per day, Hermes can instinctively dismantle, open, or repair any mechanical or clockwork device, even those he has never seen. This may include locks, alarms, or medical equipment. He may **repair** only once per day.

RPG Hooks

- Any unattended personal item is liable to appear in pieces neatly arranged on a nearby surface
- Hermes gladly disassembles anything handed to him. Reassembling it requires patience... or chocolate, or Cuban baseball cards.

The Men’s Department Tour.

Dr. Vilela bids them farewell, and the visitors are turned over to Ricky, who leads them outside. They are let out by a friendly guard of the gated *Children’s Pavillion*, head and west along the Mazorra’s main thoroughfare. The afternoon heat has eased, and the palm trees lining the road sway just enough to suggest a coming change in weather.

If asked, Ricky explains that the Mazorra stretches roughly 0.6 km from east to west “...a good twenty-minute brisk walk from the east entrance to the west gate that leads to the Mazorra’s farm colony” a reminder of just how large *Hospital de Dementes de Mazorra* really is.

[Keeper Notes: If desired Roll or pick an option from the Mazorra Grounds Encounter table during the ten-minute walk (see AOM #240 in E&A #3].

As they pass through the now-open gate spanning the rail spur to Havana, the Investigators will see that the morning’s train is gone.



Ricky brings them towards one of the tallest structures on the grounds, M1. This is a four-storey structure painted a faded light blue. “This is the main medical complex of the Men’s Department, my friends” he explains. “Built some thirty years ago. The U.S. Army helped with the construction. We’ll meet Dr. Zorrilla and Dr. Prats inside.”

As they approach, a successful Spot Hidden will have them notice Dr. Santiago Prats is seated on a stone bench in the shade beneath the breezeway, speaking quietly with a slender man in a hospital smock. The patient, dark-skinned, fine-boned, with unmistakable Chinese features, keeps one hand resting on the bench between them, tapping a steady staccato rhythm with two fingers.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, Prats rises quickly, smoothing his white coat, and greets them all.

Ricky’s own smile flattens the moment he sees that Prats is alone. With careful politeness that fools no

one, he asks, “Hola, Dr. Prats. And where is Dr. Zorrilla?”

Dr. Prats sighs and replies: “Ramon has gone to see that coughing Haitian Brujah Arturo mentioned at lunch. He told me to take you all through the tour myself.”

Ricky says nothing, but a *Psychology* roll (with bonus die) notes the rigid jaw, narrowed eyes, and tight grip on his hat brim. He is furious.

Sensing the tension Prats clears his throat and gestures to the man on the bench. “I would like to introduce one of my long-term patients. Tomás, these are the visitors I told you about.”



The patient looks up. He is slender, alert, and strangely still except for the nervous percussion of his tapping fingers. At the mention of his name, *Tambor* (the nickname is obvious) nods once and taps a quick “*shave-and-a-haircut*” rhythm on the wooden slats of the bench, his version of a greeting. He does not smile, but he studies the visitors intently.

Prats explains softly: “Tomás has lived here most of his life. Epilepsy brought him in as a child; a brain injury after one fit robbed him his spoken voice, but genius keeps him here as a man. He knows the Mazorra better than any map. We even give him a small stipend to deliver messages and errands. He goes everywhere staff fear to go.”

Tambor resumes tapping lightly, a patient, repeated six-beat pattern:

- tap tap... tap-tap... tap...

Anyone with even rudimentary Morse or drumming knowledge recognizes it as a structured reply, his language made from rhythm rather than words.

Prats raises his voice slightly so Tambor can feel the vibrations:

“Tomás, have you seen *El Rey* today? Or the Madonna?”

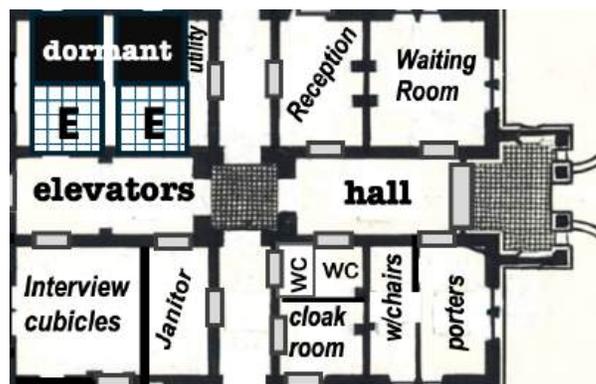
Tambor pauses then taps [*Dr. Prats translates aloud*]

- slow tap... slow tap → [“yes”]
- makes an oK sign with his fingers, draws it down across his chest (like a king’s sash), followed by a quick triple-tap → [“the King”]; points down [“South”] then tap s•• (2) → •—• (**hundreds marker**) → ••• (3) → • (1) [“The King is 231 paces south”]
- makes the sign of the cross [“Madonna”], then makes a C of his thumb and fingers to his forehead, & then pulls outward as if tipping or removing a cap [“boy”] then a long pause with no taps just a short head shake→ [“the Madonna-boy not recently”]

[**Keeper Notes:** The exchange should make clear to all the Investigators that Tambor is not simple and is he is precise & observant. This can be an opportunity for any Investigators who know Morse Code, ASL, or drumming/music, or ask him how to say ‘good bye’ to make a connection for a possible valuable ally.]

Dr. Prats Partial M1 tour.

Dr. Prats thanks Tomás, who taps his chest once and does a half “shave and a hair-cut” tap, and nods at the others. Dr. Prats then leads them up the wide concrete steps lined with shrubbery and gestures them inside. Past the doors, a pair of Mazorra porters are polishing wheelchairs with rags soaked in something sharp and medicinal.



The main hospital hallway has a modest Art Deco ambition: black-and-white geometric tiles, two brass-clad elevators gleaming on the right, and bronze wall lamps inset with electric bulbs that glow through kaleidoscopic panes of coloured glass. Wood benches painted lime green and tangerine line the walls, and a proper waiting room with more benches opens to their right.

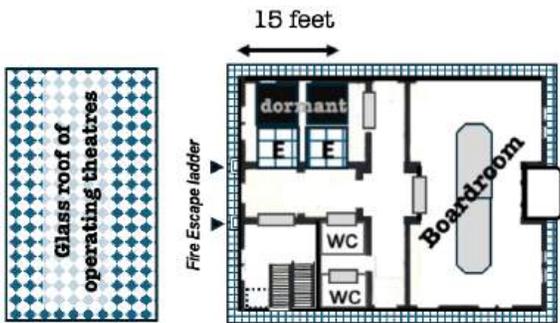
Prats says, “This building is the main entry point for all male patients, medical assessment, psychiatric evaluation, surgical treatment, or short-term

observation. Everything begins here.” His tone stays warm rather than boastful.

“The whole west half of the building is our surgical block,” he continues. “Two operating theatres, side by side, each with its own scrub rooms, prep areas, and instrument stores. When the lamps are on, the light makes the tiles shine like wet porcelain, and at night it glows almost as bright as the lighthouse atop Morro Castle. By day, the windows and skylights are usually enough.”

He leads them down the corridor toward the elevators. After pressing the up button, he points to a set of double doors marked *A los quirófanos: Solo personal* and says, “We cannot go in now. Operations are underway and the corridors must stay sterile. Later you can watch from the gallery. First we will see the Fourth Floor and work our way down.”

Fourth Floor – Board Room and View



The 8x8 lift fits all eight of them comfortably and could fit more. It rises smoothly without stops, then halts with a soft jolt. The doors open onto a corridor lined with framed photographs of former hospital directors and benefactors, stern and sepia-toned. Prats takes them to a double door marked *Sala de Juntas* and opens it. Inside is a long mahogany table polished to a dark sheen, high windows with heavy curtains, and a large map of the Mazorra complex studded with brass tacks. Beside it hangs a smaller map of the upper floors of the M1 building.



[Keeper’s Note: Flash may wish to photograph the maps for later handouts.]

Potted tropical plants fill the corners, their fronds brushing the light from a square glass skylight overhead. The east wall has French doors opening to a narrow balcony. Below lies a broad, palm-lined avenue that forms the main spine of the asylum grounds.

The street stretches straight ahead with only a few figures visible: patients in loose garments walking under supervision, and staff crossing between pastel yellow, blue, peach, and cream pavilions whose roofs cast sharp shadows. Close by runs a fenced strip of land beside the north-south rail line. A railroad crossing sign marks where the hospital road meets the tracks, with a small guard post opposite under the palms.



Across the tracks stand the Women’s Department buildings, arranged in a loose grid. Beyond them, framed by trees, rises the pale bell tower of the Mazorra Chapel.

“One of the best views here,” Ricky says, calmer now. “Our Directors meet with hospital leadership here, or receive inspectors from Havana. On clear days you can see all the way to Boyeros and watch planes landing at Machado International Airport.”

A successful *Spot Hidden* roll shows a group of patients following a man who appears to be wearing a crown. If asked, Prats laughs.

“That is Señor Reynaldo Fontanilla, though he prefers His Majesty. Many here call him El Rey, the King. He believes he is the exiled Alfonso XIII of Spain. If you bow, he is gracious. If you question his title, he pities you. His followers, however, may spit or even strike.”

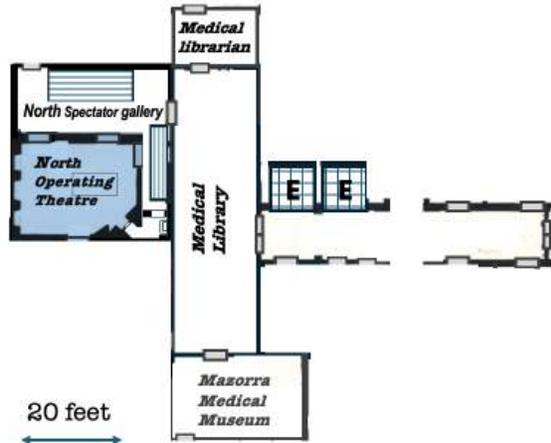
Ricky gives the Investigators a few minutes for Flash to take any photographs before reminding them it is now 4 pm and they have about an hour left.

Dr. Prat’s Abbreviated Tour of the 2nd Floor

They re-enter the elevator, the door closes and Dr. Prats presses the #2 button. If anyone asks about the third floor, he keeps his tone light: “That 3 level holds several of Dr. Zorrilla’s more difficult patients.

Without him present, I'd rather not bring you there. The second floor is quieter, and safer."

The elevator opens onto a cooler, wood-paneled hallway. The carpeting hushes their footsteps. Dr. Prats gestures down the corridor. "This is the administrative heart of M1. But before we continue, I'd like to show you our library and what lays beyond."



The M1 Medical Library

He opens a tall door marked *Biblioteca Médica*, the title painted neatly across a frosted glass pane beneath a small transom window. The room beyond is long and cool, lined with high windows and tall shelves of journals, atlases, psychiatric treatises, and well-thumbed surgical texts. A handful of lamps with green shades glow softly with reflected sunlight.

The reference desk is unattended. Beside it stands a narrow office door with another painted-glass panel: *Oficina del Bibliotecario*. The room is locked; through the upper glass door the Investigators can glimpse only a covered typewriter, ledger stacks, and a squat floor safe tucked into the corner.

Further along the library's south wall stands a second locked door, its frosted pane bearing the painted words: *Museo Médico Mazorra*.

Prats hesitates before saying: "While there are many interesting hospital artifacts, vintage asylum equipment and curious medical specimens going back even hundreds of years, we should keep moving. The Operating Theatres are just ahead, and we're nearly on schedule."

He steers them back into the hallway, toward an untransomed door marked *Galería de Observación Quirúrgica Nort*. There is a lit blue electrical light over the door. Dr. Prats says, "The blue light means they are in surgery now. Come, let see what is happening."

The North Operating Room Gallery

Dr. Prats ushers the Investigators and Ricky into a darkened gallery. For a moment it feels like a cavern; black all around, a glowing pool of light below.

"Give your eyes a moment," Ricky murmurs.

Shapes emerge: the operating theatre beneath them, a white-tiled bowl lit from a frosted skylight and a ring of low surgical lamps. A full team works in tight rhythm; surgeon and assistant at the table, the anaesthetist at the head monitoring the Boyle's machine, two scrub nurses moving with practiced precision.

Stainless steel counters, glass cabinets, and carts of instruments line the green tiled walls. A fluoroscope stands idle; a stainless autoclave hums faintly. The soft hiss of ether and oxygen rises like a slow metronome.

As their sight sharpens, reality lands: **blood everywhere**. Towels soaked. Streaks on tile. Red freckles flung across every white gown.

They take their seats in the steep gallery. The thick glass pane reflects their ghostly shapes over the bright theatre. Dr. Prats checks the posted schedule and sits down among them.

His voice stays low. "Most cases are emergencies: fractures, deep cuts, infected wounds. Hips, abscesses, bladder stones. Amputations when forced. Speed and judgment mean everything. Dr. Francisco Llerena is operating. Dr. Armand Moas is on gas; you might have seen him on the train."



He gestures downward. "The patient is one Rafael 'El Gavilán' Jiménez. Ruptured spleen. He's... not well liked. A bully. Two days ago he pinned down an elderly patient with dementia and burned him with cigars. Eactly hundred burns. The man will likely die of sepsis from the skin infection he has we've only

Neo-Salvarsan for syphilis, nothing else truly effective.”

Below, glass bottles drain into the patient’s cannulas. The surgeon curses in mixed Spanish and German as the oozing continues and retractors slip.

“¡No, no, NO! ¡Eso no era lo que pedí! ¡Scheisse! ¿Quién le enseñó a usted?”

A nurse tries to suction; the tube clogs instantly with clot and has to be reamed out again and again as Dr. Llerena curses at them. “¡Suction! ¡Suction! ¿Qué parte de *suction* no entienden?”

Ricky adds softly: “Baltasar Urrutia—‘El Martillo’, <The Hammer>—warned him. When he heard what El Gavilán did, he ‘corrected’ him. Jiménez drew a knife and tried to stab him in the face. Baltasar took it away and broke the knife, his wrist, and most of his ribs.”

Dr. Prats nods grimly. “That’s what tore his spleen. We see things like this... every week at the Mazorra.”

Death on the Table

Through the speaker, Dr. Moas mutters, adjusts the ether, and announces the patient is *fibrillar* <fibrillating>. Blood pressure falling. He calls for more saline, draws up a syringe, and plunges it into the man’s heart.

Moments later he shakes his head. “No tiene latido. Está muerto.”

The gas machine goes silent. The patient’s chest rises once, rattles, and stops.

Dr. Llerena’s fury explodes. He hurls a scalpel across the room narrowly missing a scrub nurse and begins cursing and berating everyone around him; his assistant, anaesthetist, nurses. He starts to look up.

Ricky leans forward. “Hokay... I think it’s time—”

Then the surgical lamps flicker and Dim. Dim again. Light draining as if something vast has stepped between the theatre and the world. A cold weight settles over the gallery. The nurses below instinctively retreat, one making the sign of the cross while doing so.

Llerena snarls at them, then stops mid-word.

The dead patient’s abdominal cavity **bulges**. Not with breath, for none remains, but with a slow internal pressure. Retractors twist. Then a glistening loop of

intestine rises, grey-brown and mauve like a wet tentacle.

Another loop slithers out over the dead man’s ribs. One reaches toward Llerena’s wrist.

Prats whispers making the sign of the cross: “*Madre de Dios...*”

[Keeper’s Note: SAN 0/1d3 for the 1st animation.]

The bowel coils around Llerena’s arm. Another loop of small intestine lashes upward toward his throat. Llerena screams as a slick rope of bowel encircles his neck, tightening with a wet suction sound. He claws at it with one hand, tearing off his mask to reveal a terrified moustachioed face. The other hand claws and reaches for the tray of clean scalpels, but he is too clumsy and spills them all onto the bloody-towelled floor.

[Keeper’s note: SAN 1/1d6 for witnessing this grisly strangulation]

The corpse *sits up*. Half its intestines spill over in a cataract of slime and blood off the table, then slowly start rising serpentine-like. The dead man’s head turns with a boneless twist. The jaw hangs slack.

A deep, resonant voice, half Haitian Creole, half Cuban graveyard, speaks through the cooling meat:

“*VOUS AVEZ HUMILIÉ LES FAIBLES.
VOUS AVEZ ACHEVÉ LES VAINCUS.
À PRÉSENT, BARON KRIMINAL RÉCLAME SON DŪ.*”

*(You shamed the helpless.
You finished the fallen.
Now Baron Kriminal collects his debt.)*

The animated corpse suddenly *lunges*, using bowel-loops and broken bone to strangle the surgeon.

Keeper Notes:

Intervening From the Gallery: There is no direct route down. Reaching the OR by hallways/stairs the long way takes 90 seconds (4 rounds). A Spot Hidden (Hard, dim light) reveals a maintenance panel with a ladder; 60 seconds to open, descend, kick out the bottom panel (3 rounds).

Smashing Through the Gallery Glass: Can be done by gunshot, fire extinguisher, library chair. 1-2 rnds.

Jump-Smashing Through the Gallery Glass:

Jump / Brawl (Hard): Break pane w/ running leap.
Success: PC crashes through → **DEX (Reg)** to land

safely.

Fail: PC rebounds, takes **1d3 HP**, loses 1 action.

Fumble: PC slams off pane → **1d6 HP**, stun 1 round.

Spending Luck:

- **15 Luck:** The glass breaks *automatically*.
- **10 Luck:** On a failure, the pane still shatters, but PC takes **1d3 HP** from cuts.

Landing:

- **DEX (Reg):** No damage.
- **Fail: 1d3 HP** (glass + rough landing).
- **Fumble: 1d6 HP**, prone amid instruments.

Note: *Breaking the glass causes screams, falling shards, and a SAN 0/1 check for bystanders below.*

Once down in the OR, *Baron Kriminal* can be seen (he/it is located on south east corner of the room), a hazy figure whose outline seems to shimmer in the semi darkness.

Use the Stats for the Death Loa (*Baron Kriminal*) as per the previous AoM write-up, but now use the **30 HP** version.

Baron Kriminal's attitude toward the PCs is that they are an intrusion and he dislikes them. To him they are outsiders, present with Mazorra staff and have entered a place of suffering without his permission. But his attention is focused on Dr. Llerena, who unknown to the Investigators is a Porra member (unless they directly ask Ricky or Dr. Prats) which explains his enmity.

BARON KRIMINAL SPECIAL POWERS/TACTICS

1. **Aura of Decay:** Ten foot radius. 1d4 *Necrotic chill* damage per round and minus ten percent to all physical and mental skill rolls.
2. **Shadow Walk:** Baron K. vanishes into shadow and immediately appears in another dim corner of the operating theatre. *Listen* or *Spot Hidden* (Regular) or PCs take a penalty die to attack.
3. **Repair (Surgical Light Rig Manipulation):** Twists lamps to blind or swing/strike. DEX or STR (*Hard*) to avoid dazzle or knockback. Falling lamps and hot bulbs are hazards. Using lamps offensively may disable them for 1d4 rounds.
4. **Possession/Influence**
 - a) (*Animated Cadaver Parts*): Isolated organs act independently once per round. Examples: bowel tentacles 1d3, ribcage jaws 1d4; first time each part moves gives SAN 0 or 1.
 - b) (*Induced Panic*): Direct POW vs POW, and terrified bystanders in OR become hazards. Examples: assistant bolts and drops a cart, RN slips and screams. PCs make POW or lose one action next round.

5. **Ritual Corrosion:** Baron K. can supernaturally corrupt Baron Kriminal can spiritually rot or destabilize metal, pressure seals, valves, and mechanical joints. This is not mundane corrosion but a targeted supernatural sabotage that attacks the "spirit" of a device. **Mechanic:** Opposed POW vs highest Mechanical Repair among PCs. If the Baron wins, the device loses 30 percent function or fails for 1d4 rounds and triggers one of the effects below.

- **Autoclave Burst:** Seal ruptures and releases superheated steam in a ninety degree arc. **Effect:** Anyone within three yards makes a DEX roll. Failure 2d6 burn. Success 1d6 burn. If a PC loses half HP to burns they must make a CON roll or fall unconscious.
 - **Medical Gas tank Leak:** Nitrogen, CO₂ or N₂O reduces oxygen in the room. **Effect:** Each round PCs make CON roll. Success = no effect. Failure = dizziness + penalty die for 1d2 rounds. *Hard failure* = 1 HP + choking. *Extreme failure* = collapse and suffocation rolls begin. Ventilation or stopping the leak ends it. *See Suffocation Rules CoC7e*
 - **Tank Rocket Event:** A tank valve shears and the cylinder launches uncontrolled for 1d4 rounds! **Effect:** Dodge roll if in its path. Failure 2d6 blunt damage + *Knockdown*. Success no damage but forced aside. Impact with walls may drop debris for 1d4 damage. **Optional Pulp Flair:** A PC may attempt to "grab" a tank with STR vs STR, but on a failure takes the full impact damage.
 - **Machine Failure:** Lights, fluoroscope or similar devices stall or shut down. **Effect:** Minus thirty percent function or full failure for 1d4 rounds. *Hard Mechanical Repair* to restore.
6. **Roar of the Dead:** Once per scene. SAN roll or 1d6 SAN loss and minus twenty percent to all skills next round. Don't use at beginning or end of fight, but use to escalate tension and make Investigator's pause if they find things too easy.

Weaknesses

As earlier noted.

REPELLING BARON KRIMINAL (Baron K.)

1. **Brandishing Crucifix or another Blessed object:** Baron K. hesitates one round. POW vs POW or Baron takes penalty die next round.
2. **White Light** (from camera photo-flash or surgical lamps): Baron K reels and loses one action. PCs gain a bonus die; 2 consecutive rounds of exposure forces retreat.

3. **Running Water** (surgical/sink hoses): One or two round barrier to Baron K. Touch inflicts 1 HP damage.
4. **Ringed Steel** (from struck metal basin): Baron K's concentration falters, halts strangulation efforts; Hard POW vs POW or Baron K loses 1 action.
5. **Alcohol/Ether Flame:** Baron K retreats 2m; direct contact with fire inflicts 1d4 damage.
6. **Salt (saline bottles):** Thrown as grenades either cause direct damage when brittle glass shatters, or creates a 2 round ward from salt water splash. POW vs PC POW to cross. Direct hit deals 1d2 HP.
7. **Sacred Baron Names:** Invoking the names of other Loa, (e.g. La Croix, Cimitiere, Maman Brigitte) causes hesitation & Baron K. loses initiative.
8. **Fluoroscope Radiation:** Surprisingly deadly and treated as direct sunlight. One round to warm up the machine, one round to aim. Baron K has to succeed vs Hard POW vs PC or Baron K immediate disengages. A second exposure forces full withdrawal.
9. **Holy Water** (wielded by a priest or devout PC) One HP damage. Ends possession or entanglement. Keeps him one yard away for one round.
10. **Direct Sunlight** (e.g. shooting out the skylight) 1d4 damage per round. Two rounds forces disappearance/withdrawal and corpse becomes inert.

STATS: Baron-Ridden Corpse of "El Gavilán"



STR 75/80, CON —, SIZ 70, DEX 60, POW 90, HP 12, Move 6, Build +1

Atk: Bowel loop Garrote 50% (1d6/rd, STR vs STR), Lash 60% (1d4, 2 m, disarm), Claw 40% (1d6)

Special: Vengeance Aura (POW vs POW → lose 1 action), Dead Flesh (½ dmg), Loa Withdrawal (collapse + stench, POW or vomit)

SAN: 0/1d3 (first animation), 1/1d6 (strangling), 1/1d4 (Loa voice)

If the corpse is restrained or the Baron is repulsed, flees, the dead man suddenly collapses if a marionette's strings are cut. As the loops of bowel collapse, from its abdominal cavity spills out blackened blood from which comes the stench of faeces, cold tobacco and grave-soil which fills the OR and makes all gag and make a POW roll otherwise they will vomit and be incapable of any action for 1 round.

Aftermath of 2nd Baron Kriminal Encounter

If the PCs save Llerena, he survives with crushed cartilage and humiliation, and though staff are shaken and terrified by the supernatural outbreak, Both Ricky and Dr. Prats grow to trust the Investigators. Perversely, Dr. Llerena's reaction at being saved by foreigners is one of furious humiliation. He blames everyone except himself and immediately starts claiming the PCs "interfered" and "contaminated the sterile field." This will perversely cause Captain Gandía as a fellow Porrista become suspicious, making the evening's dinner tense but survivable.

If the PCs fail and Llerena dies horribly, panic sweeps the OR, and the staff and guards quickly turn suspicion toward the Investigators, transforming the upcoming dinner at the Director's Manse into a hostile, accusatory ordeal. Capt. Gandía will attempt to weaponize the incident; he will call the Investigators "agitators" or "sorcerers.", issues an order that they be restricted to the Visitor's Quarters, and will assign extra guards (all Porra loyalists).

In either case, Ricky ends the tour immediately and makes it clear that he **does not want** the PCs wandering the grounds after what they've just seen. Guards are summoned, alarms and shouting begin to spread, and Capt. Gandía is notified at once. The Investigators are shakily escorted out by Ricky and Dr. Prats and, if still mobile, brought back to the MD Pavilion to rest between 4:30 and 7 PM. Any injured PCs are taken first to the M1 Infirmary to be sewn or bandaged up, then returned to the MDs Pavilion with firm instructions to stay put until dinner at 7 sharp.

Dr. Zorrilla & Derosier's Tshwa Elixir

Off scene from all this, Dr. Zorrilla's fascination with the "pharmacology" of Santeria and Haitian Vodou rites leads him further down a path few rational men could follow. Obsessed with finding new chemical means to improve the lives of those whom science and society deem mad, he becomes fixated on the Haitian Bujah *Mateo Derosiers' Twsha Elixir* [see E&A #4 / AoM #241] and will skip leading the tour for the visiting Investigators.



Could the liquid inside that grisly storage container, a hollowed out and brass-capped human metacarpal bone, conceal a psycho-biological agent modern psychiatry could use Zorrilla wonders? Might it be a key to understanding and treating madness? And even better, could this substance, used in native superstition, prove to be the magic bullet science has been seeking for insanity, a truly universal *anti-paraphrenic*?

In the main X-ray department located west of M1 he studies the bone-finger cylinder, but the metal cap hides its inner mechanism even with radiographs. Impatient, he directs Evelio Gil, the fussy laboratory technician, to open it. Gil turns the wrong sequence of left-handed screws. The spring mechanism inside does not produce a spray but instead forces out a **thin**, ropy jet of viscous black fluid, almost like a living thread. It lashes across both men and sticks to their skin and clothing. The substance smears rather than drips and gives off a faint odour of copper and ozone when they tried to wipe it off with a sterile cloth. Both men next scrubbed themselves with carbolic soap yet the dark, sticky residue clung stubbornly to the skin. They finally wiped their arms down with 95% ethyl alcohol, and this seemed to work leaving their skin raw and abraded, with still a faint soap-like sheen. Zorrilla dismisses Gil's rising panic and tells him to return to his work.

No further change is noticed through the afternoon or evening. Zorrilla keeps to himself making notes and dressing for dinner at the Manse. Gil retires early and is restless and anxious, but still outwardly normal.



Lic. Evelio Gil



RN Yolanda Heres

The first true signs of contagion will begin only late that night. Under bright light Zorrilla discovers small translucent patches on his arm, like tiny windows

through the skin. His curiosity briefly returns before fear sets in. The changes spread and he feels the first internal movement from the old *fetus in fetu* deep in his abdomen. Something long dormant is awakening. By the small hours he is desperate enough to wake RN Yolanda Heres, his not so secret lover, and show her what he has become. She remains loyal and helps him hide the early signs, but she already fears the man before her is not entirely human.

Evelio Gil will become the first public victim. His symptoms appear either in the middle of the night or the next morning, progressing faster and with less restraint. Gil panics as his own skin turns translucent and may seek help from staff or flee down the corridors, spreading terror and confusion. Only then will anyone realize that the true danger began hours earlier, when a careless twist of a screw released something neither medicine nor religion is prepared to face.

Zorrilla's own struggle will soon become a *three-way* contest between his own mind, the alien will of the Twsha, and the strange resurrected twin growing within him.

To be continued

COMMENTS: E&A #5

ROGER BW: *RYCTM on Cthulhu Eternal RPG:* thanks for your detailed reply to my question. I had no idea *Chaosium* was so restrictive for mid-sized creators.

BRIAN ROGERS: What's this, dissing *Nero Wolfe*? I started reading this golden age detective series a few years ago right from the very start with *Fer-De-Lance* (1933) and I'm now up to *Three Witnesses* (1953). Archie Goodwin makes up and then some for Wolfe's misanthropy, and he does start to unbend over time. *Re Murderbot Diaries:* *Re Murderbot Diaries:* I found the Apple series' tone quite jarring compared to the books; had I watched it first, I might not have continued.

MATT STEVENS: Matt! I can't say "welcome back to A&E," but welcome to E&A. Thanks for the kind words about our daughter Lauren. <> *RYCTM* on fascism in the hero pulps: some pulps leaned right-wing, given all the lone vigilantism, and Doc Savage's non-FDA neurosurgery has a whiff of eugenics, but I know of no US/Canadian/UK/Australian pulp heroes who were actual fascists. During the war they were all effectively Antifa. Patrick Zoch's link showed a few Nazi-era German pulps like Sun-Koh, an Aryan Doc Savage, but I haven't read them.

GABRIEL ROARK: Glad your spectacularly bruised elbow was only olecranon bursitis. Good call on the helmet and elbow pads. RYCTM on my latest COVID recovery: it took weeks to get over. After my flu shots, I learned I must wait until late November before I'm eligible for my next mRNA dose

JIM ECKMAN: Two thumbs up re your 'No Kings Day' comment; I hope your art show was *smashing*. I am chagrined I got all 3 RAH correct but only 1/3 of your AN questions. Is fig. 1 from "The Zero Stone"?

MARK A. WILSON: Don't be too discouraged with your current full-time un-paid job of sending out CVs; here's hoping your current doldrums shall past shortly. *Re classical violin:* Your comments on the violin reminded me of something I only learned recently there isn't any difference between a violin or a fiddle, it's the same instrument, just different styles of music. "Violin" is used for classical pieces, while "fiddle" refers to folk, country, bluegrass, or Celtic styles. An MD friend of mine trained in classical violin but soon switched to fiddle music, inspired by the revival of Canadian fiddle players in the 1990s like Ashley MacIsaac (*Devil in the Kitchen*, *Sleepy Maggie*), Donnell Leahy, & Natalie MacMaster.

MYLES CORCORAN: You've responded to my DM already, so here are a few more things; here's hoping things stay better this late fall and winter.

Fascinating gaming write-up. Re Moon Tan: now I know I should have done an Irish exchange year too! *RYCT Avram Grumer:* I have two 24" monitors too, but one I have turned in portrait mode too for viewing oversized pdfs of pulp and vintage magazines in full size in my upstairs office PC.

RYCTM on Mythos beings; perhaps they aren't "seen" at all, but because they distort and warp the sensory physics our primate brains rely on, we detect them in ways that are unnatural & disconcerting. Like phosphenes "flashes" when you rub your eyes, but on a larger and wider sensory scale: brief field effects that scramble dopamine and acetylcholine pathways. To us their mere proximity triggers scintillating scotomas & headaches, tinnitus, déjà vu phenomenon, motor freeze/atonía, and even parahallucinations like [Charles Bonnet Syndrome](#). Our nervous system glitches in their proximity, and as we approach closer literally causes psychosis.

PATRICK ZOCH: Very pleasing the look done for your latest zine. I wasn't familiar with *Truth & Treason* (2025), so I looked up Helmuth Günther Guddat Hübener (1925–1942) and was appalled after learning his story. A young German Mormon, he opposed the Nazi regime and was executed by guillotine at 17 after 10 weeks of torture. Even the Berlin *Gestapo* requested clemency, but Hitler personally refused. <> I was hoping that Leavenworth show had wargames too. ☺

PATRICK RILEY: *RYCTM on twins in A&E #4:* I enjoy using twins for the classic soap-opera reasons; confusion, impersonation, secret pasts, dual personalities, etc. At least I haven't tried identical triplets yet, though they do exist. <> *RYCT Jim V.:* I agree: getting the issue out before the 1st is fine. In the snail-mail days, mine often arrived late anyway. <> *Re publishing Habana Horror: if I ever did, I'd follow the model of [La Piel De Toro 1936 Guerra Civil Española](#).*

ERICA 'ELF' Frank: Well hello there from Canada! You wrote a very interesting 9-page submission for your first foray in E&A. *Re solo RPGs:* The closest I've come to solo gaming has been computer RPGs and the *Fighting Fantasy* books, so this was very enlightening. I looked up a few of your games, like 'Lord Moon's DIED' and 'Lost World of Ur', and while I played neither I was most impressed at the layout, design and art you used (I was struck at the inverted NASA image)! Thanks for the reviews of 'Ironsworn' and 'Thousand-Year-Old Vampire' which I knew nothing about. <> *RYCT Michael Cule where you wrote "...complete with the popular stereotypes and racial biases of their eras."* I'm afraid I read that last word as **ears**, not eras, and had a double-take. ☺

JOHN REDDON: I'm tempted to make this Habana Horror stuff available to others in the future; right now I'm simply having fun. One model I mentioned above but there is also legendary French edition 1920s Paris France [Call Of Cthulhu boxed set Années Folles](#) (*Crazy years*) that came out long ago in 1988 to emulate.

LISA PADOL: Kudos on getting SCD done, and for letting Paul Mason sneak in words after the deadline; I'll claim success for nudging him. ☺ *Re Mazorra:* conditions lagged North America and Europe by a decade, worsened by criminally gross neglect & corruption. *RYCTM on high APP scores:* I use APP as presence as well as looks—passive charisma, memorability, and how one carries oneself. High APP can also hinder a PC trying to stay unnoticed. <> *Re unforgettable faces:* some artists have near-automatic facial recognition; proportions are as distinct as fingerprints. <> *Re Medical Museums:* exactly as advertised; local specimens plus historical artifacts such as old stethoscopes, respirators, and 1880s surgical tools. A fine example is scattered across several floors at UCC's medical school in Cork; I took photos there (no room thish).

Everyone Else: RAEBNC

Nov 21st 2025. BCM

Accidental Recall #5

For Ever & Anon #6
© 2025 Joshua Kronengold
eaddr: mneme@labcats.org

Dreamwidth: <https://mneme.dreamwidth.org>
Gaming blog: <https://labcats.dreamwidth.org/> (with Lisa Padol; defunct-ish)
Tumblr: mneme / Mastodon: @mneme@dice.camp
Bluesky: mnemex.bsky.social

I haven't got that much to write, as I close my zine after 4AM (eastern) in which...well, it's still the 21st of November somewhere.

For starters, after ~24 years of working for Cheetahmail which was acquired by Experian, then spun off into Cheetah Digital, then merged with the CM Group, then renamed itself to Marigold, which then sold off its email marketing business to Zeta...my relationship with this business has come to an end. This week. I can't say I'm not looking forwards to at least some possibilities of what happens next, but also, I didn't stay almost half my life at the same company because I enjoyed the possibility of change, so I'm dreading having to step into the job market again. Not that I don't have some skills, but the last time I looked for a job it was only barely this century—I hear coding has changed a little since then. And then there's this whole AI thing.

But seriously, if someone you know is looking to hire a perl (and other languages) coder who was pleasant enough to work with that he kept a job for 20 years, around 10 of them as a "Principal Developer", whatever that is, reach out.

In lighter news, I've now reread Dark Days of Willowweep Manor and read its sequel comic, Nefarious Nights of Willowweep Manor. Quite recently, actually; I read them when taking a break from commenting the APA; they're written by Shaenon Garrity (of the Narbonic and Skin Horse webcomics) and drawn by Christopher Baldwin (best known for the Spacetrailer SF webcomic, though apparently he did work for Mad Magazine?), and are a hoot, as our genre-aware heroine stumbles into a gothic-themed "gasket universe" that might be in a bit of trouble.

In terms of board games, the one I tried last Saturday which, managed to cover its advertised time of 5 minutes (we did 3 games in 15-20 minutes) is "werewords"—a surprisingly strong cross of "20 questions" and the social deduction game Werewolf. The core of the game is 20 questions—one player is pronounced the Mayor, selects a secret word, and then attempts to use a modified 20 questions to communicate their word to the rest of the group. But also, two players (or more in a larger group) already know the word—all the wolves and also the seer. So after the town successfully guesses the word before time expires (or, alternatively, doesn't), then another minigame is played to determine whether they *really* won or lost—if they got the word, then the werewolves reveal themselves and have to try to guess the seer's identity, and if they do, they still win! Or if the word wasn't guessed, the town can try an alternate win condition by trying to guess the identify of (I think only one of) the werewolves—which might be the only way to win if the Mayor was a Wolf and trying to mislead the town all along by making sure they can *not* get the word!

Igtheme: Well, I do a lot of conventions, mostly with Lisa. The best, in my experience, are the medium sized conventions—running from maybe 100 to 500 people, so you can get to know people, play in a lot of the same games, and probably learn some new ones. The really big conventions—Pax Unplugged, Gencon, even Origins, can act like a little convention if you find a tiny subset that you play games with repeatedly, but can also be really isolating if you don't.

And as for tiny conventions, well, that's where things can get weird. Fun, but weird.

Two spring to mind, Johncon, which I haven't gone to in decades, and Anonycon, which sadly died after the pandemic due to its hotel going under.

Johncon took place (or for all I know, still does) in a single building on the John Hopkins campus. The odd thing about this con was that it had no "off" time—the building was a rotunda of rooms, and they were scheduled from Friday evening when the con started to Sunday afternoon when it ended. When do you sleep? Take a break? Get dinner? Up to you! The first year I went, the guests were James Earnest (of Cheapass Games) and Andrew Looney (of Looney Labs), which was quite delightful. But the main reason I went was that at the time I was very into the collectable card game On the Edge, which almost nobody played, but there was a solid playgroup at JHU so I could get some games in at the con; I also got to play in a RPG based on Doctor Lucky, and I'm sure several other games I remember less well.

Anonycon was a pretty straightforward con held annually in New Haven. But it was also very small. Of course, there were D&D organized play (and later Pathfinder) games, and the gamers who played those kept largely to themselves, but as for the rest, there were a bunch of games on offer, and at scheduled times, there would be a public *muster* and people would line up for games until everyone was sorted into a game. And, of course, since the con was quite small, you'd get to know and play with a lot of the same people year after year, which was quite fun.

Of course, Intercon, which is (these days, anyway) very much in my sweet spot, is one of my home conventions. As a LARP con, the only scheduled games are LARPS (some board games get played in and around the edges). But people try to not limit what kinds of larps get played, so all sorts will get scheduled, from boffer games with high action to mystery games, to games with prewritten characters and all conflict between PCs, to workshoped games where characters are come up with on the spot. Not to mention very odd games like one scheduled for this year, where players play a selection of PCs, picking up a PC, reading it and entering the game space (a train), playing them until they think their story is played out, and then exiting to pick up a new PC when they're ready.

Comments on E&A #5

Cover (Florence Harrison, but since she's 70 years beyond the veil, I'm going to address these comments to Jim, our OE): Oh, an excellent choice. I love the enlightenment aesthetic. I'm a bit curious about the pixelation in the cover version, though—looking over other copies of the painting online, it looks not to have the pixelated, washed out effect seen in the cover; instead it's got a very stylistic watercolor look to my inexpert eye. Was the effect a deliberate choice, a side effect of the process used to put it on the cover, or something applied by an intermediate source? I see that it's public domain in the US because it was published as an illustration in William Morris's "Early Poems" in 1914, but looking at Wikimedia Commons, I don't see the pixelation effect.

Regardless, what a great cover!

Brian Rogers: I kinda love that you got suckered into running set building for local High School shows! If nothing else, that kind of thing has to at least get one good blow against the depression.

Having seen Puffs, I feel like as an unauthorized "parody/fair use" show that pokes excellent fun at some of the worst aspects of the books, is possibly the closest you can get to that particular work without getting *too* tarred by the toxicity. But of course mileage can certainly vary.

Re Speed: I think in play the biggest weakness he'd have is that his secret identity is, well, a horse. Of course, you could let the player play Jake, giving the player someone who could be present in places a horse couldn't plausibly interact, and some players would utterly eat up the "my character is a horse" schtick, but it would certainly be a big RP limitation.

Re PC familiar: Wait, *all* the way up the levels? So if they'd gotten that high, Continual Light at 3rd casting level (or a significant illusion spell), all the way up to, say, some of the Prismatic series (and/or Alter Reality) at high levels? That's really badass, though I'd guess a familiar wouldn't be as good a melee character as, say, a fighter).

I agree with you on Cribbage—I don't want to play it all the time, but what could be wrong about this game of limited information, guessing, and math? And some luck, of course, but both how you play a hand and how you discard are fun little iterative minigames.

Re my list of broken treasure behaviors: I mean, for me this was D&D 3.5 play. After our first real fight, the treasure we'd grabbed disappeared (invisible thief); in our second major fight the enemies teleported away when they were losing (with "our" treasure!), and after that I started getting clever at making sure that even if we didn't kill the enemy, we still got something for our trouble when fighting intelligent enemies. Ironically, this meant I ended up throwing a pile of skill points (for my Wizard/Rogue) into Sleight of Hand, which ended up being generally useful in that game and character defining.

Great fun, of course, but the levels of "top that" get wearying after a while and I'd rather play a normal game, where leveling up is a result of going through tough experiences, not something the PCs have to earn (even if I mean a segment of leveling up that involves getting loot, something not all games have, of course). It's different if the goal of the adventure is to get a specific piece of loot, naturally; then the "loot" is your goal (and you can fail), not a side effect.

Regardless, I don't actually agree that we're that far away on RPG design (D&D design quite possibly), but it's fun to argue as long as we don't take it too seriously. I've brought this up before, but despite your preferring D&D3 to 3.5 (I have no opinion on 3, but both love and despise 3.5, with more of a balance on spite) while I think my favorite version of D&D so far is probably a hack of 5e that doesn't exist and probably won't,

that we're not actually that far away in terms of play preferences. Different experiences make for different emphasis; that's all.

Mark Nemeth: Starting a session *in media res* of a fight, as said, isn't something to do all the time, but is a nice change of pace; (and starting it as soon as a player showed up with the fight expanding as other players joined is a nice twist) glad to hear that it worked out well.

Re it being easier to sell items than to buy them: Which works great for rare and valuable magic items. For stuff (like healing potions in most versions) that PCs can churn out by the dozen given time, even with just (in 5e) having the right skill? Which isn't to say that a clever DM can't ring fun changes on this—the one campaign I play in had the PCs at one point find a temple in a swamp selling healing potions at a discount. The catch was that the temple was dedicated to a love goddess, so most of the potions they had for sale were "failed" love potions (made by acolytes for training purposes) with other effects as the main effect. So you could drink a discount healing potion (or even flying potion) knowing the main effect had been tested and would work, but you'd also have to make a (low) save or suffer a love-based effect for some period of time!

Re maps on grid paper: I like maps on grid paper that entirely ignore the grid except for scale. That way, you have an easy enough guide to decide how far apart things are (even if they're off the grid in both directions) but you're not bound to the grid in terms of design—avoids having to use a ruler all the time!

Re magical healing: The noted fact that it can/will prolong combats is one reason I'm leary of giving NPC enemies access to magical healing (unless that's a major plot point, of course, but in that case you want some pacing mechanisms to make sure the combat doesn't drag on forever, whether it's the PCs figuring out a regenerating enemy's weakness, "target the healer" as a core tactic, or an enemy only having a few big heals (possibly with a switch to an aggro mode when they're out of heals; TTRPGs can take lessons from everywhere and that includes video games). With respect to PCs healing, yeah, it's a really interesting balance and combat timing problem—make combat healing too weak and it's just a bad option and nobody takes it; make it too strong and the PCs can almost never die. Personally, having had no "this fight is boring because healing works" fights, and several really exiting "oh, we almost all died/several of us actually did die, but then people stepped up and were able to come back" fights, I have to put the balance on healing being powerful, if limited, and upping enemy damage a bit if this means that fights are feeling too safe.

Of note are a high level D&D fights (in which an enemy one-shotted two PCs early in the fight and the party healer(s) were able to bring them back fast enough to let the party prevail) and a "Special" Living Forgotten Realms game I played with like 4 PCs back in the 4e days—I wasn't playing a healer; I was playing an Avenger, a Wisdom-based, unarmored high survivability high damage class, and early in one fight, all three other PCs dropped. Of course, my usual strategy at this point was to teleport around the battlefield, engage the highest value target and just go wild against them, but that was (obviously) the wrong tactic for this fight, so instead, I went next to one unconscious PC (this included the party healer, of course, which I was not), delivered a healing potion, then (this probably involved an action surge, since 4e was the edition where every PC got an action surge) moved/teleported to another fallen PC and made a Healing (wis) check to trigger one of their healing surges (the equivalent to Hit Dice/Hit Points Die [is this actually a change with the 2024 rules? I've been seeing the Hit Point Dice terminology on some new material but it was never mentioned in terms of conversion notes), and the now conscious (if prone)

cleric was able to bring back the remaining fallen party member and stabilize people enough that we were able to win the fight despite at one point being very much about to lose it.

In general, as long as damage is potentially lethal enough that parties are in real danger despite powerful magical healing, the death spiral from downed party members not being able to take actions can act as a balance to healing slowing down fights—an all damage dealer party will generally get through fights faster but with less tolerance for errors or mischance, while a party that has strong healing/mitigation will generally have longer fights (and thus spend more resources per fight overall), healing between fights, but have much more of a safety zone...at least except against enemies that power up over time, which can be a real problem for such parties.

Re "removing the orc": Similarly, the most recent rules also removed Drow (and all other elves), Deep Gnomes (and all other gnomes), Lizardfolk (unless priests or royalty), and human thugs from the game.

Which is to say, they didn't do anything of the sort—they simplified the enemy list to collapse entries that mechanically worked exactly the same into a single entry, which seems like a perfectly reasonable thing to do if you want to make the game easier to run. Previously, if you wanted to pull up a list of, say, orcs for PCs to fight at 10th level, you'd have to wait for them to print some 10th level orc enemies, but now you can just look at the 8-12 CR humanoid enemies lines and pull some, maybe giving them an "orc" extra ability to fit the flavor—that is, Assassin, berserker commander, warrior commander, spy masters, bandit crime lord, death knight aspirant, archmage, ahpriest, and pirate admiral to name a few.

Matt Stevens: Glad to see you back in the APA scene after so long! (and miss you!)

Yeah, no ill feeling as far as I know—and it wasn't just storygames—you got to not have fun with us with Seven Seas too!

But yeah, I liked and still like storygames, but I think the versions that were coming out and causing arguments in the early 2000s were some of the most half-baked versions. Of course, there are still popular and less dated games where you're playing a member of the writing room as well as a character—Fate, Good Society, Microscope, and Belonging Outside Belonging (BOB) to name a few, but a lot of the more modern iterations are less half baked than the iterations we were playing, better educate you on what you, the player, are supposed to be doing, are less likely to put you on the spot for responsibilities you weren't prepared for (like PTA's "ok, so you've won narration rights, go narrate the scene!"), and are generally more accessible. Of course, there are plenty of half baked experiments too; just look on itch.io, but your odds are better.

WRT *Fiasco*, I think the key element is that, yes, it's very much a storygame—but also, the heist (or other hijink; most *Fiasco* games I've played aren't a heist) doesn't have to go wrong! (except in the way every single heist in every single story goes wrong because if nothing goes wrong there isn't a story, of course). *Fiasco* has a very strong "indirect PVP" aspect to it, in that the PCs aren't expected to be on the same side—if you were doing an "Oceans 11" playset, one PC might be the casino owner who's the target of the heist, one might be the VP of the casino who's an ex-spouse of the heist leader, one the heist leader who just to rehabilitate a rep after getting out of prison, one a new thief whose parent is a cop, and one a cop (the parent of the new thief) who wants the casino to get robbed and get credit for capturing the thieves. For example.

But yes, there's a certain element of "steering" in that in any given scene, *either* you let the group frame a scene and then play it out until you have a good sense of how to end it (and whether that result is an upbeat or downbeat one), or (and this is

where things are trickier from this perspective), you get to decide what kind of scene you're playing, but then at some point someone in the group will throw out an "upbeat" or "downbeat" token and you're responsible for helping steer the scene to fit that signal, kinda like a loosely structured improv.

But, while I've never been super happy with the third act mechanics of *Fiasco* (loosely, you roll a bunch of dice based on what's happened to your character so far and then narrate your ending based on how upbeat/downbeat that ending is, and more importantly, how high the absolute value of that result is, with low being bad and high being good; it can work, but it doesn't make me happy), I've also generally had good games; as long as your setup has enough fail (or just chaos) baked into it, you can just play your characters when they're on scene, taking into account cues from the mechanics of the game, and the story will generally just flow out of this. Sure, there are places where two PCs are in conflict and the weal/woe marker will often guide you to which direction you should steer for, or where players can see where things "should" go and it doesn't mean their PC gets to win, but mostly you can root for your character to succeed without dissonance—the endgame mechanic even supports this, with it becoming pretty clear by the midgame whether you want to shoot for "downbeat" endings or "upbeat" endings if you want to have your character avoid a bad end.

And there are "storygames" that don't really have much mode switching at all. For instance, *PbtA* is generally viewed as a storygame, written by big storygame names in the Bakers, and does have some story elements (particularly moves where you pick from a list), but is actually pretty traditional overall; in a game like *Masks* or *Monster Hearts*, you play your character, your character wants to succeed at things, and most things that make your character's life worse are things the GM does—sure, the game uses some wonky terminology to describe it, but that's what it is—which is probably why *Dagger Heart*, while trying to do something close to D&D, is largely using *PbtA*-style mechanics.

Re simplicity and complexity: One "forge" term I like using because it's not covered by other terms well is "high/low contact". A game can be simple, but also high contact if you're touching the rules at almost every point (see BOB games if you're playing by the rules, grabbing a token whenever you make a weak move and spending one every time you make a strong move, even if the weak move is "whenever you monologue about a topic of interest"). Or a game can be complex but low contact if there are many, many rules, but you can do minutes or even whole sessions in the normal course of play without even going near the rules. And, of course, as you imply a game might have higher contact for some rules than others (although that goes back to the Grappling rules that Lisa, er, grappled with in *Cthulhupunk*—where there's a complex rules for one rare part of play but nobody knows it well so that decreases how often it comes up even more; if anything I'd much rather have complex rules only for things that came up all the time and needed a bit more complexity to feel interesting, with rules that only came up ever 5 sessions generally being very simple and easy to use.

Re comments: I mean, I make a lot of comments and I don't necessarily respond to everyone. In general I think an APA works better if every comment is something the giver genuinely cares about and is interested in, even if that means you only comment a tiny fraction of zines.

Re players tempted to "steer" an entire game: I fear I resemble that remark (at my worst, anyway; I've tried to tame that urge if by no other reason than presenting helpful suggestions more gently and only when they seem desired). I find that's more an issue for complex games than for storygames per se—you do get places where a player has a very strong idea of where the story "should go" but a good group will often push back against any player exercising sole ownership that way

unless most of them are leaning in the same direction (and even then). But with complex rules sets, it can be hard to see a player doing stuff that they're clearly not enjoying the results of and not at least offer to help—building overly complex characters in D&D without stats to support them, building characters in a game with speed (like Champions or 1st edition 7th Sea) but setting their character's speed low enough that they rarely get to do anything, or building a character that needs to roll successes to do anything fun and then being visibly frustrated when the dice don't go their way.

But there of course are some story games that also have systems that reward mastery this way. Most easily coming to mind is the now mostly forgotten game Capes, (which I think we played at least one session of) where players compete over what will happen in a scene, playing protagonists, but also antagonists, bits of scenery, etc. Of course, there's the difficulty of stance shifting—that the players are swapping back and forth between playing their characters, but also playing the writers' room or presenting opposition specifically in order to make other players' victories meaningful, and like a lot of early storygames, there's a strong question about when the players get to roleplay rather than just describe stuff. But also, on top of that, the core of the mechanical game is this complex die/resource manipulation toolkit, in which the players can earn various kinds of tokens by manipulating the dice in certain ways, and because it's designed to reward mastery, the game can just bog down in the fact that players are going to learn this PVP (ish) system at different rates, giving them very different levels over the story that they're supposed to be narrating together!

A better low mechanics blend, in my opinion, is the surreal game Itras By. In IB, people will generally just go back and forth on free play—roleplaying describing stuff happening, whatever, until there's a point where people are in disagreement over what should happen—or just think that a roll is called for. Then they turn to a player not involved in the scene, and the player pulls an improv card (Yes, Yes, but, No, No, but, No And, Help is Needed, etc) and puts a spin on how this affects the scene. Light, yes, but just enough structure to feel like a game, at least for a one-shot game (which is really what it's suited for in my experience).

Roger BW: Re solo minigames: I have a love-hate relationship with these—I enjoy them, and enjoyed the more, but as you said, the main issue is that they were required much of the time, warping play and slowing it down (see: the 2 weeks of hunting down/arguing over buff spells for a critical combat in the climax of our D&D 3.5 game). But often, when a new version of a game strips out the minigames (like Feng Shui 3.0 making character creation and advancement much more straightforward) something important is lost.

Re 50% in percentile systems: 50% is often a core number in percentile systems for other reasons, too—of course, in systems like BRP where characters have to succeed at a skill during the session and then pass a training roll by *failing* the skill after the session, it's the point at which skills advance fastest. And it's also the point where (if you get an opportunity to choose, like Call of Cthulhu's Harlem Unbound does with the social penalties of obviously non-White characters) the penalties for "your skill is halved"/you need a "hard" result (which emanate the same thing) and "you must take a penalty die" affect the odds identically—any higher and the penalty die hurts you less; any lower and needing a Hard result is better, but at 50% it's basically the same.

I can see why to combine advantage rolls and the traditional bonus/penalty system with 2d6! The problem is that each point of bonus is very significant—with a sharp bell curve, getting a +2 already reduces the chance of rolling a below average (6 or less) result from 15/36 down to 1/6, and getting a

+4 makes it 1/36 instead, so if you let people pile on the bonuses it can become too hard to fail at things. But you have to make it pretty clear what kinds of things should affect base failure/success rate and which affect bonus dice or, yes, everyone hates it (particularly if you don't allow stacking bonuses; getting tripple-bonus and being able to roll 5d6 and take the best two could be pretty nice).

I'm with you on one tending to bring language constructs from language to language—my perl style has always been a bit more "loop" focused than some others, quite possibly because I was looking at Lisp before I learend perl, so glommed onto the rich list manipulation and processing available in the language (and the way this can make certain kinds of operations very clear and efficient if written well). Still have never managed to spend time learning Rust, but maybe I'll have some opportunity soon. And yeah, I spent 38 years mostly writing perl code, though I got to write some recent Python and Ruby towards the end (in between more perl code).

Re two node RPG in which the cats used the video link to communicate: Aw! That sounds incredibly cute.

Re combat openings: I mean, sometimes the combat opening establishes who the bad guys are etc, but sometimes it's a bit of intro that gets players familiar with the combat system or the damage system. I remember my introduction to Masks, where the GM had a nasty adult superhero yell at the PCs and inflict conditions on them. It was a bit awkward and didn't feel like combat narratively, but it did get us used to knowing how the conditions worked (and wanting to dump them as quickly as possible).

Re convention RPGs: Yeah, that can be a problem, and not just for RPGs—one memorable Origins (I think it was Origins) had the Shadowfist gang crammed into a room with the folks playing a wrestling CCG, and...they were a LOT louder than we were, lets just say. Smaller cons can be better with this—the space isn't *quite* as nice as it used to be when they remodelled away the business center, but the Dexcon/Dreamation hotel in New Jersey still has a good number of suites that are suitable for putting one or two tables for RPGs so you don't have 8 games in the same room with no airwall. Weirdly, this wasn't an issue when I taught Near and Far (which is a story-reading game like Arabian Nights) in the big game room, but presumably, while my players needed to talk pretty loudly to tell their stories, most other games didn't need to be quite so loud so it worked out (still might ask for a smaller room to run in if I do story-reading board games again, though).

Re GURPS: Yup! Despite my contrary views, there's no reason to have an on this; there are things I like about GURPS too, but they are often overshadowed by the ways I don't like the system affecting play. (and companies that pay people on time and as promised are to be respected and awarded!)

I managed to not have time to play with Typst in November as well—ah well, maybe I'll be able to make the time in December. And yeah, I'm not a shiny online editor either; I already have toolchains I like (or tolerate; I deliberately type my zines in VIM despite honestly preferring Emacs and my fingers knowing it better), and I just want to shove typst in on the end of one, not use a shiny web thing someone else is hosting.

Re E&A collating toolchains: Not only can a machine discover how many pages a PDF file has (so exactly how to build the bookmarks can be made error free), it can also renumber and restructure bookmarks already in each document, so rather than stripping bookmarks that were already in each document (as is done now) they could be incorporated and moved so they sit, folded, under the "master" bookmark of each APA with sufficient coding. As I've documented elsewhere, while Unicode characters (or other high-ASCII characters, like Windows-1252 figures) can be incorporated in bookmarks, it can be annoyingly technical to do so. We used ghostscript for the bookmarks in Something

Completely Different, and there you need to encode things in UTF-16 and then put them (as I eventually figured out, mostly) in octal escapes, but we still ran into issues I never figured out. And with pdftk, which is apparently also popular for doing bookmark work, it uses an entirely different format (ghostscript, of course, formats the bookmark file as postscript), but you can use XML decimal escapes (e.g. { or whatnot) which is at least a single not that complicated step that's well documented, even though it's technically pretty similar to the octals we eventually settled upon.

Re starting a PDF APA of your own: Do it! The world needs more PDF APAS! (I mean, a one shot would probably not be that much commitment other than the toolchain for combination being the lion's share of the work).

Re starting off with one skill and improve it to higher resolutions: our own Matt Stevens did something like this in Two Fisted Tales. Your character starts with some skills; as you improve them you can pick up a Specialty which must be more specific and which gives you a +3 bonus over the regular skill, and as you commit to the skill even more you pick up a Mastery which gives you an additional +3 and has to be even more specific than the specialty (and within one of your specialties). These can be pretty freeform (or at least they were in the first edition; the outer skills were fixed but the specialties and masteries had flexibility), but the general->specific helps keep things in line.

John Redden: Re bonus dice: they're something that really came into gaming with Over the Edge in 1992 and have been gaining purchase slowly since. (I mean, obviously, "roll 4 keep the highest 3 was part of D&D from very early on, but that was character creation, not play) It's pretty common in newer games, but often only recently—Call of Cthulhu only added them with 7th edition, D&D with 5th edition in 2014, etc.

I don't think D&D has to be in a medieval reference frame—Eberon is explicitly manapunk, Strixhaven (like the D&D framework it uses) is positively cosmopolitan and cross-universe, and Spelljammer generally feels "space fantasy with D&D mechanics and species" and not at all medieval. But of course the D&D progression and system gets all over everything whether you want it to or not; Call of Cthulhu pushes towards a certain feel but is a lot more neutral.

re not worrying about comments: Ah, but I love comments! They act as a wonderful way to connect with people and also a way to write original content by bouncing off what other people say rather than having to come up with so much original stuff. I just get behind on reading if I procrastinate too much.

If anything, my issue with the APA getting too large isn't falling behind (personally) on comments; it's the thing that's a byproduct of; that as the APA gets longer, fewer and fewer people will read it all the way through—at least in a single month.

As a farmer (and one who came to it late in life rather than being raised to it), I'm curious about your opinions (if any) on Sarah Taber's stuff about the politics and economics of farming. <https://www.youtube.com/@FarmToTaber> (CW: Yes, she's totally a liberal).

Mitch Hyde: Re improving as a GM by playing with good GMs: I think it goes both ways—as a GM or player you also learn from better players, who will do more creative and original things that others players (and the GM) have to respond to, opening your mind to what's possible.

I'm all for shared GM responsibilities, but I don't think rotating GMs would work well for D&D. The entire structure screams out for a single GM at any given table, in any given game, even if everyone is *capable* of GMing. If anything, I think the main issue is the "on-ramp" problem—as someone who will GM some other games but won't GM D&D (well, except brief

times on that side of the table back when I was playing LSR), DMing just seems like too much work and too much risk. Designing interesting but not over-deadly encounters is hard and the tools don't support you well; CR and XP sound like they're a broad but simple enough way to design encounters, but far too many encounters just feel trivial with a well built (not even optimized) party. Plus, the assumption is that campaigns are going to last for literal years, so starting a new D&D game feels like a big commitment. Make designing encounters feel more fun and like you're more supported, come up with some structures that give people a chance to try out DMing and you'll get more people who decide they like it and stick with it at least for some of the time.

Erica Frank (Elf): Welcome to E&A! And a particular welcome from me as we've had a influx of D&D people and (as someone who usually prefers not-D&D) it's good to have some balance!

I'm actually a different kind of D&D player wrt dice. Not sure what to call it—kobold? But I have a reasonable die collection and it's very badly organized, so I'll bring a random selection of dice to cons and maybe they're appropriate to the games I play, and maybe not (in which case it's borrowing time). I don't generally buy new dice any more (why do I need more dice? I have lots of dice!) but I'll still end up with more if I get into a new game that needs dice I don't have (ug, friends want to play WoTC; how many D10s can I find, anyway, at least ones that are readable and I don't hate?), or if Lisa picks up extra dice at a kickstarter, or there's some other giveaway like free dice from Gencon or Dexcon (a local con).

That gaming schedule sounds awesome, but also, in the long term, TOO MANY GAMES! Well, too many RPG games; I like having some space for doing other stuff. I mean, I'm fine being in 4 games but I'd like some of them to be collapsed into the same weekday or running on a monthly basis or something.

Re 5am saturday game: Brindlewood Bay is lovely, but yeah, if I hit 5AM for a game it will be from the wrong end (and that's not actually a good idea, but I know myself).

GURPS but started as D&D and now the D&D flavor has worn off: Fascinating; it would be lovely to hear more about this!

Re not-D&D being a good filter for "players I'd like to play with"—ditto! This has actually become less true as the "not-D&D" crowd has grown (and for that matter as the "open to indie gaming" crowd has grown), but since "plays D&D exclusively" is not a reliable indicator that someone's not on my wavelength, the converse—"plays games that not D&D" has always been a good place to start when trying to find people I find fun to play with—even if we end up playing D&D!

I'm not convinced that a game needs to provide a world to be a RPG, particularly since lots of RPGs (or other story games, like Microscope) don't include a world at all, expecting (or even guiding players) to make it up at the table. But I'll agree that Fate and GURPS and Gumshoe aren't games; they're metagames, which are expected to be customized for the particular genre or other world details you're running/writing them for. On the other hand, our (so far unpublished) Good Society Hack, *Dangerous Refuge*, doesn't include a specific school, but it's certainly a game in concept; the opening act involves collectively coming up with a school (or picking and customizing one of the examples we provide, I guess; we did write examples), but the game guides you through each act of play. Or at least, it will; the game it's based on, Good Society,, does that so I'll have to write that part.

In contrast, GURPS doesn't guide you much at all. What's the first thing that happens? Well, I guess the GM has to decide on (build and/or buy) the milieu they're running in, and as part of that they're going to have to come up with all sorts of micro-decisions—what NPCs if any are you coming up with and are you

going to build them or wait until 5 minutes before they need to appear and fill them out later? What rulebooks are part of your game, and which are very much not something players should draw on? All that sort of thing. Fate is a bit different in that you can run with many fewer pre-game decisions if, say, you decide to start a campaign with Fate Accelerated with a quickplay technique where people improvise what went wrong immediately prior to the game starting, there might not be anything else—just characters with one Aspect (the high concept, of course) approaches and a name filled in, and the improvised situation, and then people can come up with the rest of what's going on (including proposing other aspects and stunts) as things go. At which point does that go from being a system to a game?

On the other hand, if you're looking at the Fate Core main book and wondering when you go from that to a game, yeah, there are some decisions to be made first.

The bell curve may not work in cards-as-randomizers, but auto-norming does - as long as the cards aren't recycled or reshuffled, events will tend to trend towards the mean, which can be useful in some structures. I ended up suggesting cards for this reason in...I think two playtests at Metatopia where the possibility of bad ice luck pushing the game away from what the designers were going from seemed to be extra present.

Yeah, I use two columns for the same reason. If I'm going to write a lot of text, having it in the font I'm likely to use in a single column is going to be really hard to read, while going to two columns may involve some scrolling, but will generally work.

When we were discussing format, I originally suggested having a word count instead of a page count specifically to avoid this issue. It's about as easy to read 10k words in 30 pages as it is in 10 pages (more intimidating? Sure, but about as easy). Easier, arguably, since unless people are going all e.e. cummings, they are probably using a comfortable to read font and maybe some pictures and illustrations to break things up. But crammed into 10 pages, those 10k words are going to be quite hard to read unless the font size is very small, which leads to two column solutions.

I love and hate the idea of landscape pages with 3-4 columns. Problem is, the APA s all jammed together, so unless you put your zine sideways (in which case the reader needs to rotate the image before they can read your zine) or use a radically different format than anyone else, it's going to be hard to read in a compiled format. And while in theory, having different page formats can work in a concatenated PDF that is only read electronically, it feels better overall to have them all be the same orientation if possible. And yeah, I think if you want a top/bottom split you're going to want a bigger divider between "top" and "bottom" so it's clear to the reader that the top is a multi-column article that they should read in totality before they go on to the next section—I don't know that it would be fun to read, but a newspaper-style layout would be fun in concept, at least.

Re Windows 11: I don't really hate it, but wow do I hate all the misfeatures they've included. Specifically:

I don't want AI (it's actually easier to get rid of so far than AI in Android though). I don't want Onedrive (in fairness, Windows 10 also forced onedrive on you and I had to remove it there too; I think I'd done all the work and it didn't bother me when I let it upgrade to Windows 11...until I got a new laptop, anyway).

I don't want Edge or Explorer or any windows-provided web browser. This means that when I install an app I want it to open pages in my favorite browser, not Edge. No, Edge, go away.

I don't want my mobile device in Start. I also don't want ads, or web pages, or...just show me apps, ok? (honestly I would *much* rather go back to the tree-based start of old; there was nothing wrong with it that letting people search the entire

start menu like modern browsers let you search your bookmarks wouldn't solve).

Re group character creation: Yes, please!

I think the best way to do GURPS might, in fact, be to come up with the whole character concept first, and then figure out how to balance the points on it second, and if you don't have enough points, scale the character back or work with the GM to figure out how to fit it within your allotted point total (or just run GURPS with no point limits, which apparently some people do). What it often doesn't do is inspire me to create a character; if the milieu has clear archetypes I can build around I can work with that, but the system itself isn't inspirational except exactly in "if you take this one expensive advantage, you will need to build your entire character round it and the advantage is costed to assume that you'll do this," which is awfully specific and steers you away from a lot of ideas.

LOL on "look, we have a system for this but YOU are never going to use it". Not unless you have a thousand character points, anyway, and see "characters with high points have too many skills/abilities."

And yeah, insightful on how GURPS was originally an alternative to AD&D (as honestly are a lot of '80s games). I mean, I do have AD&D in my bones, but I also have year of OTE and Fate and PbtA games.

Gabriel Roark: Yum, scotch! Our tastes tend to be fairly pedestrian, but we do try keep a good Islay in stock (like Lalagavin).

Re having NPCs possess backup consumables that PCs can find if they win: Glad you like it! Given that it serves both realism and gamism, I thought it might be a good compromise.

Re double column text on the screen: I like it just fine on a laptop screen. On a tablet screen, though, double column usually entails a lot of scrolling...which is part of why I tend to just read on a laptop these days.

Yikes on your fall! Yeah, at that point adding some protective gear makes sense. Yikes on your fall! Yeah, at that point adding some protective gear makes sense.

Myles Corcoran: Re Amber players making art and craft for a game: The fact that Amber gives players extra character points for making arts and crafts probably at least got the ball rolling, even if, in the end, players produced many more pieces than the measly rewards require they add.

Re Hit Dice for recovery points in D&D5: I mean, they had a term for them; it was "healing surges", which they'd used for 4e. But, of course, that was taken badly and unfairly seen as a mechanic that made 4e feel like "not D&D". So, despite the poor fit, I think they choose to use the term to try to give the mechanic some cover in the next edition. And, despite the awkwardness; it orks - people will complain about the term, but not so much that the mechanic itself isn't D&D-ish (not least because it's not being used ubiquitously like it was in 4e, where it powered, at least at launch, all healing that wasn't provided by per-day abilities, including potions).

Re Swords of the Serpentine as the best Gumshoe game: It's not just that it's one of the most recent—Yellow King is more recent still, and I don't like it nearly as much. Timewatch is also really strong, and for some of the same reasons—that Kevin Kulp "gets" Gumshoe's advantages more than anyone else working with it. So, Swords has a much reduced General skill list, with all 10 skills, plus the hit point pools (Morale and Health) which aren't competing for points with the other skills. And, while Yellow King deals with the "20 points of investigative skills, much less than 20 ways to spend them" issue by replacing them with 2 pushes that can be spent on any investigative skill, Serpentine leans into the concept instead—it formalizes the idea that you can spend any investigative skill for a 3 point general pool if you can justify it well enough that Timewatch also

formalized, adds the rules letting you spend *one* investigative skill down for an even better ratio of one d6 die of damage for each point spent (which also results in much simpler combat rules between that, teamwork, a unified maneuver system, the minimum damage rule, and the refresh token rule, compared to, say, NBA's individual refresh rules for specific combat cherries, a dozen different (or more) maneuvers for specific decisions, etc that feels much more fun to play with. Also, unlike every other Gumshoe game, each investigative ability in Swords (mostly) comes with a special ability—often scaled to the number of ranks you have. Corruption limits your number of Sorcery spheres. Spot Frailty lets you ignore [ranks] worth of armor. Nobility also indicates how high ranked you are in the world whether you spend it or not (what it means to have Nobility and Servility is left as an exercise for the player). Each point of Vigilance increases your alertness modifier. It's a bit of a weakness that not *every* investigative ability has a fun side ability like this, but it's still pretty neat.

I mean, we playtested it so obviously we still have some wrinkles that need to be fixed or houseruled, but mostly it works well.

I'd call the workers in The Builders and Project L a worker management system, not worker placement (which is much more specific term, where players are blocking other players from taking an action by doing it themselves). But the tetris shapes are certainly workers in function the same way The Builders: Middle Ages (and The Builders: Antiquity, which is the same system but also has some other widget, including slavery, tools, and training to mix up the economy). They're very much not the same game—not least, while the Builders mechanics reward doing the kind of nonsense you do in Project L with the Master action, the economy doesn't support it well until very late in the game (where you might, in fact, grab multiple projects and work on them all at once for similar reasons that you do so in L, at least if you're doing well), because the big difference is that in the Builders, grabbing workers is free (except for slaves) but setting them to work costs you gold (except for slaves and machines), so while, if you have 8 or so workers it's much more action-efficient to have them work on 2 or even 3 buildings at once than try to shove them all into the same building, that would require that you be able to pay all their salaries at once without getting the payment for completing all the buildings in question until they're done.

George Phillies: I think you need a border or a bit more space between your columns, since it's sometimes hard to separate them with less space between left and right columns than individual characters within a column (or so it appears).

Michael Cule: Shout out for Everway love! But yeah, I can't see you going badly with letting players get inspired by art cards to pick their character. Having it also be an exploration game where the GM built all the characters sounds like a trip.

Mind, I don't find Everway that hand-wavy (I mean, it's less hand-wavy than Amber!) But it does certainly show its age a bit these days, and who was ever completely happy with the magic and powers subsystems? (the newest edition's version is probably something of an improvement).

Viticulture is a delightful game; congratulations.

Re Glamor Days: Sandrene never sleeps? Is this a perk of some sort?

Re glockenspeils: I mean, they have metal, they have percussion instruments; I don't see why not!

Wow, that Sewer Chase was really designed well for Sandrene to do well and not the rest of the group. Actually, what would you have done if they'd had Sandrene do the bulk of the chase? Sure, they don't have mangal communication (I assume) so she couldn't have followed with the rest of the group on the surface and only descending when she caught up, but they

could have followed at a distance so she got a chance to be undetected and mark a trail for the rest of the group (following say two combat rounds behind). But since there was a combat at the end that they won handily, doesn't sound like it would have been worthwhile.

Does the disaster in Dragon Pass have anything to do with other material? King of Dragon Pass, maybe?

Re Scum and Villainy: Yeah, I think one of the key things about Heat (in both NBA and Scum and Villainy) is that it goes up if LOUD things happen even if the PCs are never fingered for it directly. By doing so, the players have to manage their messes (or, you know, run away to another system and hope to never come back again; whatever) even if nobody actually *saw* them blow up that Star Destroyer.

Re civil forfeiture in the US: The thing about civil forfeiture is that it's easy to abuse against people without a lot of money and status (because it breaks the core "innocent until proven guilty" thing) but not against people with both.

Re Detect Alignment: Yeah, if you're going to have a Detect Alignment in your game, it should really only ping on people who have Chosen a Side—not the odd heroes (or crims) who aren't into the game of gods and demons; they just have a sense of morals (or just greed and some honor).

One Upon a Mystery would probably work, but it wouldn't feel much like a mystery plot since while you'd introduce clues and fight over the Real Answer to the Mystery, the players would firmly be in the storyteller role, not the detective one. Still, it would be fun to playtest! Horror and Space Opera seem pretty easy to do, actually.

Patrick Zoch: The distinction between villain/equipment is an interesting and valuable one. It goes both ways, honestly—if you can make a clean designation of something as villain "treasure" it's good to make sure the PCs can get it if they win (even if the villain uses a copy against the PCs because that's why they had the "treasure" around; another alternative is that if it was kept in a safe area, a desperate villain might try to go for it once they realized they were losing but not necessarily in time—which could also clue the players in that here was a hidden treasure box.

And on the other hand, sometimes you want an enemy kitted with equipment that the PCs should NOT get access to; not least because the economy of your game doesn't support the PCs picking up dozens of +1 swords. In which case, well, maybe most enemies don't use permanent equipment, but instead the "equipment" they carry is part of their abilities and becomes useless once they're defeated. Or maybe there are other reasons the PCs can't use it, whether it's that it's evidence, not treasure (if the PCs are cops, anyway), or it runs on a different fuel than the PCs gear, or is dedicated to an enemy god, or whatnot.

Re Influence in Masks (from Adult heroes): I do think that part of the game is the PCs becoming their own people that are less influenced by both adults and their peers (see the mechanics for locking attributes). But whether adults, specifically, influencing them is seen as positive or negative is going to depend a lot on how the adults are played; it's pretty easy to play it as tearing down the young heroes, but it doesn't have to be, and in the cases of more complex relationships like the Protegee's to their mentor or the Legacy to the various members of of their legacy, I wouldn't expect it to be exclusively negative. If an adult is using their influence to tear down the PCs and inflict conditions on them, that's one thing (and I'd hope that would be a good lesson on how to reject someone's influence), but a mother saying "I know I can trust you to take care of your littler brother" is an influence move to increase Mundane, and a mentor saying "you're the one I trust to protect people in my place, no GO!" is an attempt to increase a PC's Savior label, and neither feels negative to me. Of course,

eventually the PC may have their Mundane or Savior locked at 3 (or -2 I guess), but they might still not reject an adult's influence if they still trust them.

Patrick Riley: It's true that most RPGs focus on a "party" or other group of protagonists, while most non-RPG-inspired fiction focuses on a different organization. Which makes works like *Dracula*, *Penny Dreadful*, *Leverage*, and even *Burn Notice* stand out as works that *do* lend themselves well to the kinds of groups that RPG tables form (even though *Penny Dreadful* often focuses on the individual plotlines; it still absolutely forms parties of most or some of the main characters at various points).

re Adventurer's Guild: So, you can light the candle for an hour by sacrificing a hit point (did she figure this out after she tried it?). Is lighting the candle useful in some way such that this will be worth it at some later point? Also, does the person (or animal?) whose blood is used have to be willing? Ah, perfect translation. At a terrible cost, though.

Re layered environmental effects: Yeah, it can be overwhelming if used well (the ranger/druid Spike Growth is also a favorite) but it's also really fun for players and lets them think tactically. There's plenty of time later in a game to include enemies immune to some of these effects or that use tactics that make them less effective.

Re playtesting games at cons: Yeah, I agree that there's a distinction between doing a premier run at a con (with no playtesting before-hand) and playtesting at a con; talking about how a premier run is "playtesting at a con" is mostly a joke. But it's certainly true that while you don't expect the kind of feedback at a premier run that you would at a formal playtesting session, that there can certainly be some rough patches.

Re disfigurement in D&D or a D&D-like system: It's a tricky point, largely papered over by NPCs not running by the same rules that PCs run under. But if I wanted something like this in a game available to PCs, I might offer it as a Devil's Bargain—"you can avoid any HP damage from this attack, but you will take a long-term injury that can only be healed by big magic" or the like and have the player choose whether to take it or not.

Re Brindlewood Bay mysteries being not solved but resolved: well stated. It can still be a bit of a puzzle as the players try to find an answer that fits the clues and is satisfying, but since the mechanics can accept any answer, it's certainly not a solve on a mechanical level. Apocalypse Keys changes up the concept a bit more with a possibility that an answer might be rejected and wrong (and there's a danger clock to keep tension in the case where the PCs keep making wrong guesses; they can mitigate this by collecting extra clues before they start trying to guess), so you can have the detective/agents act on an incorrect guess, reveal evidence showing that it can't be correct, and go back to mystery solving with the action moved forwards until they guess again.

PUM: Yeah, your old D&D house rule (of CON representing "body" points and critical hit damage coming directly off body) is intriguing, but really punishing high level character who might otherwise be expected to tank dozens of low level hits if they had to; I'd expect armor that negated critical hits to be unreasonably popular in a game that includes this rule if it was available.

Dylan Capel: The play of *Psychodungeon* sounds interesting if not necessarily what I'd want to play for a longish campaign. I do like BoB for some games (particularly Yazeeba's B&B), so certainly the system is interesting and I should check whether we own that one (Lisa is usually the Keeper of Games, particularly indie ones). [answer: no, because it's not to Lisa's taste for similar reasons it's not to mine]

Mark A Wilson: That fiasco game sounds like it went well; I'm not quite sure where the turn (the midpoint of the adventure when you get a random twist, for those not familiar with *Fiasco*) was in the story, but that just means it worked into the story as it lay.

Re your musical and dancing background: Fantastic! I'm very much a practiced amateur—I took violin for a pile of years as a child, but was never dedicated; as an adult I got into folk singing and practiced up my violin and learned harp (and took lessons in the latter), reasonably successfully, but I'm actually more competent playing by ear or improvising than I am playing from sheet music. I'm not doing daily practice any more (for now, anyway) though I was for years, but I do still have an electric violin sitting by my desk I'll play on occasionally so I don't tend to fall too far out of practice, yet.

As to dance, I've been a casual partner dancer for many years, but never really got into the local dance scenes (other than historical stuff) until we got involved in the local blues dance. We were pretty avid for maybe 3 years, and then less active but still showing up for events and the occasional weekend for some more years, but while we keep in practice (sort of) by breaking out into dancing when music playing and the mood takes us, we haven't really shown up since Covid.

Re monks: I'm glad your 5.5 monk is working out well! I do think that the new version of the class is better built than its 2014 version; they have a better sense of the class's Focus (previously Ki) and action economy so it tends to flow better together. Sadly, while Rangers are also somewhat improved, they left a lot of traps behind, resulting in a good class that relies on a subset of its abilities (in contrast, while the Tasha's ranger was concentration-limited, turning the class's main damage feature into something that only activated when you hit something and didn't take an action was inspired and avoided punishing you just for using it).

Avram Grumer: Re *Kazenjammer*: Groan! But it could happen! There's even a cat-people species in D&D! And historically, *Spelljammer* was even more prone to furies than regular D&D, with elephantine species among others.

re how a fiction piece will design the PC to show off the new things in the adventure, but a PC is designed to no set gauge and it's a feature that the players probably don't know everything that will happen in the game: Very true. But it does highlight the advantages of building the adventure based on the PCs rather than the more traditional mechanism of building an adventure not knowing what PCs will enter it and then rolling with it (that said, the latter is less work so a hybrid approach is often ideal).

Good point on how our adventures have often lent themselves more to Vary's strengths as a speaker than to the interests and skills of the other PCs. I wonder how much this is based on the adventures themselves, and how much to my getting out ahead and proposing a way that Vary will be useful, but yeah, will want to try to balance the focus more; not sure that the last session did that either but will see what you think in this month's writeup.

Re POT and NOT tokens: The interesting thing there is how NOTs are the ones that turn into negative tokens. So the system incentivizes you to only spend POTs if you really need them, but to use up all the NOTs you can where the group can afford to take the loss—which at least in playtest meant our Collect Fees result was, after successfully doing this, ridiculously easy after one job.

Re lots of little tiny skills: Yep! This is why I prefer the overlapping skills model; don't assume that some PC will have any given skill; instead build adventures assuming *some* vaguely useful skill will get taken, and let Servility and Nobility solve some of the same problems, just in very different ways narratively. Which of course would shift a system that was

originally "applicability at the beginning" systems towards an "applicability at the end" approach, but that can be fine.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek: Re formatting: I notice that your zine has formatting designed for printing on even/odd pages! Which isn't a problem, really, but it certainly involves some sliding/adjustment when reading it on a tablet!

I had known about Replays, but not that they were originally intended to teach would-be GMs how to play RPGs—thank you!

Re having hit points be how many hits a PC can take before they're out of the fight: Which of course gets back to the original purpose of hit points; minis that could take one hit before dying with heroic minis being able to take more hits, eventually leading to minis that could inflict more than one "hit" per strike. One could even add some of that back in, which most non-combat having only one hit point, but lowering the scale down a lot and having powerful spells and fighters being able to inflict a larger number of hits per blow—perhaps 2 or even 3. Of course, weapon damage stops being a function of weapon size entirely, but weapon size can be incorporated in other ways—giving you a bonus or penalty if you're in your weapon's range, for instance.

WRT hit points and classes, I'd probably preserve the existing level structure but specify that "weak" classes can take 2 hits per level, "normal" ones 3 hits per level, and "strong" classes can take 4 hits per level, letting fighters shrug off blows that would lay down 3 normal people but wizards only be able to ignore one telling blow (at first level) before being in terrible danger. That way, you can also continue to associate spellcasting to level without things getting more complicated.

Lisa Padol: Of course, between last APA and this one we've seen the *Chainsaw Man* movie, which continues where the anime series left off (Lisa and I are both animem-only so don't know what's happened in the manga and not yet been animated). Naturally, it's certainly no less violent than the show (and nor does the movie ignore the protagonist's romantic/experiential ambition; it even begins with a date).

I asked Lisa verbally WHY there was a lion in King Arthur's bedroom in the Pendragon game where her character got lost, and got the answer that she doesn't know. IT WAS JUST THERE. I guess it's Camelot and these things happen?

Re PVP moments: Yeah consensual PVP can be incredibly cool! I was really annoyed OOC in one Monster Hearts game where the player playing the Witch decided that her character, after my Mortal character (with the Down the Rabbit Hole move which rewards you for sticking your nose where it doesn't belong) kept walking into situations she wasn't suited for, that her character would repeatedly try to kill mine...as far as I could tell...because she didn't like her? Because she was a mortal who knew too much? I don't even know! The way it worked out in the end—where my character, finally at 0 wounds after repeated attacks and having gained witchy Spells as an advance, had fallen off a school roof and apparently died...only to wake up having entered Darkest Self was actually pretty cool, but I do think we could have had more interesting play overall if one player hadn't jumped to MURDER.

We can talk about "technical Debt" at some point when I'm not chasing an E&A deadline. It isn't uninteresting!

Re not wanting to cut off the GM or another player: Yeah, this is what tend to throw us off when a GM has a style that they'll lay out what is about to happen and *expect* to be interrupted if a player wants to do something or respond to something. Fortunately, most GMs don't have this style, but some do (and some game systems, like Blades, encourage it at points).

re players in larps ignoring roleplay and going on Choose Your Own Adventure encounters early in a larp instead so

nobody else gets to do those first: I mean, they might be wrong in that those adventures might have only been set up for their characters (actually, I don't remember any CYOA for our faction, but enough happened in that game that I might have forgotten them). But if the designer wanted to avoid this, it should be easy enough to do—either don't make the adventures available until a half hour into the game, or require that they bring someone from outside their faction to do the thing, so they have an incentive to roleplay with people long enough to decide who to bring. Without that, yes, they're likely to vanish into their mechanical quests for a bit as soon as they're available.

Re Strixhaven and Bugbear cupcakes: I think this is actually from the text, which mentions something about owlbears being lured in with *meat* cupcakes. We've somewhat deemphasized the meat part in the game, and yeah, in our strixhaven campaign, bugbears like cupcakes. Actually, the food theme is pretty solid because Barbara's character (Mihoshi, (my character) Luna's also harregon sister) works in the cafeteria and so makes a number of food related items for buffs and other advantages; similarly to how Luna started out proficient with painting tools, which has become a major part of her character and part of how she solves problems, academic and adventurous alike.

Re forgetting abilities: The best is when you forget a useful ability until it's almost too late and then figure out how to make it useful. The worst is when you just forget it until well after the game.

Re Giovanni the Geometric as a Plasmoid monk without a supernatural flavor: Indeed. This was why I used the open-hand monk, specifically, to represent Giovanni's abilities as toned down for a PC. As a gelatinous cube, he can touch someone and paralyze (well, stun) them for a brief period (stunning strike). As a gelatinous cube, he can slam something and even form multiple arms to make repeated blows. As a gelatinous cube, he can form lots of little legs and move surprisingly fast, or even [stealth and high ex] become invisible. And as a gelatinous cube, his perception isn't limited by normal senses (high wisdom score and trained in Perception) or facing. Similarly, I wouldn't call Julian's monk character in Neitherworld, Kaline, particularly mystical—she's a sailor, weather-worker, and brawler, and as such, can manipulate the elements to enhance her brawling (she is, of course, built as a four elements monk). This gives her a supernatural flavor, naturally, but not a particularly contemplative one.

Re quickshock vs regular gumshoe: I mean, quickshock is harder to run (in an improvised way)—it demands that you have available cards that represent both Edges the PCs can gain, and Injuries and Shocks they can gain which make their life less easy, which might be standard cards, but might also want to be specific exception-based cards based on what's going on in the game. If you have a card to hand that suits the situation, all well and good, but if not, have fun doing game design on the fly.

Re PVP in our current group(s). Yeah, having a subset of the groups that was ok with (somewhat) PVP play would be a prerequisite. What I was proposing wasn't full PVP—the group would presumably come together for the things that mattered, but it would still have to be carefully handled.

Yes. Both Heroine and Cerebos are ultimately single protagonist games, with the other players playing helper characters, antagonists, or both, but in Heroine the identity of the protagonist is determined at the beginning of the game, while in Cerberos, all the starting PCs (except the Conductor, if any; the conductor can also be a shared NPC) are potential Main Characters, and only when a PC reaches Main Character status does the game reorganize to fit that new reality.

This also is supported by the other weird structure of the game, that the characters start out with only a single aspect—their name and two word description, if I recall, being known

and made up by their players, and we discover more about the characters as the game continues. Even the player playing the character learns more about them as the game progresses, as the character has other aspects that are made up by other players and hidden at the start, and will be revealed through play. So not only do you not know if you're playing a main character as play starts; you don't even fully know who you are playing.

And yes, of course all the Darkover books are written by Marion Zimmer Bradley. I have no idea why I wrote Mercedes Lackey instead.

Attronarch: "But Darcon did not heed the cries of the village priest"—so, a failed attempt to call for Divine Intervention?

Ambros had snapped out of his predicament on Flowerbloom #8: But what was the predicament? We never found out!

Yay, Hagar was brought back! (also, the current iterations of the parties seem somewhat more grounded at the moment, and less, um, amoral. So far, anyway). But that cost was certainly high (if appropriate for a 5th level spell given the abilities of the party).

Jim Vassilakos: Re popularizing gamebooks by making ones for children: Ironically, the first popular books with a "gamebook" style format, the Choose Your Own Adventure books, were expressly written for children, or at least young

adults.

The key to successful Call of Cthulhu is that even if the players are fully conversant with the Mythos used in the game (and many avid CoC players are, as are players of other systems that use the Mythos), that they don't know the specific mysteries and horror of the adventure they're playing. So, learning that Cthulhu (or Nyalthotep, or Yog Sogoth, or Golgoth, the Great Race or some other being that is hard to pronounce or alien creature with a strange name) is behind the events isn't nearly as important as the details of what actually happened and how you can stop it from getting worse. It's true that after you've learned a lot about Lovecraft's Mythos and the other related Mythae around it that it's not going to surprise you that, oh, an event involving time travel related to Yog Sogoth or one relating to a big northern storm related to Itaquia the Wind Walker. But that doesn't mean you can't reasonably portray a character learning of the actual terrible events.

Of course, replaying the *same* adventure is a bit different, but GMs who try that feat will sometimes change the details so the players don't in fact know everything likely to happen or who is really behind this mysterious disappearances.

Re Heroine: Glad it helped! Heroine is a pretty simple structure overall, but it's doing an interesting thing in what I think is a very elegant way. As for other egalitarian roleplaying games, I know I've mentioned Good Society and Belonging Outside Belonging here before. (and not just Lisa and I, as regards BOB).

Traveller Play-By-Email

Plankwell Campaign, Ch 51: Back Where I Belonged

GMing: Jim Vassilakos & Timothy Collinson, Playing Capt. Plankwell: Conrad Rader
The character of Capt. Plankwell was conceived by Phil Pugliese

“What now?” Both Sidara and I thought to ourselves as she and Josefeen followed close behind. Such was the strength of my psi that I could essentially “see” the Countess’s camera crew with their multiple lenses trained on our backs as we walked away. It was almost like having eyes in the back of my head, except I could even sense Helena’s displeasure despite the fact she kept a neutral expression.

It was the Countess, I suddenly realized, who’d directed the Imperial media to go after the HPSS, to paint them as incompetent. This apology, taking place at the Imperial Palace, was clearly a statement to Jewellians that she was in lockstep with the Navy. But behind closed doors, that wasn’t the case. She’d been openly derisive of Admiral Karneticky, essentially demanding he move Plankwell Naval Base out into the desert. As for me, I’d said or at least thought some things at her....

«Not the most diplomatic of things,» Josefeen interjected as we reached the turboporters and each got into separate capsules. Then the door slid shut, and I selected Iota Eight from the electronic menu, which, despite the fancy name, was just the transpex-domed rooftop of a gigantic parking garage.

On the way, I reflected on how I’d effectively scorned the Countess, asking if Her Excellency intended to use Olav to march on Capital¹. It was a ridiculous notion, of course, and underscored my contempt for the AI. There’d been some contempt for her as well, or at least anger over how I’d been buffeted, used and maneuvered, which I conveyed to her quite clearly. During that part, I was essentially the polar opposite of *Captain Ironface*, but it was entirely telepathic, even as I injected my anger into Alise. I’d caused her dramatic reaction, I realized, just as I’d somehow provoked Captain Masa back in that parking garage, in that instance without even trying.

A security robot met us outside the gravpad, removing our security collars as the launch emerged from underneath. Sublieutenant Jimenez was already preparing for takeoff.

“Back to the ship, sir?” she asked.

“Back to the ship.”

«You do realize the Countess is a powerful person, don’t you?» Josefeen’s voice, dripping with sarcasm, echoed in my head as we strapped in.

«At this stage of the game, we all are powerful in different ways. Yes, the Countess has political power and down the well, she is a force to be reckoned. Out in the dark, I wield a different kind of power.»

«Yet you decided to unleash your rage not in jumpspace but inside the Imperial Palace.»

«Nobody unleashes anything in jumpspace unless they want to draw in the Black Ships². In any case, it’s my birthday. I’ll rage if I want to.³» I decided to change the subject. «You knew the nobles were psions, didn’t you.» That one piece of intel I’d gleaned from Alise was a surprise only to myself.

«Not all nobles are psions,» Josefeen replied, «but the most powerful usually are. If not, they have psions around them pulling their strings.»

So we and the Zhodani were not so different, after all.

«What’s your evaluation of the Countess’s motives, pitting the Army and Navy against each other?»

«It’s a good question. Give me a day to dig into it.»

“Lt. Sidara,” I said, breaking the silence.

“Sir?”

“Compose a report to Mr. Faulk, summarizing what you saw and heard.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

“Let me read it before you send it off, so I can attach any personal commentary that might be necessary.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

Looking directly into her eyes, I could sense her giving herself an internal pat on the back. She’d recorded the entire thing, I realized, and though it would be impolite and therefore imprudent to leak the audio to Faulk, she fully intended to reference it to maintain accuracy. As far as she was concerned, I’d done exactly as he’d bid, showing no emotion and communicating only minimally and as required by protocol.

Josefeen looked at her and then at me.

«Am I influencing her now?» I asked. «Psionically, I mean.»

«It wouldn’t surprise me.»

«Are you immune to it, or do I have to watch myself around you as well?»

«No unshielded mind is immune. Until you’ve been trained, you’ll need to be careful, particularly with your emotions. Some minds are more susceptible to telempathy

1 [https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Capital_\(world\)](https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Capital_(world))

2 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Black_Ship

3 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ft_QfY16CxU

than others. As for Miss Francine,» — Josefeen took another long look at Lt. Sidara — «*all I can tell you is she's got the hots for you. Don't tell me you haven't sensed it.*»

«*I'm sure I am old enough to be some sort of parental surrogate. I'm sorry she feels this way, but I am not messing around in the ranks.*»

Whatever itch I might have had got scratched with Kaz, and I wasn't about to disrupt morale by playing favorites. Love me or hate me, everyone would get treated equally. That, at least, had been my long-standing practice, and I was determined to stick to it now. Of course, I'd never been telepathic before. Knowing what people actually thought about me was sure to be more than a little disconcerting, not to mention my Intel officer being a dyed-in-the-wool psychic succubi.

«*You could mess around without messing around, you know. Think of it as practice.*»

«*I'd prefer to practice on people other than my crew. I need to rely on them, not expose them to potential brain wiping. You may have managed to cauterize your sense of responsibility and morality, but I still have some attachment to mine.*»

She bit her bottom lip, and I detected a wave of hurt feelings intermixed with anger. Perhaps I was being overly judgmental, but the idea of having to repeat on Lt. Sidara what I'd just done to Reggie was enough to make my blood curdle. And even if I avoided "messing around" with people's minds as a conscious act, this aptitude I apparently had at influencing people subconsciously was sure to be trouble. Maybe I could shield up and isolate myself.

«*Stick your head in the sand and hide. That's a great idea, Sir.*» Josefeen was, of course, smirking. «*You do realize the report your new favorite lieutenant is going to prepare for that lawyer isn't going to include anything about what actually happened between you and the Countess.*»

«*Faulk lives in the world I used to live in. He has to go by what is said out loud. Unless he's a psion too?*»

«*Doubtful.*»

Out of the corner of my eye, I sensed Sidara pivoting her gaze from me to Josefeen and then back to me. She must have noticed us staring at each other.

"Did you have a question, Lt. Sidara?"

"Uh... well, Sir... I was wondering what you want done with the six crew members in the brig."

"I have not forgotten about them. Captain's Mast. Schedule it for later today, after I have had a chance to review the case."

"Aye aye, sir."

Given what I'd gleaned from Reggie's memories, I was prepared to go with *Acting Under the Influence Causing Grievous Property Damage*. Looks like my goodwill account was going to take another hit. Depending on their testimony, some might take a reduction in rank. All were

going to be restricted to the ship regardless. This was another issue. I knew what happened from Reggie's point of view, but the crew had choices, and they had been made poorly. I was also interested in what they'd say about how they were treated by the locals.

I messaged Nizlich, informing her of my imminent arrival and asking if the crew had a surprise ready for me. Better forewarned than ambushed. Sidara, meanwhile, was looking at me again. I glanced up, meeting her gaze, and behind those eyes, I could sense her wondering if there was something going on between her Captain and his well-endowed administrative aide. Back at the turboporter terminal outside Faulk's office, when I'd mentioned how Lt. Abbonette had to agree with me, she'd thought nothing of it, but now seeing us staring at one another, Josefeen biting her lower lip, she was almost certain she'd detected sexual tension.

"Is there something else, Lieutenant?"

"Uh... no, sir. I just wanted to mention that if you're too busy, you could appoint an OIC⁴."

«*I just love how she's trying to make time for us to be alone.*» Josefeen smiled.

Memories of Josefeen in succubus-mode as well as Commander Nizlich in the shower both sprang to mind, and I hurriedly drew my psychic curtain, trying to keep my composure. Josefeen, meanwhile, broke into a fit of giggles, Sidara's confused frown only making it worse.

"Sorry," Josefeen said, "I was just... remembering something."

"It's a bit early in my tenure to be off-loading duties," I answered Lt. Sidara. "In any case, I am curious to hear what happened down there firsthand, and I need to check their behavior against my first impressions."

"Aye aye, sir," she said, glancing back to Josefeen who by now was wiping her eyes.

Cleon only knew what Sidara would make of all this, and I reopened my psi-curtain to focus on her as she went back to looking at her slate. I couldn't discern what was displayed, however, because she wasn't actually reading it. Instead, she was still wondering what was going on between me and Josefeen.

What's so funny about appointing an OIC? Maybe they take turns being OIC behind closed doors? Ew! Stop it! That's perverted and ridiculous!

«*Yes and no,*» Josefeen's whisper reverberated across the psychic ether.

Sidara, however, was deaf to it, wondering to herself why it was that men always seemed to prefer the crazy ones. Unfortunately, she'd never been successful in the romance department. She was too studious, too serious, unlike this woman across from her who could laugh over a memory and who's physical assets no doubt afforded her all the male-attention any female could ever want.

4 Officer in Charge of a nonjudicial punishment proceeding.

I'll bet that's why he chose her to be his aide.

She looked up, catching us both staring at her, and both of us quickly averted our eyes. Sidara wiped her nose, worried there might be something hanging out.

This was getting me nowhere, and my paperwork was still backing up. I turned to my slate and called up the approvals list, things that had been done by others on their authority and just required a sign off. Meanwhile, I pulled my psychic curtain firmly closed. I didn't need Josefeen interrupting my train of thought as I skimmed through the lists of replenishment items, routine maintenance and departmental exercise reviews. I needed to get in tune with my ship and crew, and the time-honored Navy way was to snoop through all the minutia and wait for a web of connections to form.

The Navy had experimented with limited AI programs in the past, which was how ship computers had ended up with their personalities, but the brass preferred a sophont's hand on the actual wheel, so to speak. With my new knowledge, I couldn't help but wonder if it was because living captains and crew would be more susceptible to psionic interference. But the Zhodani were extreme users of warbots, semi-autonomous killing machines. That seemed like a solution when warring psions went after each other, to have troops not susceptible to psionic interference.

A return message suddenly appeared from Commander Nizlich. "Surprise birthday party to follow your dinner with the Highport Director. It'll be in the fighter pod. He already knows."

He already knows? So he's in on it. I checked my schedule. Dinner was set for 1800 hours, which left me about six hours.

"One-eight-seven to Jaqueline, acknowledged," Jimenez's voice drifted out from the cockpit. "Proceeding to P.A. number 1."

We'd apparently gotten permission to dock, the "P.A. #1" probably indicating the forward port side airlock. I listened for the familiar noise of metal biting against metal as the locking clamps did their thing. Then the seatbelt light switched off and the doors slid open.

Back in my own domain. More or less.

Josefeen's whisper of a smile made me wonder if my curtain was slipping, so I re-imagined it, this time drawing it shut even more forcefully.

"Thank you for the smooth ride Jimenez. Lieutenants?" I motioned for Josefeen and Sidara to disembark ahead of me, in contravention of the usual order of things. I wanted to see if there was a welcoming party, and I was not disappointed. Commander Nizlich was there along with a variety of deckhands and petty officers all saluting as a bosun piped the *Captain aboard*.

I should have known that any opportunity would not be missed by the ever-resourceful Nizlich. At least she had limited it to the junior crew, who rarely had the practice of

greeting senior officers. Leave it to her to combine a greeting with a training exercise. I walked to the precise point where the Navy deemed the line of demarcation (and had helpfully painted it on the deck in yellow) and turned a crisp salute to the side party. I then stepped over the line, marking that I was back in command. Both of us being in the same place made it simpler, although I did note the senior petty officer updating the log.

"Just the person I wanted to talk to," I said to Nizlich.

"Company dismissed," she said in a low, even tone, everyone immediately scattering without a single "Happy Birthday" well-wish to their new captain. "Why the Bravo-Nine-Nine?" she asked as soon as we were alone. "What happened down there?"

"The Countess decided the optics of the two HPSS security contractors apologizing to me in person was valuable to her in some way. Given that I was being directed to re-enter the presence of known hostiles, I thought better safe than sorry. Was Major Fa'Linto unhappy I didn't get shot again?"

"Um... I'm sure I wouldn't know about that, sir."

Though she maintained a neutral expression, there was now a slight blush. The love/hate relationship between the Navy and Marine Corps was somewhat of a running joke. If they didn't have a pool on when the senior Navy officers were likely to get themselves in trouble, I'd be very much surprised.

"I was overly cautious," I admitted. "Or it might have been a case of over-enthusiasm."

"Over-enthusiasm, sir?"

"For the rules, Commander... unless you or the tribunal turned up anything."

"The Admiral's staff told us that if there is to be a tribunal, it'll be the home fleet that conducts it."

Meaning Karneticky wanted to keep this from going any further. I pressed my lips together.

I could only fault Nizlich to a point. Technically, I was right in my assertion that as the ranking representative of the 213th Fleet, I could trigger all the ancillary investigations I wanted. Practically, however, the local fleet simply had better resources and connections for fully ramping up an investigative tribunal. Likewise, it was the general practice of visiting captains to defer to the local forces when it came to such matters, unless, of course, there were extenuating circumstances.

"Did you gather the intel I requested?"

"We are still in the process, sir, but early indications are those guards were following standard procedure."

Standard procedure. That's what the HPSS representative had said to that reporter on Channel One, that they followed *all pertinent regulations*.⁵ Therefore, to indict them for high crimes against the Imperium would be to indict the local government as well.

5 See the 5th page of Chapter 44 in A&E #592.

The power centers of Jewell's labyrinthine bureaucracy must have been getting increasingly annoyed. It would be interesting to learn what they were saying to each other and what plots they were no doubt hatching. But were I to deploy intelligence-gathering assets against an Imperial world, against civilians, no less... well... if discovered, then claims about my overreach would be pretty easy to substantiate. Nizlich could have authorized use of such assets during my absence, but she probably considered it doing me a favor by not digging deeper into what was obviously a political minefield.

"Send the data you've collected to Lt. Sidara. I am sure she will let me know if there is anything there we need to work on."

"Aye aye, sir."

Though I was still learning my way around the ship, I could see Jimenez had docked at the airlock closest to my quarters, and on the short walk it took to get there, I wondered if perhaps sweeping this incident out of sight wasn't such a bad idea after all. Certainly, that's what the powers that be all seemed to want. Granted, I could stand on my points and expose myself to greater scrutiny, but taking one for the team even in the face of actual physical violence would likely get me better cooperation in the future. And now that Naval Intelligence was sucking me into its schemes, I didn't need the public scrutiny a tribunal would bring.

Once back in my quarters, I stripped off my dress uniform with an unexpected dryness in the back of my throat. I'd dutifully made my appearance at the palace as requested — i.e. ordered — but I'd also lost my temper, at the Countess no less. No doubt she could send a message to Admiral Vasilyev, complaining about my court manners, and that would be it for my career. But would she? The offense had been telepathic and so there was no loss of face. Although Kaz has been guilty of far less.

It was probably due to that damn psi-enhancer. It clearly lowered my inhibitions, as whenever I took it, some subconscious rage I harbored deep inside wormed its way to the surface. If not for that moment of venting, I'd be now escorting Lady Alise to some swanky, Silver City nightclub. Better that didn't happen, I reconsidered, as I could just picture myself trying to dance in full dress and a bulletproof vest.

I tossed my dress uniform into the laundry chute and hung the vest in my closet alongside my shipsuit, throwing on a regular duty uniform instead. Based on the instructions I'd given Nizlich three days ago, there was technically a one-in-eight chance of a zero-zero drill (zero atmosphere, zero gravity) sometime during the next eight hours⁶, but I very much doubted she'd run the drill without giving me a heads up. In the unlikely event she did, I'd be scrambling for an emergency vacc suit along with everyone else, but to

wear a shipsuit to a birthday party would be a bit... well... it would look weird, and it would also broadcast to the crew that a zero-zero was in the mail. And considering that we were in port, surrounded by the bulk of the 112th Fleet, well, a zero-zero in such circumstances was a bit on the strict side, although this was the Imperial Navy, and I had to admit, it would be a great way to cut short my birthday celebration.

I couldn't help but snort as I checked myself in the mirror. Only if I wanted to be resented for the next several years. There was a delicate balance between captain and crew when it came to drills, and I'd not been here long enough to build up any credit save for that bequeathed by my association with Olav. The Marines might like it that I called them out on a retrieval mission, but I doubted they thought any better of me for putting myself in the position of having to.

I exited my quarters, determined to find my way to the bridge on memory alone, and though the corridors weren't empty, I didn't encounter anyone wishing me a happy birthday. Perhaps Nizlich had explicitly instructed them to *not* remind their new Captain another year has passed. And if so, was this wise? Well, we hadn't been through anything together. Not yet. So all they knew of me was that speech I gave, and, of course, they knew of Olav's speech, and perhaps they saw me on the morning news, if they were paying attention to it, being quoted as saying that Olav the android was, in effect, the reincarnation of Olav hault-Plankwell.

Should I publicly disavow this? I was misquoted, after all. Oh, but that would irk the Countess like nothing I'd done prior.

I turned right at the T-intersection, and the short corridor to the main bridge was there on the left, exactly where I expected it to be. With some small satisfaction, I turned left and let the auto-scanner take stock of me. Then the iris valve twirled open, revealing the wide, rectangular chamber with its numerous holographic displays and the captain's chair — my chair — positioned at what was more or less center stage. Someone was presently sitting in it. It was that sublieutenant Nizlich had introduced at the end of my initial tour.

"Captain on the bridge!" someone called out, causing him to leap from the chair almost as if he'd been jolted by a shock baton.

My practiced eyes took in the scene. All stations were manned, and there was the normal bridge chatter one would expect for a ship under repair. No alarms were currently in effect, but a swath of amber on the forward screen marked work being done. I assumed it to be related to the scout pod replacement. Likewise, the line of amber on the weapons board told me there had been little progress on the fusion barbettes. As for the crew themselves, they wore a mix of

6 See the final paragraph of Chapter 15 in A&E #563.

shipsuits and regular uniforms, mostly the latter, so it was doubtful word of the upcoming zero-zero had leaked.

“At ease,” I said, mentally noting the location of the nearest emergency vacc suit locker. “Status report?”

“Nominal, sir,” the sublieutenant said. “However, the general recall you ordered is still in effect. A construction crew from GP is also on board. They’re decommissioning the Exploration Pod.”

“You are relieved,” I said, sitting down.

“Aye aye, sir. The Captain has the Conn.”

“I have the Conn,” I said. Not that we were actually going anywhere.

I opened the armrest’s earbud compartment, put them on, and then activated the chair’s holographic interface, my status board lighting up with the current duty roster, the operational readiness model, and, of course, my personalized, computer-generated “To Do” list, the very existence of which sometimes made me wonder who was really in charge. Nonetheless, I eased back into the command chair and just let it all soak in. Finally, I was back where I belonged.

Download the consolidated Plankwell write-up:

<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/plank.html>

Past zines available at:

<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/apa.html>

Jim’s Comments on E&A #5:

Quinns Quest:

Brian Rogers (E&A #5, pg. 12): “This is an RPG review series on YouTube where Quinns guarantees that he will run a 10-14 session campaign before reviewing them; this gives you a nicely detailed sense of how the game plays rather than how it reads, He’s also doing an actual play podcast Play to Find Out where he takes “hoary old games” that kids these days have only heard about (Jorune, Toon, and Nobilis so far) and runs them to see if they deserve their unplayable reputations (spoiler, they do not).”

Thanks for mentioning this channel.⁷ Looks like a good place to learn about some of the TTRPGs I never got around to playing.

⁷ https://www.youtube.com/@Quinns_Quest

Dangerous Books:

Mark Nemeth (E&A #5, pg. 15): “Supposedly, a woman named Yarana had arrived last autumn from the Old Empire, seeking to join the abbey after repudiating her former interest in demons and devils. She did, however, bring some books on the subject that were added to the abbey’s library, as the monks valued preservation of the written word, even if it was at variance with their own beliefs.”

Call me paranoid, but in a world where demons/devils provably exist, I would personally put summoning instructions under lock and key. Granted, Archlo might still have gotten access to the book, but this could have been explained as being a security breach rather than him simply taking it off the public bookshelf. It would also have been more interesting if that boar the devilish-looking entity was tormenting was possessed by Archlo's consciousness/soul. It would have raised the moral question over what to do with him, and with the right magic, the party might have discovered more about his motives and anything else he might have learned that could later prove valuable.

Storytelling Games:

Matt Stevens (E&A #5, pg. 18): “First, I had trouble with the cliched question “What’s my motivation?” I felt I wasn’t playing a character, I was playing a character AND a member of the writer’s room, being asked not only for my toon’s motivation, but what would make for a “good story.” (This was explicit in Prime Time Adventures, of course, but implicit in many others as well.)”

I have no experience with these storytelling games, so I can only imagine what you're talking about, but in my experience with the older games, I’ve seen a little bit of the same. For example, in most horror RPGs you, acting on behalf of your character, would have to pretend you don’t know you’re in a horror movie (until it becomes obvious). If your PC knew what you know as their player, they’d run for the hills. So for the good of the game you have to go with the flow. Likewise, in GURPS or Top Secret/SI if you're playing a character with a psychological disadvantage (say a drug addict, kleptomaniac, etc.), then you've got to play that disadvantage. Yes, you know as the player it might get you into trouble, but you presumably chose the disadvantage, so you're sort of honor bound to play it. Indeed, there are many situations in RPGs that can interfere with a player’s agency over their character⁸, although from your description, it sounds like story-telling games take this a step further.

⁸ Christopher Abbott brought up this question of player agency when he asked “Where does the GM's influence end?” in A&E #511. See my comment to him in #512 as well as my IgTheme comments in #552.

Complexity in RPG Combat Systems:

Matt Stevens (E&A #5, pg. 19): “They want to give the DM guidance for almost every conceivable (combat) situation, and if that means hundreds of pages of rules, well... so be it.”

Back in the day, we used to talk about the trade-off between simplicity and realism. On the one side, there were simple combat systems that were regarded as preferable because they were quick. Gamers like myself who wanted RPG sessions to resemble a conversation punctuated by brief combats didn't want to have to bother with lots of dice and tables and math and so forth. But on the other side, there were complex combat systems, which were preferred by the sorts of gamers we called simulationists⁹. They claimed they wanted combat to be realistic, and so it had to involve lots of detail.

Bear in mind, this was before smartphones, and very few people back then even had access to a computer, let alone one at their gaming table. The first time I saw someone using a computer for GMing was in the early 90s, and I soon adopted the practice myself, developing my own software for my AD&D campaign.¹⁰

Considering it in retrospect, I think the introduction of computers could have allowed the people who wanted fast combat and those who want detailed, realistic combat to come together, because computers are really good with randomization and tables and math and so forth. But this didn't happen, and I think the reason is that the simulationists didn't really want detail for the sake of realism. Yes, they wanted detail, but based on what actually happened I'm guessing the real reason was that they wanted the RPG to become something closer to a tactical wargame where they'd have all sorts of combat options, all sorts of possibilities of min-maxing their characters, and ways to make a substantial contribution to the game through their mastery of the combat system without necessarily having to roleplay a character. So, at least to the best of my knowledge, a highly realistic combat system was never developed.¹¹

Minigames (RPG-Adjacent Activities) for GMs:

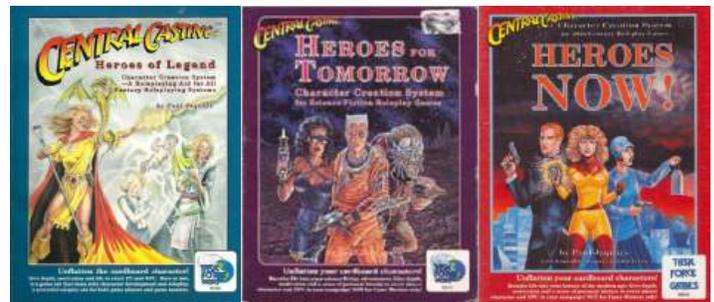
Roger BW (E&A #5, pg. 22): “In those days before widespread Internet access, I had lots of time when I wanted to do game-like things, but didn't have access to other gamers. And I scratched that itch with what I'd now call minigames: designing a car or 'mech for the

combat games, designing a new spaceship for Traveller, putting together a subsector, and so on.”

Yes, and character generation for Traveller NPCs also qualifies, I think. Perhaps so does creating new monsters, spells, magic items, and NPCs for (A)D&D, or drawing up and populating dungeons and wilderness maps. A GM's work is never done. And I agree that including a framework and especially a procedural system whereby GMs can do these sorts of activities is a really smart design choice, because getting people to engage with an RPG naturally increases their creative investment.

I remember one of the first programs I ever wrote was for the Apple II+. Essentially, what I wanted was a spreadsheet to help me design Traveller starships, but I hadn't even seen a spreadsheet yet. VisiCalc might have just come out, but since I didn't know about it, I just wrote a spreadsheet-esque program specifically for the purpose of doing the necessary calculations that go into starship design. It was rudimentary, but it served its purpose. Of course, I also started writing programs to help with Traveller sector generation. This, much later, culminated in the release of Galactic.¹²

Somewhere along the line I got an idea for a program that would allow the user to create their own random tables that would link to each other, so that the user could create a whole network of random tables that referenced each other.¹³ I'm not sure, but it's possible I got the idea from the Central Casting series.¹⁴ But the program, I realized, could be used for all sorts of RPG-related tasks.¹⁵ And so while I see the value in these sorts of RPG-adjacent activities, I always had this inclination to automate them as much as possible. This automation, of course, required a certain degree of focus, but I figured it was better to spend my



12 <https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/gal.html>

13 <https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/rand.html>

14 Central Casting: Heroes of Legend (1988) (<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2680610-central-casting>), Central Casting: Heroes for Tomorrow (1989) (<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2680613-central-casting>), and Central Casting: Heroes Now! (1991) (<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/2589025-central-casting>), all of them by Paul Jaquays.

15 See <https://rpgreview.net/content/using-rand-brainstorming> (this is the first of three articles I had in [RPG Review #21](#)).

9 Note, these aren't the same sort of simulationists referred to in GNS Theory (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GNS_theory). They were more akin to MilSim gamers (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MilSim>).

10 <https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/camp.html>

11 I discuss this a little bit more in A&E #332.

mental energy this way than to repeatedly go through the same process manually.

I can't help but wonder, however, do the younger generations have the same level of focus we had when it comes to these sorts of activities? I mean, there was no Internet back then, no social media, very few video games, and no free pornography catering to every fetish imaginable.¹⁶ Even TV only had about seven watchable channels (2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 11, and 13). The rest were either static or preachers. If I were a kid today, with all the entertainment options they have, I don't know that I'd ever teach myself programming or even invest the time to learn these *minigames* as you call them.

So maybe including them into RPG rules isn't such a smart design choice anymore. I hope I'm wrong in even considering this as a possibility, because it seems to me like these sorts of RPG-adjacent activities are a great way to exercise one's natural creativity. But the entertainment landscape has definitely expanded, and this trend will likely continue.

Horror Cinema & Horror Movie Fans:

Mitch Hyde (E&A #5, pg. 40-41): "Give a man a horror film about S&M demons who confuse eternal torment with pleasure, and he'll have an interesting night's entertainment. Give a ten-year-old that tape, and you will change him. I was terrified. And hooked."

S&M demons? Looks like I missed out.

Back when I first saw those flying monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz* (I was probably about 7 or 8), I decided I didn't like horror movies. Not one bit. The few horror flicks I've seen are *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), *Flatliners* (1990), *The Cell* (2000), and at least one of the *Chucky* franchise. Also saw *The Thing* (1982), but I wouldn't consider it a horror movie despite the fact that it is pretty horrific.

So why do some people like horror movies and others don't? Well, I went down a little bit of a rabbit hole while looking into this. At first glance, I thought maybe it would have something to do with empathy, but the psychological research on this seems to be a bit mixed. There's some evidence that in children, exposure to horror movies does lead to a decrease in empathy and an increase in anxiety. However, that doesn't answer the question.

The main driver, psychologically speaking, seems to be a natural tendency towards thrill-seeking behavior, although other components may include morbid curiosity and a lack of disgust sensitivity. Note, none of these are necessarily good or bad. There's such a thing as too much disgust sensitivity as well as too little curiosity, but like I said, I think the main component is thrill-seeking, which is positively correlated to extraversion and openness. As for

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRgNOyCnbqg>

negative consequences, the main one is that you might have gotten hooked on the adrenaline, but as far as addictions go, this one is about as benign as they come. You might have also been desensitized to violence, but this also isn't necessarily bad. In the right circumstances, it can be advantageous.

So was *Cigarette Lady* right to rent you those movies? I don't know, but it did make for a fun story. Thanks for sharing.

Thousand Year Old Vampire:

Erica Frank (E&A #5, pg. 48): "A beautiful, sad, solo RPG about the crush of time and vampires."

I don't know if you have access to old issues of A&E, but Mark Wilson did a review and two session reports of *Thousand Year Old Vampire* in A&E #s 551, 552 & 553 (*Bumbling Through Dungeons* #s 26, 27 & 28). Well worth reading. Mark, I imagine, would be happy to send you copies. One thing that struck me was how each of his session reports read like the plot treatment for a novel. For this reason, TYOV strikes me as being as much a tool as a game.

I think I'd prefer playing these sorts of solo RPGs, ones that results in something that can be turned around and used in some way. *How to Host a Dungeon* is also on my "to do" list for the same reason. Would be curious to learn if there are any solo RPGs like TYOV but for different genres.

Central Coordinator Volunteer:

Erica Frank (E&A #5, pg. 52): "Anyway — whether or not I could 'do the CC job' (I'm not even going to consider 'maybe I could' or 'probably not' in my first issue), I could help with the PDF production if that's ever needed, and could probably do 'assemble all the PDFs & TOC' in an hour or two. That might drop to 30 minutes if I had a coherent system set up."

Welcome to E&A. Let me know if you'd like to do a training month sometime next year. You'd basically be the CC for one issue just to see how you like it. *Training* might be a bit of a misnomer, as you could do the assembly and so forth however you like.

Amusing Nickname:

Myles Corcoran (E&A #5, pg. 64): "He rides a new and very fine horse, Bucephalus, which is immediately renamed Booze and Syphilis by the crew."

LOL.

"Booze-Syphilis."

"No. His name is Bucephalus. It is a noble name for a noble steed."

"Like I said. Booze-Syphilis."

“You are hard of hearing, Sir!”
 “At least I’m not hard of thinking.”
 “What exactly are you implying?!”
 “That you’re a diseased, booze-swilling lech.”
 “...Oh. Well, I’m not diseased, at least not anymore — thank heavens for magic.”
 “My mistake.”
 “Yes, indeed! And you would do well to leave my horse out of it. He’s perfectly innocent.”
 Bucephalus snorts contemptuously.

Court Gossip:

Michael Cule (E&A #5, pg. 78): “They heard a lot court gossip, including allegations of the Emperor’s romantic predilections and rumours of his current state of constipation.”

Heh-heh... no, I’m going to refrain from commenting.

Words of Wisdom from Chief Overseer Pharnastes:

Michael Cule (E&A #5, pg. 79): “People want there to be heroes. They want there to be defiant bandits who are Doing Good. They want there to be secret champions. People are generally idiots.”

People? It sounds like he’s talking about Player-Characters.

Insanity in RPGs:

Michael Cule (E&A #5, pg. 81):
 “YOUNG PERSON: It’s taken him! It’s taken him!
 JARATHIR What’s taken who?
 YP: The tentacle thing from the privy!”

See?!¹⁷ A tentacle thing — from a privy, no less — took Grigory, and yet nobody ended up in an insane asylum. I rest my case! Oh, wait. This was from a *fantasy* RPG. Okay, never mind.



Psionics in the Plankwell Campaign:

Michael Cule (E&A #5, pg. 84-85): “I’m a little confused. ‘Manipulator’ is a psi power In Your Traveller Universe? Because I’m accustomed to think of it as a weird thing the Hivers do which isn’t psionic based.”

Well, I did mention in A&E #582 (page 7 of our zine), that I was “going off the reservation” when it came to psionics. Also, the Traveller Wiki mentions projective psycho-empathy as well as psycho-mentalia.¹⁸

¹⁷ Roger BW & Brian Misiaszek, take note!

Variant Rules for D&D Combat & Hit Points:

Pum (E&A #5, pg. 100): “Hit Points represented luck and otherwise avoiding actual damage, such as by dodging, parrying, etc. I had “Body Points” be CON + Level, and represent actual physical damage points. Normal damage came off Hit Points, and when Hit Points ran out then all damage came off Body Points; however, natural 20s rolled normal damage which came off Body Points. After taking Body Point damage the character had to make a System Shock roll to avoid becoming incapacitated/unconscious. The idea was to make it a little bit more “realistic” (which I suppose actually means more believable), and to increase survivability of low level characters, whilst making high level characters a bit vulnerable to “lucky critical hits”. It seemed to work fine, but does change the balance of the game a bit, and I could imagine high level characters being quite reluctant to play such a house rule.”

Interesting idea. Did the amount of damage affect the System Shock roll? Was there any rule regarding continued bleeding vs. binding of wounds? At what point did death occur? And how did you deal with the healing/restoration (both natural & magical) of lost HP & BP? Also, did monsters also have separate HP & BP scores?

Childhood Background for PCs:

Jim Eckman (E&A #5, pg. 106):
 “One thing that’s missing from most games is a growing up phase, a good place to insert reasons behind a character’s quirks.”

Agreed. I once started a PBEM by describing a PC’s first memory. The player, I seem to remember, was somewhat astonished. My idea was that we’d play out scenes from the childhoods and teenage years of the various PCs, and somehow I’d figure out how to connect them together so the campaign could properly begin.

Unfortunately, the game started a bit slow and then died pretty quick. I don’t like begging for a response from players, especially new ones, so I decided the experiment had resulted in a stillbirth. Nonetheless, it might have been fun had things gone differently.

I also remember wanting to start an AD&D campaign with zero-level PCs, but I don’t think I was ever able to sell my players on this idea. I think I finally settled with each of them having a mentor NPC.

¹⁸ https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Psionics#Telepathy-derived_Psionic_Powers

The Central Casting books (see my comment to Roger) helped a lot with establishing character backgrounds. There are tables in there for family structure and childhood events. Generally speaking, however, you're right. This is a largely overlooked aspect of character generation.

Fiasco Session Report — Aging Rockers:

Mark A. Wilson (E&A #5, pg. 110): “We played members of a metal band who, having broken up years ago, were trying to stage a comeback as aging rockers, looking for one last big tour.”

Loved this! Sounds like it would make a great movie. I'm particularly curious as to the content of the eminently awkward conversation with the Disney executive.

Character Design in Novels vs. RPGs:

Avram Grumer (E&A #5, pg. 116): “A sci-fi story is built around what critic Darko Suvin calls a novum, or new thing. When designing a protagonist, the author wants to build someone who will show off this novum to the reader.” (...) “An RPG PC, on the other hand, especially one designed for an open-ended, long-running game, is made to no set gauge, and prepared for no laid course. The novae your PC encounters in sessions #10–20 might be things your GM hadn't even thought of yet when you were rolling the PC up for session #1.”

Great point. In the Plankwell campaign, when we first began, I didn't know what the novum (or, at least, the initial novum) was going to be. I didn't even know there would be a novum. But then Jerry Stratton reviewed Zelazny's *Unicorn Variations* (a book of short stories) in A&E #549, and he mentioned how in *Walpurgisnacht*, Zelazny introduced this idea of AI memorial holograms, and suddenly the idea for the Olav-AI clicked into place. But, of course, it only happened because of the character Phil had chosen to play. It was like Phil had given me a puzzle, and Jerry had provided the solution. So this initial novum followed the character concept.

But had it happened the other way around, where I had the idea for the Olav-AI and wanted to explore this in a novel, would I have sketched a protagonist like our PC? Probably not. More likely I would have chosen a character like Zeenye or perhaps Ensign Florence.

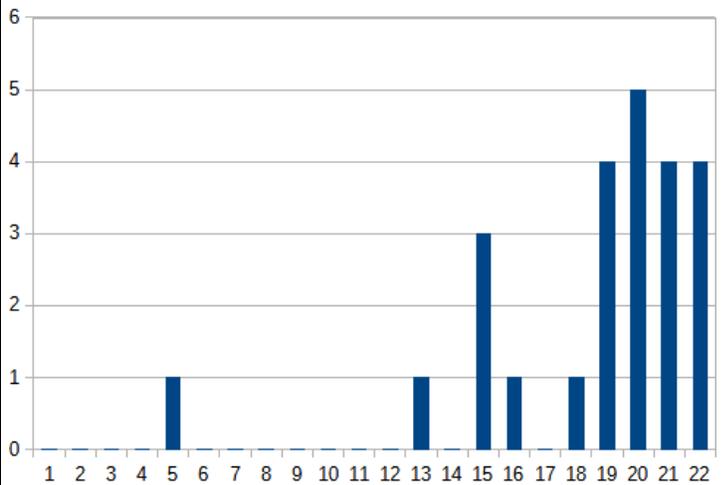
Such a novel would, of course, be much more tightly focused on the novum than this campaign has been. And I think part of the reason is that RPGs are cooperative, whereas novels usually aren't. In most RPG campaigns, the player has (or, at least, should have) a hand in deciding what the novum will be. But in a novel, there is only the writer. The novel will be more focused, because the tension between the player's desires and those of the GM won't be there, blurring the narrative's focus. In short, the story

produced by an RPG campaign is almost always going to be messier than the story produced by a novelist.

Order of Zines in E&A:

Avram Grumer (E&A #5, pg. 117): “You always put your own zine last, but is there any other rule to the zine-ordering? Is it just whatever order they show up in? I notice that my zine wound up near the middle of E&A #4, despite my having sent it in just a day before the deadline; does that mean that about half the zines are flung over the virtual transom on the last day?”

First-come, first serve. They get added to the table of contents in the same order they arrive, and then they get merged in the order of their date stamps. And yes, a lot of people submit zines in the final 24 hours. Here's a chart of the number of zines I accepted on each day of October.¹⁹



As you can see, over half the zines showed up on or after October 20th. Four of them, including my own, technically showed up after the deadline (midnight of the 21st). Actually, there were five, but the last one — sadly, by one of my favorite contributors — showed up after we'd posted the issue online, so I had to tell him I'd hold it for the following issue.

I tell people to get their zines to me by the 21st, but if when I wake up on the 22nd, there are some new zines in the APA's inbox, I'll go ahead and include them. I then convert my, Conrad's, and Timothy's zine to PDF and tack it onto the end. I'll admit that one reason I leave our zine for last is that if I submit it before the deadline, I'll inevitably tinker with it after I've already added it to the table of contents, which will change the date stamp of the file, which will

¹⁹ Note, this chart only includes the final versions of the zines that were accepted and shows the day I received these zines (not necessarily the same as the day they were sent). Two people re-submitted their zines in order to correct something in the initial versions, and one person's zine wasn't accepted because it showed up too late.

force me to have to revise the table of contents just as if the zine had been resubmitted, and so it's just less work for me to leave it until the end.

As for my feelings about so many people submitting their zines at the last possible moment, there's not much I can say about this, as it's something I used to do myself. How many times did I submit by zine to Lee with only a handful of minutes (or seconds) to spare? I have no idea.

The Death Loa's Entrance:

Brian Misiasek (E&A #5, pg. 124): "Then, the lights flicker. The rhythmic click-clack of the wheels slows perceptibly... and then quickens as a wave of unnatural darkness rolls through the train cars from back to front, not an absence of light, but something heavy, like being submerged in black oil pouring and oozing through towards the train's locomotive."

Wow! What a description. Nicely done. And a great explanation for how this whole scene unfolds. But I'm curious, are there any practical consequences for the rest of the scenario if the PCs fail to prevent the Death Loa from making it to the Mazorra? Or is this just something that's left up to the GM's discretion?

Dungeon HOA:

Lisa Padol (E&A #5, pg. 135): "re dungeon dwellers trading with surface dwellers: This reminds me of the idea we had for a Dungeon Home Owners Association larp."

Ooh? A dungeon HOA?

Orc #1: "We got a letter from the association."

Orc #2: "What now?"

Orc #1: "They want us to paint our doors."

Orc #2: "With what?"

Orc #1: "It doesn't matter, just so long as they all the same color."

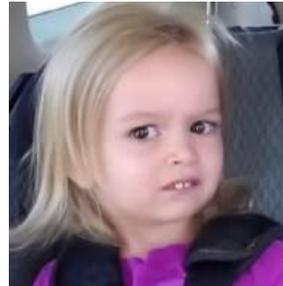
Sometime later...

Adventurer: "Why are all the doors red? Is that blood? What kind of sicko dungeon is this?"

Forging a Durable Party in RPGs:

Lisa Padol (E&A #5, pg. 145): "...a lot of CoC scenarios/campaigns presume that the PCs are a group of investigators -- indeed, the PCs are generally referred to as 'the investigators' -- and some NPC comes to them and says, 'So, this weird thing happened, and you're the people who look into weird things.' It's the Call of Cthulhu equivalent of 'You all meet in a tavern.'"

When starting up an AD&D campaign, I've found that it's useful to have the backgrounds of the PCs all intertwined, so there's some reason why they would be adventuring together. The same sort of thing is obviously useful in CoC. Of course, given CoC's lethality, it is perhaps okay to have all the PCs simply be at the same place at the same time (notice how Brian introduced the various potential PCs in the Mazzora scenario). The problem, of course, is what happens when the scenario is over if they happen to survive?



Wait. Why are we friends again?

If it's a one-shot, no big deal. But if it's the beginning of a campaign, would they necessarily stay together? This is yet another reason I've come to prefer single-player campaigns. Because in multi-player campaigns, the continued existence of the party can all by itself become a strain on the suspension of disbelief.

Josefeen & Plankwell's Flirting:

Joshua Kronengold (E&A #5, pg. 153): "I never know what to make of the flirting between Josefeen and Plankwell."

Well, she did mention in Chapter 34 that the psi-enhancer they've been taking has some psychological side effects. So maybe it's just *the booze* talking.

Alise in the Plankwell Campaign:

Joshua Kronengold (E&A #5, pg. 153): "Alise isn't titled..."

Actually, she is. Her title is Lady Mongo²⁰, which makes her a dame (equivalent to a knight). That by itself wouldn't necessarily make her very impressive, but she's a landed noble. Her fief is the planet Mongo.

Now, as you might remember, I'm not a big fan of the way Traveller handles the nobility, and I proposed some changes in A&E #547. It was my initial intention to call Alise a princess (I could have also called her Dame Alise), but Timothy urged that I stick with *Lady* in order to follow Traveller conventions.

Psionics amongst the Nobility:

Joshua Kronengold (E&A #5, pg. 153): "...how common is psychic ability in the nobility, anyway?"

I think Josefeen sort of answered this on the first page of Chapter 51: «*Not all nobles are psions,*» Josefeen replied, «*but the most powerful usually are. If not, they have psions around them pulling their strings.*»

²⁰ See the 4th page of Chapter 5 in A&E #553.

Insanity as a Convention of the Horror Genre:

Joshua Kronengold (E&A #5, pg. 153): “I’ll argue that the ‘curious’ mental fragility of Call of Cthulhu PCs (or Lovecraft humans in general) is part of the genre.”

Yes, I agree. But if I were to rewrite the game, I wouldn’t apply it to people who simply brushed up against the mythos in some way. I’d keep it reserved for people who’d been mentally attacked (presumably through some magic that is mentally destructive) as well as those who practice magic.²¹ But I get that it’s applied more liberally in Lovecraft’s writings, so I get that the Cthulhu subgenre sort of demands it.

Putting the PCs on a Mission (Scripted vs Sandbox):

Joshua Kronengold (E&A #5, pg. 154): “While I don’t have the objections to them that you do, I admit that I prefer adventures that don’t start as ‘the PCs get a job’ to those that do.”

I’m okay with it under certain circumstances. For example, a task assigned by a mentor is appropriate for zero-level or even 1st-level characters. A task could also be assigned as payment for some service (see my 2nd comment to Attronarch below). A task taken from a notice board is also fine with me. Or perhaps the PCs are going around looking for work (this was the case in some of the early episodes of *Frieren: Beyond Journey’s End*, currently available on Netflix). As long as the PCs get to choose what tasks they take on, I’m okay with it. In the case of a mentor or a higher-up assigning them a task, as long as it fits the setting, I’m also okay with it.

For example, in a campaign where the PCs are members of some sort of military organization, I would expect this sort of thing. And it’s worth noting that there are some players who want the GM’s direction and would be lost without it. Indeed, it may even be the case that as our lives get busier with work and family and our RPG time becomes more constrained, many gamers might want more direction rather than a panoply of options. “*Just tell me what to do so we can get on with the adventure.*”

For myself, however, what I’m looking for is what I described in the 1st paragraph of my essay, *My Problem with Tabletop RPGs*, on the 3rd pages of my zine in A&E #533, which is to say that I want my PC to be able to bend the plot to his or her will. Only if given that level of freedom will I be able to experience this *immersion* that Paul Mason used to talk about. But that means that I need a GM who is more reactive than proactive.

Most GMs think they need to be proactive in terms of providing the PCs with stuff to do. Well, yes, to a degree,

21 In my variant magic system for AD&D, I created rules for mana addiction and its possible repercussions. See the 3rd page of my zine in A&E #508.

but when the PCs walk off the map, the GM needs to be able to pivot. The GM may even need to completely change his or her plans in order to get out in front of where the players are heading. That, to me, is what a sandbox GM should do. Keep growing the sandbox as the players push on its boundaries. Scripted campaigns, by contrast, feel to me like a straitjacket. But because so many modules are scripted, that’s what most GMs know how to run, and most players have gotten accustomed to it also. I mean, this has been going on essentially since DragonLance.

On the 4th page of my zine in A&E #513, I talked about how I felt I was essentially in the minority when it came to the issue of role-playing vs roll-playing. Well, I think I’m also in the minority on this, call it scripted vs. sandbox.

NW: Scripted Roll-Players	NE: Scripted Role-Players
SW: Sandbox Roll-Players	SE: Sandbox Role-Players

Most TTRPGers, in my opinion, are probably in the northwest quadrant. There are, however, a good number in the northeast. The southwest quadrant tends to be your OSR types. And then there’s the weirdos in the southeast. That’s me. I’m not entirely alone, but in my opinion I’m pretty close to it.

Now granted, there are many people who overlap more than one category. I talked about this in A&E #513, noting how there are lots of roll-players who also like role-playing. Presumably, there also are those who enjoy both scripted as well as sandbox adventures. Hence, my being one of the weirdos from the southeast quadrant isn’t a deficiency on the part of the roleplaying community. It’s my own deficiency in that my tastes are so narrow.

There’s also the possibility that I might be wrong in my analysis. Maybe there are far more sandbox roleplayers than I realize. Would be curious as to your thoughts.

Great Opening Lines:

Attronarch (E&A #5, pg. 165): “Sounds of butt-cheeks clapping echoed throughout the tomb...”

Nice opening line.

Paying for resurrection with divine quests:

Attronarch (E&A #5, pg. 169): “Poseidon will grant him another chance at life. For that you must accept three divine quests.”

Nice idea to make resurrection expensive by giving the PCs some work to do.

Timothy's Comments on E&A #5:

Quick note on those thinking of moving to coloured or background pages because E&A isn't in print: it's perhaps worth noting that while I don't print out the whole thing, I do print out certain pages of things I want to keep to hand. Also, they're not very partially sighted friendly (and for that matter, they're not very e-ink friendly).

I'd vote for two columns as well. Much swifter to read and also possible to read on a phone if I absolutely have to due to circumstances.

One snag with the growing size and number of contributors is that it's not just the extra pages/reading of the meat of a 'zine, but the extra commenting and conversation which means even more commenting and reading.

Matt Stevens – Cowman Baloney

RYCTM on the house rules – thank you.

Gabriel Roark – Bugbears and Ballyhoo

RYCTM LOL!

Myles Corcoran – Twisting the Rope

Yes, *Project Bayern* has a bunch of characters in the 'Mission Profile' volume which are intended for use as PCs or NPCs. Yes, there's a lot expanded from the original.

RYCT Jim V about the excellent description of his labours – I did tell him!

RYCTM about players wanting to play roles not covered in the basic rules – Yep! Been there. It's why I've written a number of Traveller careers in my time. I'm hoping one I created recently for *Advocates* is published in *Freelance Traveller* soon. I laughed at your verbose player who wanted to play an AI with sensors everywhere and a tannoy! (Now picturing two Yorkshiremen chatting: First: why did you buy a loud speaker? Second: t'annoy everyone.)

Michael Cule – Phoenix Nest

RYCT Jim V about Hivers – I scribbled a note in the margins in regard to this, but took so long reading the whole of E&A that when I got back to it, I can no longer read what I wrote/remember what I was thinking! (half an hour later: ah yes, it was to leave it for Jim to respond.) But yes, they're the ones with manipulation as a Thing. (And even a title they attain).

RYCTM about Chris – was he 'escaping' who he was or 'exploring' other options? Just curious.

RYCT Jim E on later Heinlein books causing you to roll eyes and Make Allowances – exactly! LOL!

RYCTM about renting somewhere big enough so you don't have to write in the same room as everyone else – good tip! I would sometimes retired to the balcony (wrapped up in fleece, winter coat, hat, fingerless gloves so

I could type and a blanket over my knees) to sit outside in October to do just that.

Patrick Zoch – The Dragon's Beard

RYCT Patrick R about printing E&A – no, not the whole thing, but occasional pages.

Patrick Riley – Quasipseudoludognostication

RYCT Paul H using "ironically and sadly" – we need a word, don't we? 'sironically' ?

Paul Holman – De Ludis Elficis Fictis

Bovington – that is a fun day out. I've been a couple of times as I have friends not far away who are really into tanks. Indeed, one taught me everything I know about Panzers of WWII. At one time I could even identify them all from photos.

Dylan Capel – Attacks of Opportunity

Your wished for Traveller campaign does sound like just the kind of thing I'd love.

Tx for the pointer to Lewis and *The Early Chinese Empires* which I dug up in my library and will and try and take a look at.

Mark Wilson – Bumbling Through Dungeons

Good luck with the job hunting, it does sound a grind.

Taskmaster is indeed a treat – another series here in the UK just coming to an end. Sadly.

Avram Grumer – Going to Be Ad-libbed

I was interested by your notes on cartography on fantasy worlds with magic that could assist. Nicely considered.

RYCT Myles C about *Tiān Dēng* which I think Lisa and Joshua also mentioned once or twice. It sounds just my cup of tea but having a look for it, it would appear that it's not available to buy anymore on its website or on DriveThru. A pity.

Brian Misiaszek – Age of Menace

Your Paratethys idea – wow! Just wow! Well done.

Lisa Padol – An Unlooked for Zine

Funny you should mention *The Lady Vanishes*. My map librarian work colleague's am dram group is putting it on next week. They usually do a good job, so I'm looking forward to it. (Long time since I've seen the film, so I remember nothing.)

Meanwhile, as it happens, my brother has been visiting every Tuesday night as he has a subscription which means we can watch *Foundation* together. You're right about it being "quite different" from the books. But although I'd love to have seen the novels on screen, I appreciate it might not have made good tv and they've done a good job IMO

with the series as long as you remember they're only (vaguely) inspired by rather than 'based on'. It might help to know the original was never really three books but what's called a 'fix-up' I believe. It was a series of linked (long) short stories that were stitched together. Asimov complained about having to read them all again each time he wrote a new one to remember what had gone before.

RYCTM about the Paper 7 – it does sound/look nice. Sadly, my Boox has developed a screen glitch after a year and a month. I don't think it's fixable. It makes me treasure my reMarkable more. reMarkable didn't do illumination with the 1 and 2 but with the PaperPro put on a (weak) frontlight. I find it occasionally helpful in a really dark room but have always said I'd rather have the weight/cost/battery life saving of not having anything and just turn a light on!

Joshua Kronengold – Accidental Recall

RYCT about xandering and jaquaying – thank you for the explanation.

Attronarch – Overlord's Annals

Still like your weekday names. Memorable and work together.

Jim Vassilakos et al – Plankwell Campaign

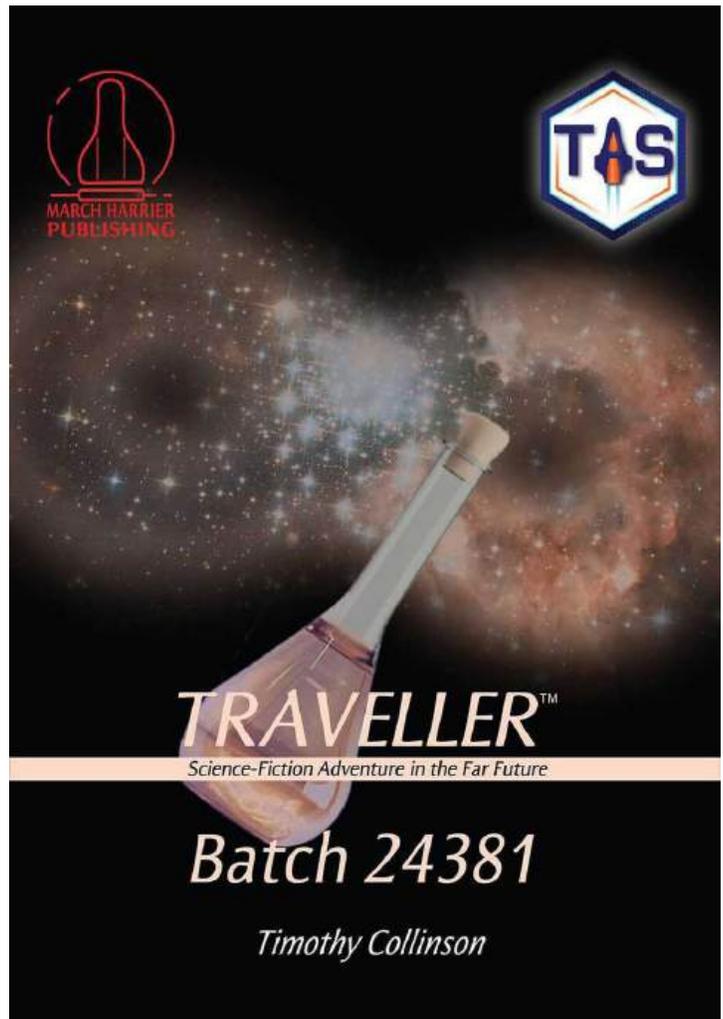
RYC on anagathics being underutilized in Traveller – you're not wrong. Hence my adventure *Batch 24381* which is on DriveThru.²²

RY footnote #9 – that is what I've said, but in isolation makes it sound like I don't like *Mindjammer* which isn't true. I love the idea of it; just find it difficult to comprehend!

RYC on plausibility flags – I suspect your ability to suspend disbelief is a lot harder than, say, mine! (This isn't a criticism, in many ways I'm envious)

LAST WORD

Disbelief suspenders come in a variety of sizes.



²² <https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/505877/batch-24381>