

# EVER & ANON

Issue #10 April 2026

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#### Contributor Guidelines:

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 unublish your zine once it has been published.

Contributors may submit their PDF zines via email to [apa@everanon.org](mailto:apa@everanon.org).

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

Issue #11 – April 21<sup>st</sup>: 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?

Issue #12 – May 21<sup>st</sup>: Gods, Demigods, and Other Riffraff / Religion, Spirituality, and the Cosmic Order

Issue #13 – June 21<sup>st</sup>: What's the most interesting fantasy race &/or science fiction species you've played, NPCed, or simply read about, and which, if any, do you personally identify with?

Issue #14 – July 21<sup>st</sup>: Intraparty Conflict

Issue #15 – August 21<sup>st</sup>: How do you find players/GMs/games?

**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 #10 (ver. 1) – April 2026

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This issue’s IgTheme:

*The best/worst/funniest monster combat tactics.*

Our logo was designed by Richard Iorio II of [Rogue Games](#).

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 pictures on page 174 & 175 were generated by Google’s [Gemini](#).

# 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 *Brian Rogers: blah-blah-blah...*, if there are no quotes around the *blah-blah-blah*, that's probably a comment to Brian.

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.<sup>1</sup> *Alarums & Excursions* was the first APA formed specifically to cover roleplaying games.<sup>2</sup>

*"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."*<sup>3</sup>

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."*<sup>4</sup>

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.

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1 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amateur\\_press\\_association](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amateur_press_association)

2 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alarums\\_and\\_Excursions](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 flatulate in our general direction.

Send your thoughts to [apa@everanon.org](mailto: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.)

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## 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

## Ignorable Theme for E&A Issue #10

*The best/worst/funniest monster combat tactics.*

I am not a good tactician, but in my current *D&D* campaign, the party struggles most with monsters that attack from range, use hit-and-run tactics, and are able to engage with the party from multiple directions. These tend to split the party and has, on multiple occasions, had Millie (wizard)<sup>1</sup> running away and casting spells at her pursuers while the rest of the party dealt with the main group of enemies. It has also resulted in Anan (fighter) moving out of reach of Chayote's (cleric) healing spells that he desperately needed.

## Derailment at St. Faustina Station

### Commentary

This was one of the few games that I knew I had to playtest before taking to a convention. Did the descriptions make sense? Were the puzzles decipherable (especially since I dislike puzzles that come with instructions)? Could we clear out the map in the allotted 6-hour game slot? The playtest went well in that most of it worked as expected, though I did replace the hardest (and most obtuse and punishing) room.

One of my fears was that the players would not be equally engaged with the game and puzzle solving and/or that "alpha gamers" would drown out more contemplative or softer voices. I knew my home group would be fine, but I don't know who would show up at the convention. Fortunately, this proved not to be the case. Happily, the quietest player (a college student sitting next to his dad), took the most detailed notes and was engaged and having fun in his own way.

### Game System

I ran this using my *Wildcard Roleplaying System*, but it can easily be adapted to other systems. The key thing I wanted was something super simple and let the players focus on navigating The Labyrinth rather than the game system.

In WRS, players draw a number of cards equal to their ability score and look for cards that match the suit of the ability. 2-10 = 1 Success; J/Q/K = 2 Successes; Ace = 3 Successes. I'm really only mentioning this because

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<sup>1</sup> The party wizard (aka The Party Wizard™)

some of the descriptive text makes reference to it. It's easy enough to translate to your system of choice.

### Jolts

Jolts are a means to discourage characters from brute forcing puzzles and to threaten their survival. When the room description says a character suffers a jolt, it means they are injured in some way. The exact nature of the jolt depends on the room and the GM can describe it in a way that seems thematically appropriate.

When a character suffers a jolt, draw a card ignoring the suit. Each success counts as 1 wound. Drawing a joker does no wounds, but does knock the character unconscious for however long seems appropriate.

### End of the Line

When a character suffers 6 or more wounds, they may make a recovery check using Spirit. Draw a number of cards equal to their Spirit and remove 1 wound per success.

Characters who are still at 6 or more wounds become one of The Lost and are doomed to wander The Labyrinth for eternity. Or their souls are annihilated, depending on what seems best.

### Generic Room Description

The floor, walls, and ceiling appear to be made of smooth, off-white concrete panels, 10 feet to a side. The grooves between the panels are thinner than a piece of paper. The room is lit by recessed canister lights in the center of each ceiling panel. The light has the soft, warm glow of sunlight on a late autumn afternoon.

The doors are 5 feet across and bifurcated down the middle with no discernable gap. The doors are 7-and-a-half feet tall and are flush with the floor. The doors are a couple inches thick and are recessed from the wall.

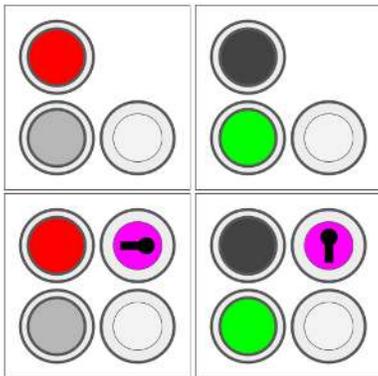
### Rules for Doors

**No room can have more than one door open at a time.** If a door is open connecting two rooms, no other door in either room can be opened by either the occupants or someone trying to enter from outside those two rooms. The closed doors are stuck in the locked condition until all doors have been closed.

When unlocked, doors are opened via a pushbutton. Some doors can only be unlocked when a key is inserted and twisted. Until then, pressing the button does nothing. Pressing the button again on either side will close the door. Some doors will automatically lock when closed.

Doors open from the middle, sliding into the wall on either side. When closing, doors exert minimal force and can be easily blocked from closing fully.

The doors are practically soundproof. If someone were to put effort into banging on one side and someone else on the other side had their ear against the door, they could hear it.



Normal door in locked (left) and unlocked (right) state.

The lower row shows a keyed door lock (magenta, in this example) in locked (left) and unlocked (right) state.

## The Labyrinth

I created everything in Google Slides with one room, diagram and descriptive text, per slide. This made navigation while running the game fairly easy, though I did create a version with two rooms per slide, sans text, when I printed them out. Basically, I had a stack of paper tiles, 5 inches square, that I would reveal as the characters opened doors and navigated the Labyrinth. Thus, the players always had a map of where they had been and could see the holes where they hadn't. I could have drawn this out on the fly on a battlemat, but a) my largest battlemat wasn't quite big enough, b) the overall look is cleaner, and c) it's faster than drawing (though I spent an hour with my printer and papercutter days in advance).

If I were to do this again, I'd do it as a 4 x 4 x 4 cube rather than an 8 x 8 square, but by the time this came to mind, I was already too far down the 8 x 8 path to rework everything.

There are two areas of connected rooms which have a twisting geometry. They are a great puzzle in theory, but in practice, they ended up being a big pain to run.

The entry and exit rooms (G1 and A8, respectively) are 8 inches square. I would have made them 10 inches, but I needed to stick with 8½ x 11 US letter-sized paper.

## Map Legend

I used chess notation to number the rooms. "North" is always pointing up on the page or away from me as I put out the tiles. The room notation helped me remember what was what. For example, rooms **D6**, **D7**, and **D8** have something special and shared about them, so I decorated the room number.

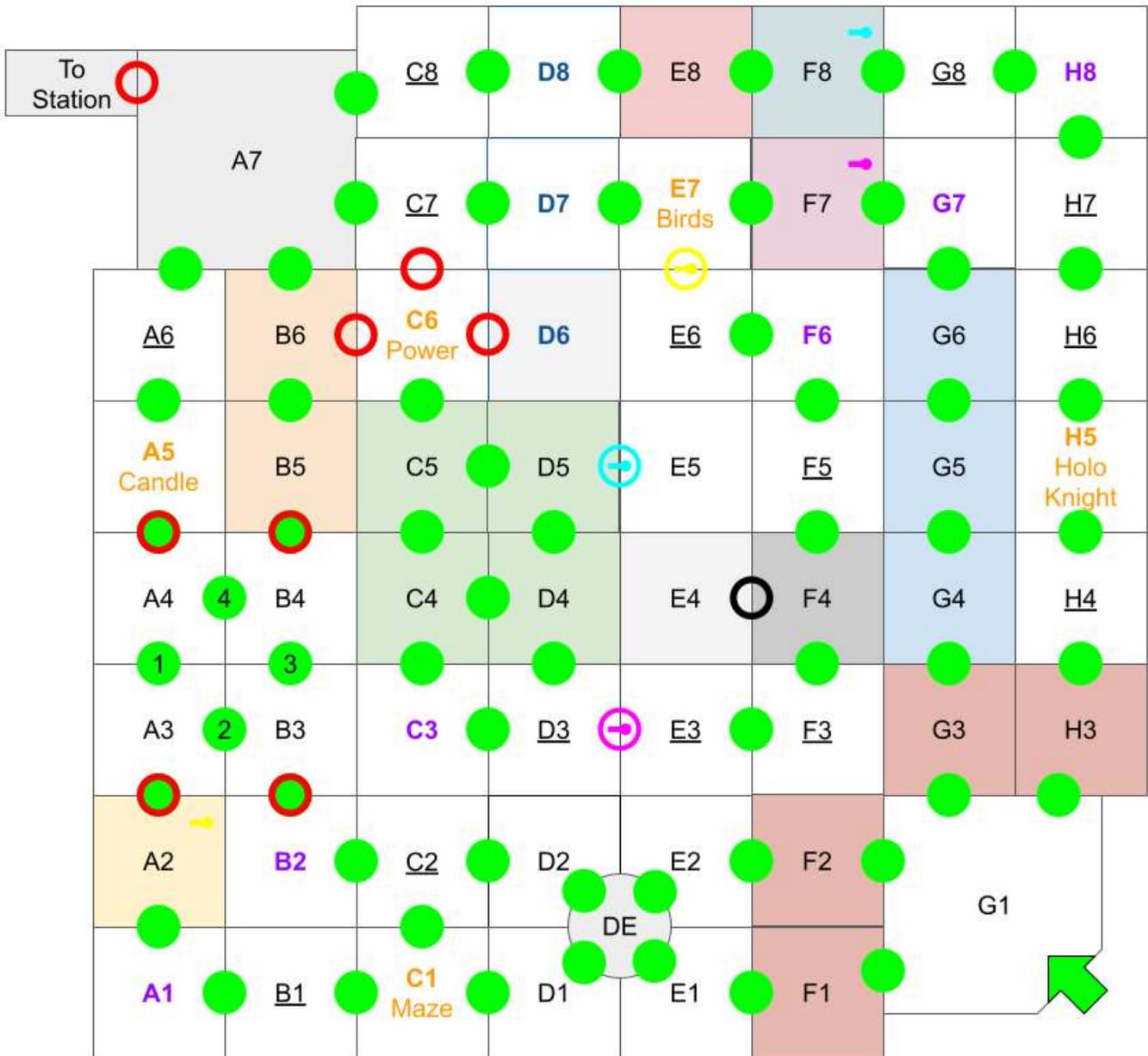
**Button rooms** are empty except for a pedestal and a red button. The character who presses the button must face their past sins—the first question on their character sheet, detailed last issue. As a reward, they are given a piece of the subway token; imagine taking a subway token and using snips to break into several wedges. There is 1 piece per PC and they can be fused together to form a whole token. While button rooms are not required to exit The Labyrinth, the PCs will be incentivized to get a whole token even if they don't know what it means. There are 6 button rooms in The Labyrinth assuming that there are 6 PCs; if there are fewer than that, then some of them are disabled and display an "OUT OF ORDER — Management" sign.

**Block rooms** are difficult or tricky puzzles that the PCs must solve to get one of the tetromino blocks for the exit room (A7). These are required to leave The Labyrinth. The blocks are 5 tetrominos that I created by buying 1-inch wooden cubes and gluing them together. The rooms are also named based on the puzzle.

Key rooms (noted with a key icon) are where the PCs get the keys they need to fully explore The Labyrinth. The keys are colored magenta, yellow, and blue and match the color of the lock (see above) they go to.

Miscellaneous puzzle rooms have a colored background. Atmosphere rooms have nothing special about them (because I ran out of ideas for puzzles), so I just added descriptive text and/or a mild hazard. Some rooms

Rooms connected by a green dot don't have anything tricky about the doors. A red circle denotes a door that is locked unless a special action is taken. The door with a black circle is hidden. Doors that require keys are noted with a key icon. The numbered doors are part of a puzzle of how to escape the block of 4 rooms.



If I had had foresight, I would have made the entrance at A1, but based on how the map evolved from my original sketches, the PCs enter at G1 and exit in A7. Though there are linear stretches to this “dungeon,” it is intended that PCs had the freedom to choose their own paths and backtrack as necessary. The first rooms off of G1 are designed as “training wheels” to get the players used to how the doors work, how rooms work, and so on.

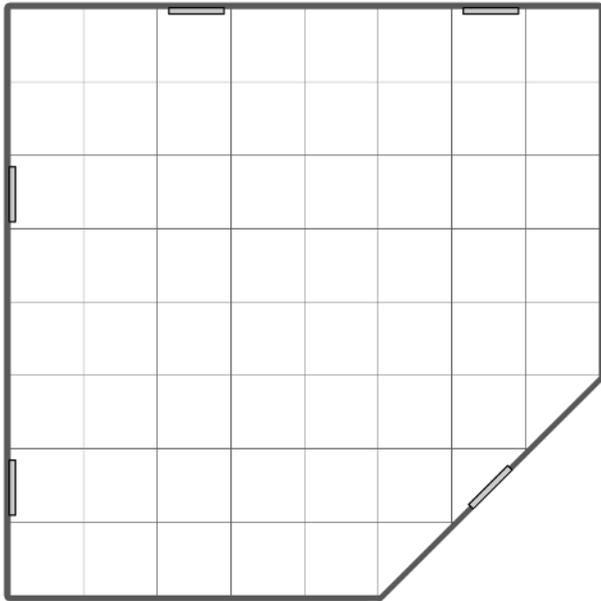
One of my great frustrations when using presentation software like Google Slides or PowerPoint is how it’s almost impossible to get a bunch of boxes to line up perfectly. This results in little errors, like D5, E7, and F2 being slightly out of place. Apologies to graphic

designers and those with AR hangups similar to my own. :)

To save page count, I consolidated some of the room diagrams.

Warning: I often write East when I mean West and vice-versa. These errors may have slipped past my editing of the following room descriptions.

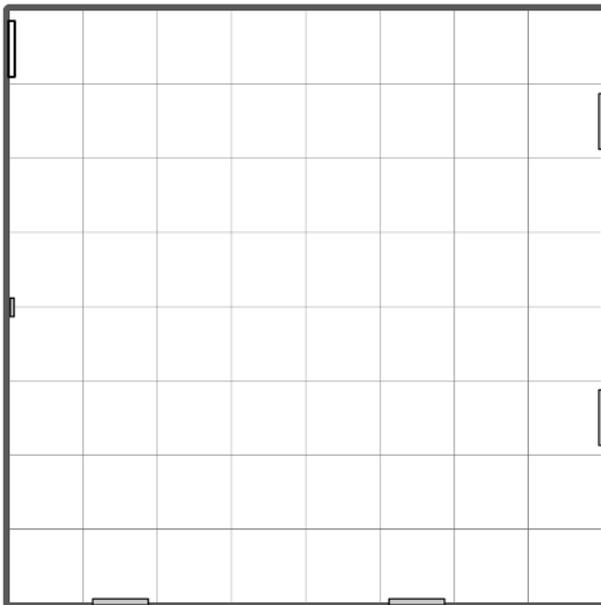
G7



The PCs enter via the door on the diagonal wall on the South-East corner.

Pete has a perch 50 feet above the floor in the North-West corner. He will ignore the PCs, preferring that they figure things out on their own, but he is available should they be in desperate need for a hint.

A7



The room is a giant cube, maybe eighty feet in each dimension with the same grid of concrete panels. On the western wall, next to the northern wall, there is a black scissor gate fifty feet above the ground.

In the center of western wall, five feet above the ground, there is a backlit panel showing a grid with grey and white squares.

When a tetromino is placed in the panel with the colored side facing outward, it will snap to the implied grid like a cheap refrigerator magnet. Once in position, if any of the white area is covered, the corresponding ten-foot block(s) on the eastern wall will extend outward ten-feet into the room.

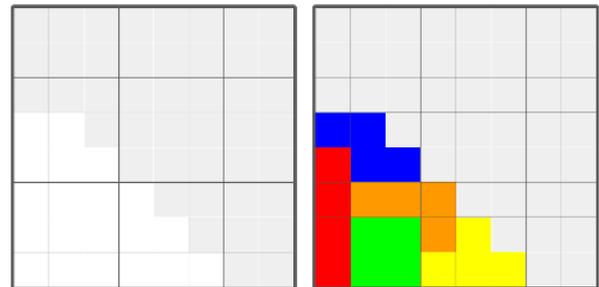
The pieces can be removed easily. When removed, blocks in the wall withdraw back into the eastern wall.

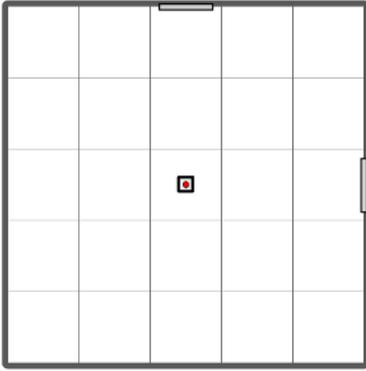
The blocks move slowly but inexorably. They should not pose any physical threat to the PCs, simply pushing them out of the way as they slide. There is effectively no gap between the blocks in any position. A PC who is determined to be injured by the blocks can be given 1-3 wounds (draw a card) for their efforts.

Once all the blocks have been slid out, they create a giant stairway that the PCs can climb to reach the gate. The climb requires no draw if they can cooperate to reach each ten-foot step. A solo PC would require a successful Physical draw, but there is no limit on time.

The PCs could reach the gate without all the blocks being in place. But the gate remains locked unless all the blocks are in place.

The Panel and Solution:



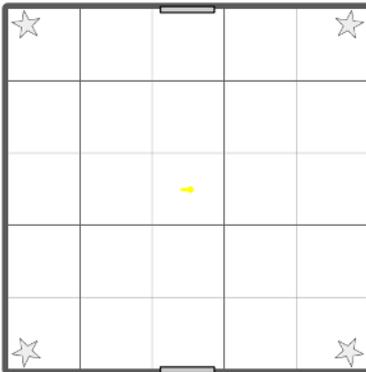


### A1, B2, C3, F6, G7, H8

In the center of the room is a square pedestal, 2 feet square and about 3-and-a-half feet tall. On the top is a red button about 2 inches wide.

The button cannot be pressed unless the doors are closed.

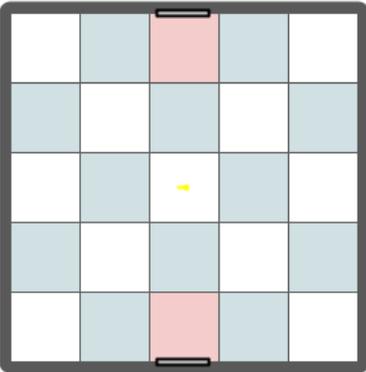
Once pressed, the walls dissolve and shit gets real. Afterwards, the button remains in its depressed position.



### A2

There is a yellow key connected to a cord hanging from the ceiling over the central square. Once someone steps on a tile next to a door (highlighted in red), the key is pulled up to the ceiling 50 feet above. So long as someone is standing on one of these tiles, the key cannot descend.

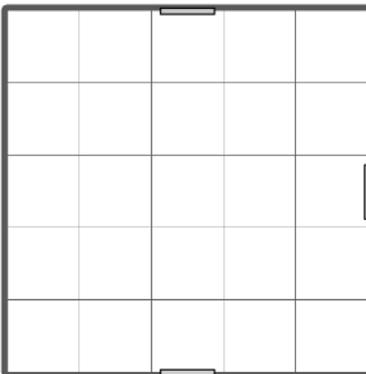
There are 4 mannequins (the stars on the map), one in each corner and weighing approximately 125 pounds, that can be moved and maneuvered to stand on tiles.



So long as someone is standing on one of the 12 highlighted tiles (lower image) the key descends 4 feet. It retracts back up that distance once pressure is removed from the tile. A person or mannequin can stride a diagonal to be standing on two tiles at once.

With the key fully descended, a Physical draw may be required to catch the key before it ascends out of reach if someone has to move from an orthogonal square.

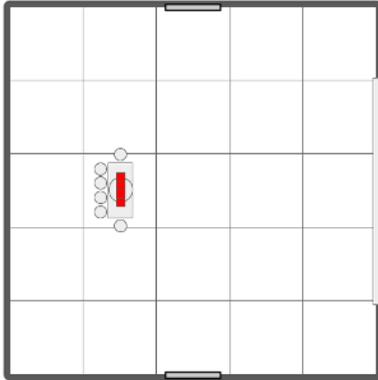
A3, A4, B3, and B4. Refer to the big map.



The South doors of A3 and B3 and the North doors of A4 and B4 lock automatically when they are closed. They can only be unlocked if doors 1-4 are opened and closed in clockwise or anticlockwise sequence (forward or reverse).

- To open the South door of A3, the doors 1, 4, 3, 2 must be opened in that order; the order 2, 3, 4, 1 also works.
- To open the North door of A4, the doors 4, 3, 2, 1 must be opened in that order; the order 1, 2, 3, 4 also works.
- To open the South door of B3, the doors 2, 1, 4, 3 must be opened in that order; the order 3, 4, 1, 2 also works.
- To open the North door of B4, the doors 4, 1, 2, 3 must be opened in that order; the order 3, 2, 1, 4 also works.

Closing and opening the same door twice restarts the sequence.

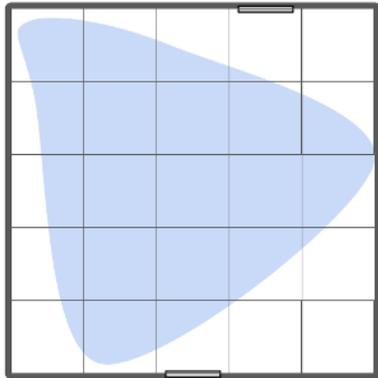


### A5: Candle

A 30' wide mirror goes from the floor to 30' up on the East wall.

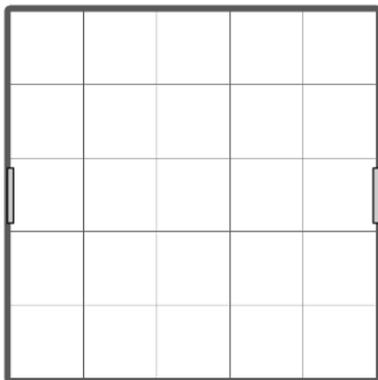
A dining room table with 6 seats sits near the center of the room. In the center is an upright, rectangular prism of a candle under an indestructible glass dome. The table and candle cannot be moved.

Everything in the room is reflected in the mirror, except that the mirror shows a full banquet and place settings laid out. Once the candle is lit, the dome dissolves and the candle melts to leave the tetromino piece. To light the candle, one must place a flame in the same relative position in room B5.



### A6

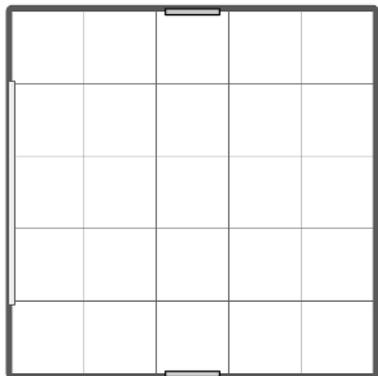
The room is dominated by what appears to be a giant shallow puddle of water.



### B1

A discordant buzzing tickles your skull just behind your ears. Your eyeballs vibrate and you can feel the onset of vertigo.

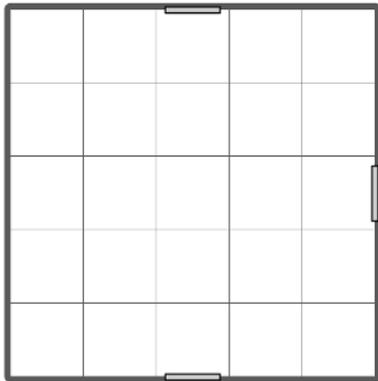
Lingering in the room too long (as determined by the GM) requires a Spirit draw to not take a Wound.



### B5

A 30' wide window goes from the floor to 30' up on the West wall. Beyond the window the contents of room A5 can be seen.

To light the candle in room A5, a flame must be passed in through an area roughly 5 feet above the center of the room. Baiting a fire bat from room B6 into the central tile area will suffice.

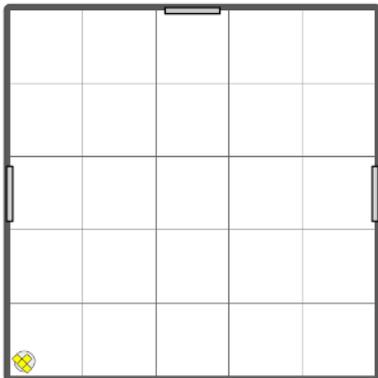


B6

The East door can only be unlocked if powered from room C6.

Ignore the following if the candle in room A5 is lit.

Each time a person enters the room, a fire bat appears near the ceiling in the center of the room. They burn with the flickering glow of a campfire and smell of sulphur. Each person is harassed by the bat and must get at least one success on a Physical draw or be scorched for a Wound. Bats that follow someone into any room except B5 disappear in a cloud of smoke.

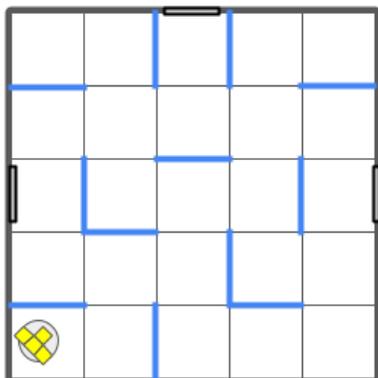


**C1: Maze**

On the far side of the room is an 8-foot tall minotaur, flames snorting out its nose with each breath. It turns in your direction and stares at you with eyes that burn with malice, waiting for you to make your first move.

The minotaur always appears on the far side of the room, opposite the door from which the PCs entered.

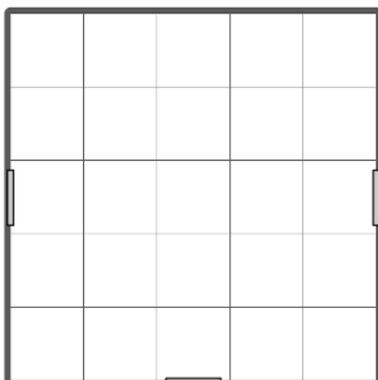
The room has nigh-invisible walls of glass. See the lower diagram for where they are located.



Each time someone enters a tile (except for the first) or bumps into the glass, the minotaur moves one tile closer to the nearest person. If there is a tie regarding who is closest, it does not move. The minotaur knows where the walls are. The minotaur will not attack anyone holding the piece. Once the piece leaves the room, the creature becomes docile.

The minotaur is treated as an environmental hazard, doing 3 hits which is reduced by a PC's Physical draw.

[I ran this game twice. Both times, the minotaur killed a PC.]

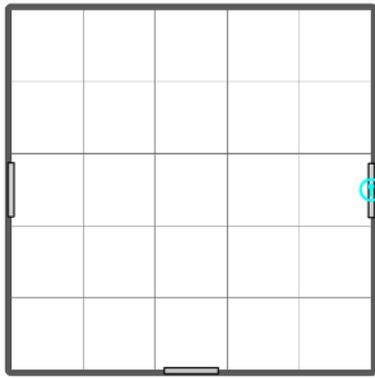


C2

Once the door is closed with you inside the room, a blaring alarm sounds and the lights flash in a regular pattern. Not unlike a fire alarm in an office building.

The longer you have to listen to it, the more painful it becomes.

Lingering in the room too long (as determined by the GM) requires a Spirit draw to not take a Wound.

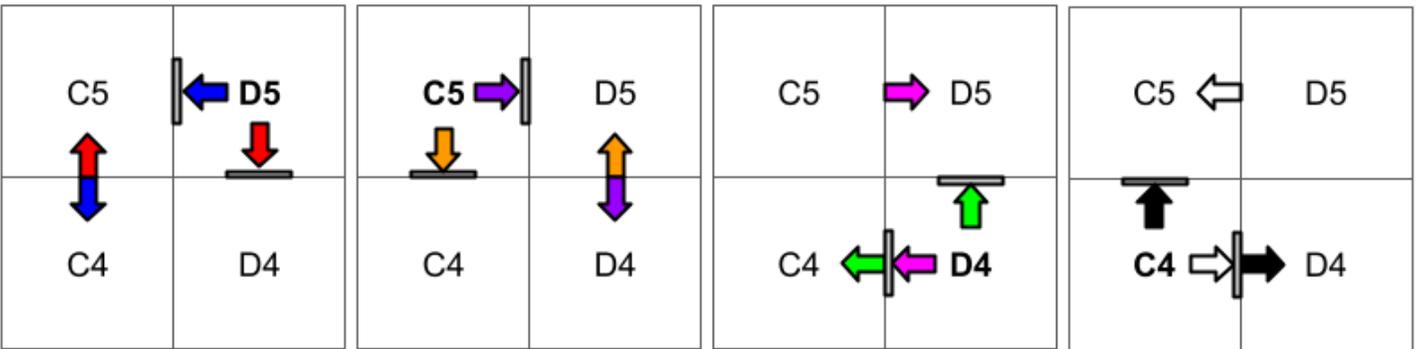


The rooms C4, C5, D4, & D5 have a complicated topology.

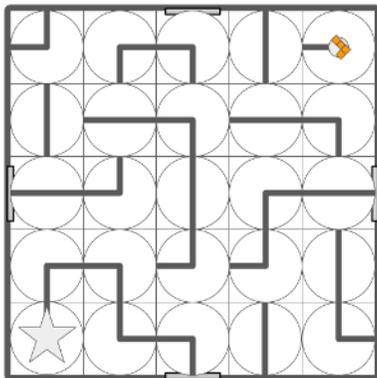
For example:

The South door of D5 leads to the South door of C5 (as if leaving from the North door of D4). The West door of D5 leads to the North door of C4 (as if leaving from the South door of C5).

The East door of D5 (shown) requires a cyan key.

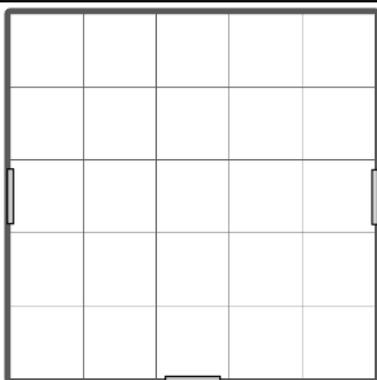


### C6: Power



The floor tiles of this room are inlaid with circular tiles that themselves are inlaid with a thick strip of copper. In one corner is a buzzing electrical transformer the size of a refrigerator. In the other corner is a pedestal upon which is a block shape under a glass dome. The copper strip also extends to the base of the pedestal. It also extends from the bottom of each door, along the floor, then up the wall to the control panel of each door.

The doors can only be unlocked and the block can only be accessed if there is a continuous path from the power source to the door or pedestal. The circular inlays can be rotated freely but have preferred discrete positions at each 90° increment. For added maliciousness, inlays must be rotated in the order indicated by the spiral in G3. Deviation from this results in a jolt.

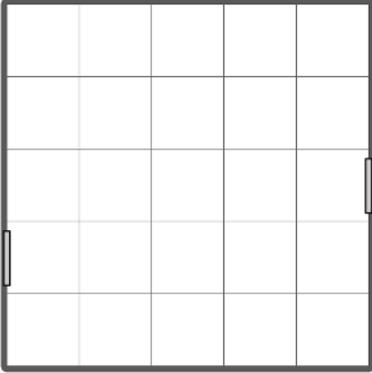


### C7

The first time the room is entered: *The faint sounds of gentle sobbing can be heard but its origin cannot be determined.*

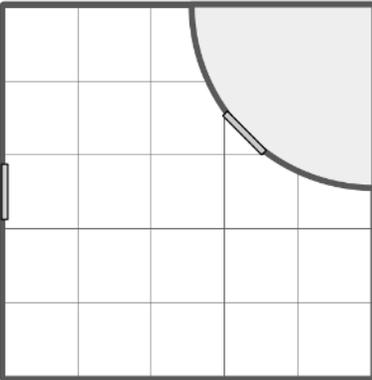
As more people enter the room and more tiles are stepped upon, the sound gets more intense in both volume and levels of sorrow and agony. This level is not reset when the characters leave the room.

The South door is only unlocked if powered from C6.



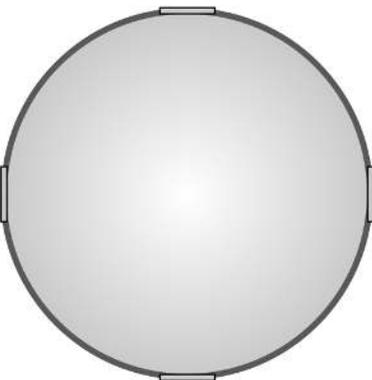
### C8

The room has the slight chill and humidity of an autumn morning after it has rained. The earthy smell reminds you of mushrooms and ferns, but none can be found.



### D1, D2, E1, & E2

These rooms have nothing special about them except their connection to room DE (see below)



### DE

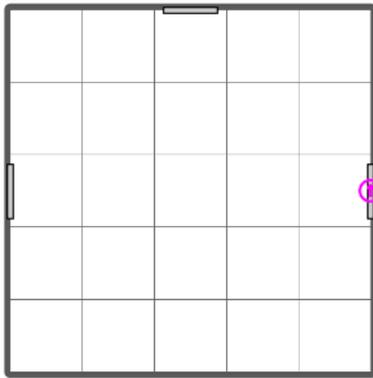
This circular room is 50 feet in diameter and 50 feet to the ceiling. The floor and walls are made of metal embossed with a criss-cross pattern of dimples. In the center of the room is a sturdy chain hanging from the ceiling and ending in a triangular handle about 5 feet from the floor.

All the doors are locked and remain locked until the chain is pulled and the room is activated.

It takes deliberate effort to pull the cord. Once pulled, the room quickly spins up. Anyone who has not already braced themselves against the wall will be flung to the wall. A Physical draw is required to avoid taking a Wound. The room pins everyone to the wall for a minute before coming to a gradual stop. Once stopped, all the doors become unlocked.

The orientation of the room relative to rooms D1, E1, D2, and E2 is determined randomly. When a door is opened draw a card; its suit determines which room the door opens upon: ♣ D1; ♦ E1; ♥ D2; ♠ E2

If a joker is drawn, draw again, but the spinning of the room is permanently disabled and the chain becomes a simple unlocking mechanism.

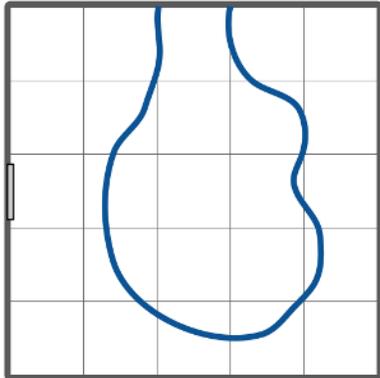


D3

The room is extremely cold and you immediately start shivering. You can see your breath as a thick fog.

Ⓛ Linger in the room too long (as determined by the GM) requires a Spirit draw to not take a Wound.

The East door requires a magenta key, but that's how the PCs would have entered this room, so it is not an issue.

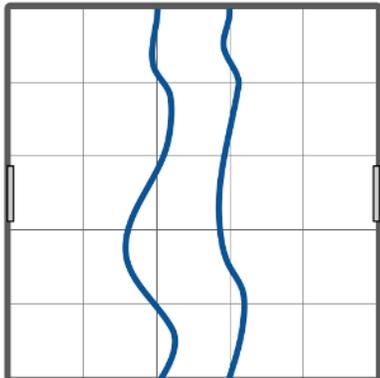


D6

The room is dominated by a koi pond that is fed by a stream coming from under the North wall. The pond is too deep and dark to see the bottom. Several fish can be seen swimming near the surface.

The East door can only be opened from room D5 and only if it is powered. The outlet of the pond is very, very deep. It is possible to swim underwater to room D7 (or even D8). Anyone who drinks from the pond is restored 1 Wound, but can only get this effect once from D6, D7, or D8.

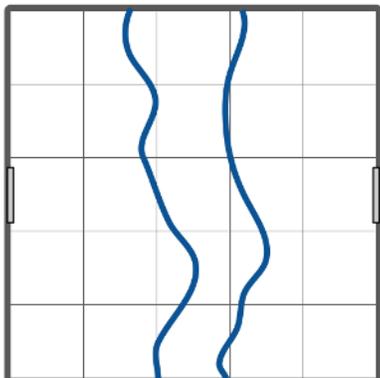
Should someone catch one of the fish using the fishing rod from room E4, it will disappear and a brass token will appear in its place. Only one fish can be caught this way.



D7

A cool, deep stream flows from North to South across the center of the room and under the walls.

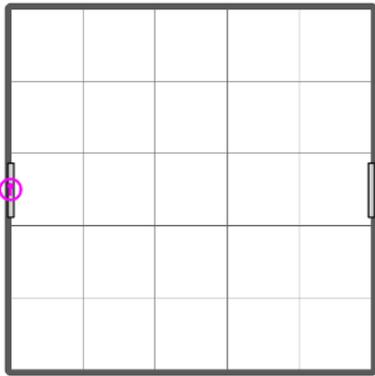
It is possible to swim underwater upstream to room D8 or downstream to room D6. Anyone who drinks from the stream is restored 1 Wound, but can only get this effect once from D6, D7, or D8.



D8

A waterfall cascades down the North wall from a hole in the ceiling. A cool, gentle mist emanates from it and the small pool below. A deep stream flows south across the center of the room and under the South wall.

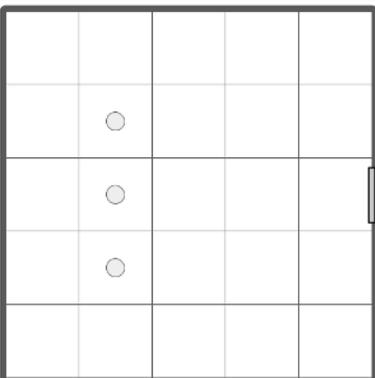
It is possible to swim underwater or downstream to room D7 (and onto D6). Anyone who drinks from the stream is restored 1 Wound, but can only get this effect once from D6, D7, or D8.



### E3

The floor is extremely slippery. A success on a Physical draw is required to not fall and take a Bruise (or bruised ego). (A Bruise is a like a Wound, but doesn't last as long.)

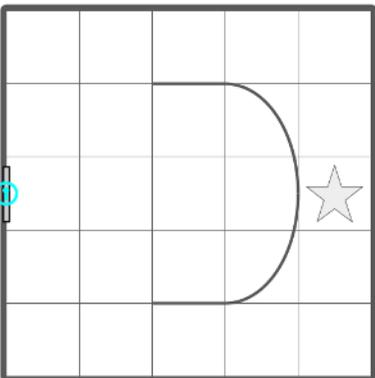
The West door requires a magenta key. Using the wrong key in the magenta lock (see room F7) gives the keyholder a jolt.



### E4

There are 3 pedestals in this room with one item upon each.

- A fishing rod (for use in D6).
- A bottle of tequila and a shot glass. The bottle has enough for 6 shots. Each shot restores 1 Wound.
- A fortune cookie. The fortune inside reads: In life it is not what we take up, but what we give up, that makes us rich.



### E5

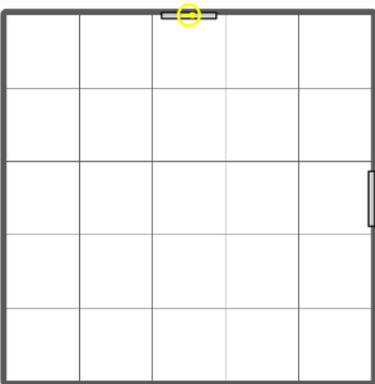
Two curved ramps on either side of the room lead up to a platform 10 feet above the floor. Upon the platform sits a great cat twice the size of a tiger with cyan fur and golden eyes. From its back sprout wings of magenta, yellow, and green feathers. It eyes you curiously and then speaks in a deep, resonating tone.

*"Step forward. You may ask any question and I will answer it to the best of my ability and as completely as I can. So, don't go asking about the Riemann Hypothesis or what your future holds.*

*Be warned that your question plus my answer cannot exceed twenty-five words.*

*If your question is long, my answer will be short, and vice-versa. One question and one answer per person."*

Provoking this magnificent creature would be a bad idea.



### E6

Tiny motes of dust swirl slowly as you disturb the stale air. A thin layer of dust clings to the walls and rests on the floor until disturbed by your movements.

The North door requires the yellow key to open, but once it was unlocked from E7, it remains unlocked.

### E7: Birds

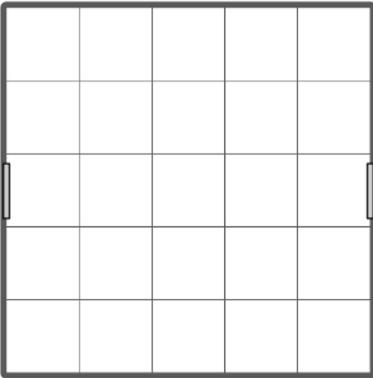


The floor tiles of this room are inlaid with mosaic images of birds. A square object sits under a glass dome that sits upon a pedestal in one corner.

When stepping on a new tile, mosaic animates momentarily. Stepping incorrectly from one tile to the next results in a jolt. The jolt takes the form of the mosaic bird pecking the character. One must move orthogonally from a rook and diagonally from a cardinal. Any move is correct from a kingfisher. [One could also add in (k)nightingales for additional complexity.]

The glass dome is easily removed if it can be reached. The South door requires the yellow key to open.

### E8

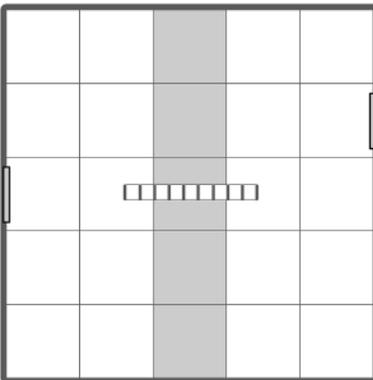


The tiles appear normal, but they are made from a thick glass. Stepping on a tile causes it to light up from below. Stepping from a tile to one that is already lit results in a jolt. The opposite door will not unlock unless all 25 tiles are lit.

Note that the pattern in room H4 is one possible solution. If you point this out to the players after the fact, you may get a response of "Fuck you," but with a smile. :)

Once either door is opened, all the tiles become unlit.

### F1

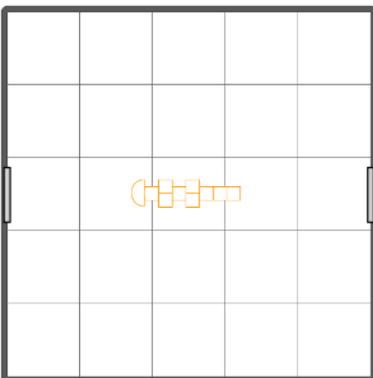


The room is bifurcated by a deep, dark chasm. Across the chasm is a set of monkey bars.

The "chasm" is just an illusion created by how the floor is painted. The monkey bars in the center of the room consist of ten rungs that light up when activated and touched. The rungs are 10 feet off the ground and there are steps at either them to allow them to be reached. Both doors must be closed for the monkey bars to be activated. Both doors are locked unless/until all the rungs of the monkey bars are lit. Any of the following activities results in all rungs to go out:

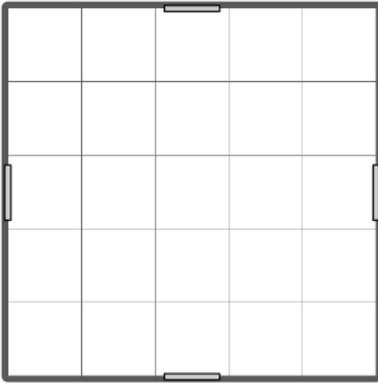
- Having more than one point of contact on any rung (one hand per rung at all times).
- Not lighting them in order (either direction works).
- Touching anything other than the rungs, including the floor, once the first rung is lit.

### F2



The hopscotch field in the center of the room consists of tiles with a glowing outline and light up fully when activated and touched. Both doors must be closed for the hopscotch to be activated. Both doors are locked unless/until all the lights on the hopscotch are lit. Any of the following activities causes all squares of the hopscotch to go out:

- Having more than one point of contact on any square.
- Not lighting them in order.
- Anyone touching a new floor tile once the first square is lit.

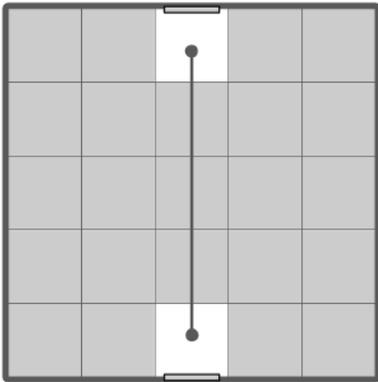


### E3

Several of the lights overhead are broken and small pieces of glass are scattered on the floor. The control panels of the South and East doors are busted and have been partially ripped out of the wall as if someone took a heavy crowbar to them. Someone has also spray painted a red "X" on the doors themselves. The dripping paint looks fairly fresh.

The South and East walls are always locked. The paint is tacky.

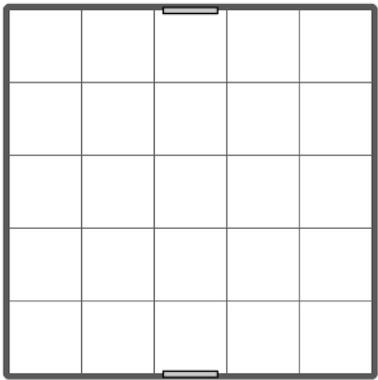
### F4



Beyond the initial 10' tile on the North and South sides of the room, the floor drops away into a thick white fog. Visibility inside the fog is limited to a foot and the fog muffles any sound.

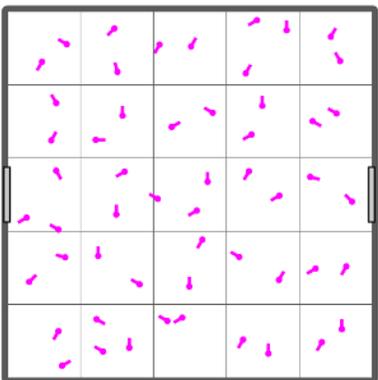
Connecting the two pedestals is a thick (3" or so) metal bar that is anchored to the pedestal. It is a 6" step up to the bar. Walking across the bar has a difficulty of 3. Crossing by hanging from the bar has a difficulty of 2. Falling causes the equivalent to a jolt in injury.

The floor is 20' down and there is a door on the West wall. Opening the door does not cause the fog to move into the next room. On the eastern side of each pedestal, starting 3' down from the top, are a series of metal rungs that form a ladder to the bottom.



### F5

The air smells of mildew. The lights are dimmer than in other rooms and they randomly fluctuate in brightness. The grooves between the tiles have a subtle brownish discoloration which is most prominent along the corners where the walls, floor, and ceiling meet.

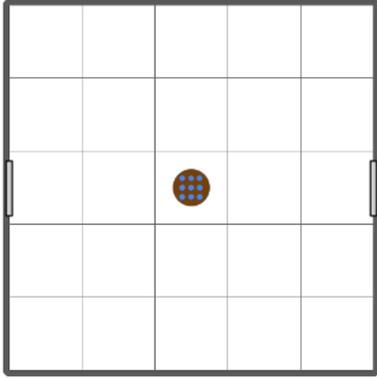


### F7

This room does not require the doors to be closed.

Scattered on the floor are 54 nearly identical magenta keys. When one is picked up or removed from the room, all but 27 of the remaining keys disappear. The next key taken drops the remaining keys to 13, then 6, then 3, until all that remains is a single key. In total, there can only be 6 keys taken from this room.

Represent this with a deck of cards with players taking a card and not looking at it. As the keys disappear, cull the deck while making sure that the Red Joker is among the remaining keys (assuming it hadn't been picked already). In all likelihood, the last key taken is the correct one (see E3)



F8

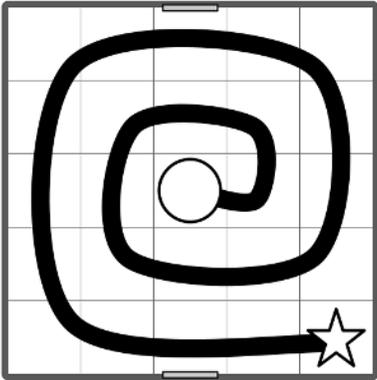
In the center of the room is a large round wooden table with a red-and-white checkered tablecloth. On the top of the table, there are 9 pies. Each has had a slice removed and set on a plate next to it. On a shelf below the tabletop, there are serving utensils and more than enough plates and forks for everyone to have their own slice of each pie.

See the image of the slices of pies. From left to right, top to bottom, they are: apple, banana split, blueberry, chocolate creme, coconut creme, lemon meringue, (key) lime, pecan, and pumpkin.



Tasting a pie other than the key lime, results in a jolt from the terrible-tasting dessert. There is no jolt if the key has already been found. All the pies are quite tasty. Eating an entire slice heals 1 Wound, but each character can only benefit from this once.

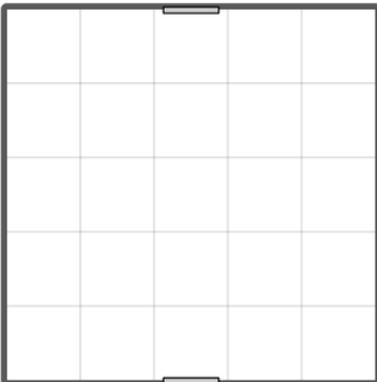
The cyan key is hidden in the key lime pie, obviously. When someone takes a bite of the byte, the key appears in their mouth.



G3

A spiral pattern has been painted onto the floor. The star and circle at the ends are considered part of the spiral. Both doors must be closed for the spiral to be activated. Both doors are locked unless/until the spiral has been lit. To begin, someone must first step on the star. Then, walking along the spiral, each tile in that section of the spiral will light. Once the final tile is lit, the doors will unlock.

Once someone has committed to walking the spiral, stepping anywhere except on the spiral (or the star or circle at the ends) causes all the tiles to become unlit. The tile is also unlit if anyone steps on the spiral besides the person who activated it; otherwise, bystanders can be anywhere in the room.

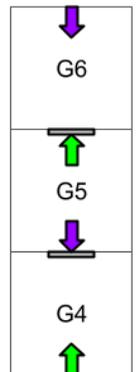


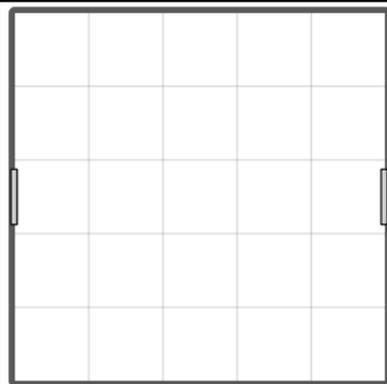
G4, G5, & G6

Leaving North from G4 or South from G6 leads to G5. Leaving South from G4 leads to G3. Leaving North from G6 leads to G7. As you would expect.

Leaving South from G5 leads to G6 (facing South, as if coming from G7).

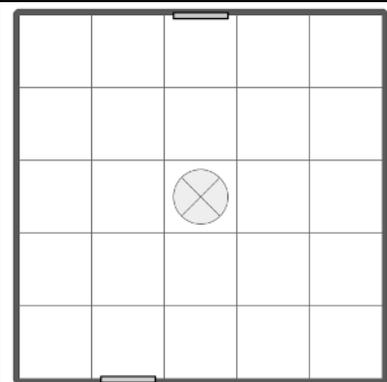
Leaving North from G5 leads to G4 (facing North, as if coming from G3).





### G8

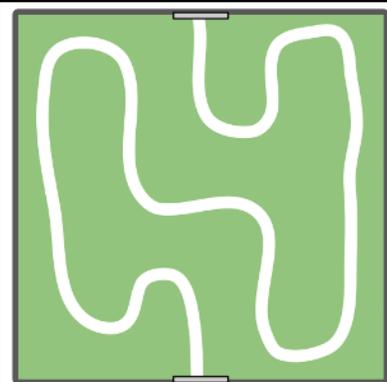
The floor tiles are cracked and flaking, like the dry lakebed baked under a desert sun. The walls have a glossy, ceramic sheen.



### H3

In the center of the room is a playground merry-go-round. It cannot be activated (as described below) until both doors are shut. The doors are then locked until unlocked by using the merry-go-round.

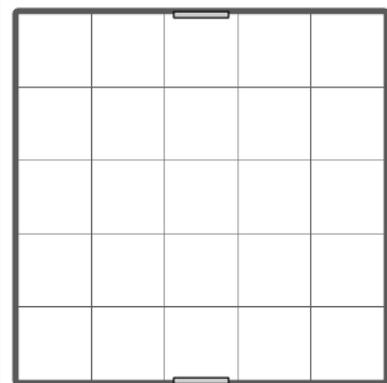
Stepping onto the merry-go-round causes one section of it to light up. It is possible for a single person to light up all sections by laying down in the center and spreading out their limbs. Once all sections are lit, it must make as many rotations as there are people in the room.



### H4

The floor is carpeted in lush, green grass. A serpentine trail of white crushed rock less than a yard wide connects the two doors.

### H5: Holo Knight

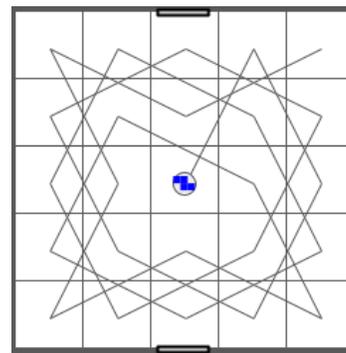


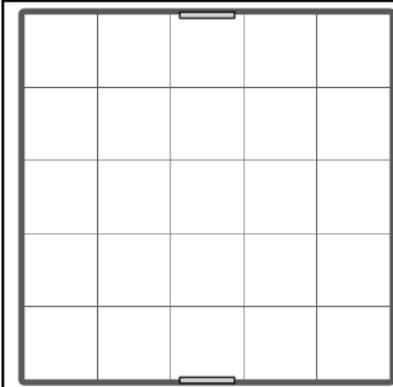
Once both doors are closed, the "z" tetrahedron will appear hovering and slowly spinning in the air about 4 feet off the ground above the center tile.

If/when someone tries to touch/grab it, they will discover that it is a hologram. Optionally, they get a jolt.

The tetrahedron appears in a new tile one knights-move away provided that tile is unoccupied. The choice of tile is left to the GM, but it should follow a "knights tour" path if possible. An example path is shown here:

If all the target tiles are occupied, then the character can capture the block. The hologram disappears when either door is opened or when the real tetrahedron is caught.



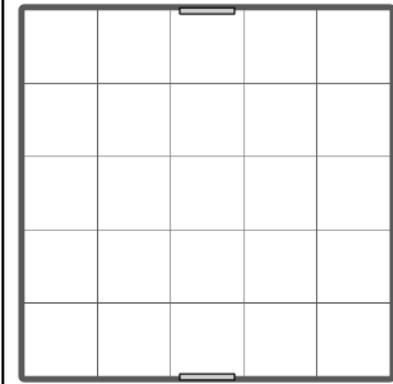


### H6

The room is unbearably hot as if it were an oven. Every surface radiates heat.

Lingering in the room too long (as determined by the GM) requires a Spirit draw to not take a Wound.

Touching the walls or floor is like touching a hot stove and results in a nasty burn (but no Wound).



### H7

Four distinct spotlights in red, blue, green, and yellow, each a foot or so in diameter, circle around the floor and only slightly up the wall. They sometimes cross over each other. Their movement is smooth and continuous, but chaotic and unpredictable.

## Comments on E&A Issue #9

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I had 3 pages of comments that would not fit into this issue. I wanted to get all of the St. Faustina Labyrinth rooms in one issue. But I still have space for a few comments.

### Welcomes

Belated and collective welcome to all the new contributors. Leaving comments and contributing to the discussions is the best way to contribute, IMO.

### Covers

We have had great covers for *E&A* and I really appreciate them. Kudos to the artists and the curators.

### Myles Corcoran

RYCT Elf, the issue of AI ingesting copyrighted text into an LLM is that some of the companies did not have legal access to the texts they were feeding into their LLMs.

### Elf

Several countries of antiquity were named after (or just known by) their primary city. Babylon. Rome. Carthage. The Greek citystates of Athens, Sparta, Thebes, etc.

### Avram Grumer

Five dozens is one of my favorite numbers (see my email address on page 1). Happy  $3 \times 4 \times 5 \text{th!}^2$

### Jim Vassilakos

RYCT Scribbles, bananas are notoriously radioactive and used as a [measure of radiation dosage](#).

### Mark A. Wilson

I am in awe of the projects you're undertaking. Don't burn yourself out. When I'm swamped (or uninspired), I find it easier to submit comment zines.

I can imagine a game of Syncretics with 4 (or 2N) in which each pair of players in sequence follows the words said by the former pair.

### Patrick Zoch

I'm wishing you luck, per your wishes. :)

RYCT Lisa, urchins, turtles and eels are considered delicacies (or at least "good eatin'") in some cultures.

One of the things I tell the engineers I work with is not to pad their schedule when communicating to me. I need to know the real schedule—I will add padding myself before talking about timelines outside of engineering.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that (3,4,5) is the smallest Pythagorean triple.

Back to Brazilian Gamebooks – part IX: *Investigar* (2024)  
by Pedro Panhoca da Silva <[ppanhoca@yahoo.com.br](mailto:ppanhoca@yahoo.com.br)> and Maira Zucolotto  
<[maira\\_zuc@hotmail.com](mailto:maira_zuc@hotmail.com)>

If we could classify Gabriel Garcia A. Castelo's gamebook *Investigar* (2024) – “Investigate”, in free translation – in just one word, it would be “megalomaniacal”! This is because the young writer, author of the previously reviewed *Sobreviver* (2017) and *Sobreviver 2.0* (2020), has achieved the feat of releasing an extremely dense and well-crafted work.

From the title and excellent graphic design of this gamebook – a trademark of the author, who is a trained graphic designer and heads the GGAC studio<sup>1</sup> – we know that it is a detective adventure. It would be the largest Brazilian gamebook ever made<sup>2</sup>, but in fact *Investigar* is composed of four interconnected solo adventures:

- 1<sup>st</sup> case: “Roubo do retrato do Duque de Wellington” (paragraphs 1-160), which means “The Robbery of the Duke of Wellington's Portrait”;
- 2<sup>nd</sup> case: “O fantasma de Hammersmith” (paragraphs 181-557), which means “The Ghost of Hammersmith”;
- 3<sup>rd</sup> case: “O homem de Taman Shud” (paragraphs 580-1222), which means “The Man from Taman Shud”;
- 4<sup>th</sup> case: “Jack, o estripador” (paragraphs 1300-2022), which means “Jack the Ripper”.

It is unclear why some references simply do not appear, probably due to excesses removed during revision/playtesting (for example, between the 1st and 2nd cases, paragraphs 161 to 180 do not exist, as well as others). Even so, *Investigar* presents an impressive 1903 paragraphs!

From the titles, the reader-player will realise that these titles are not unfamiliar, and their intuition is correct. These are controversial and unsolved investigative cases from history. Although they took place in different times and places, Garcia, in a natural and creative way, managed to adapt them all to be experienced in the same historical period (the end of the Victorian era in a decadent England). On his second trip to London, the author visited several historical sites (such as the National Museum and the Jack the Ripper Museum, among many others), gathering plenty of material for his interactive production. It is recommended that they be read-played in the order in which they appear in the gamebook, especially for a beginner reader-player who can first enjoy shorter adventures before moving on to more complex ones. However, changing the order does not change much, since when one case ends, another begins.

In *Investigar*, the reader-player finds a character sheet that is different from the others. Called the “Detective Sheet”, it records information such as places visited, evidence, luck index, time tokens, and general notes, just like a good detective from the last century. There are no combats, and the only element to determine randomness is the “luck” factor. Time tokens adjust the complexity of the investigation. There are three levels for the reader-player to choose from: you can start the adventure with 25 time tokens (easy investigation), 20 (moderate investigation) or 15 (challenging investigation). Time tokens are spent whenever the text indicates, usually

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<sup>1</sup> The Creation, Design, Art and Audiovisual studio for projects and companies can be found at: <https://www.instagram.com/ggac.estudio/>.

<sup>2</sup> The largest Brazilian gamebook to date remains *O Enigma do Sol Oculto* (2022) by Karen Soarele, reviewed in *Alarums & Excursions* - n. 592.

when reading reports, investigating locations, interviewing people, etc. Extratextual resources include QR codes to listen to the introduction (instead of reading it) and the soundtrack of the cases.

Each case begins with a brief presentation of what is happening (a fictionalised version of a real investigation case), followed by a reproduction (imitation) of a newspaper from the time with news related to the case and the beginning of the investigation. The final paragraphs for each case make up a special section called “case report”, when the reader-player finally learns how they performed. Finally, there is a comparison with the real case. As the book is very long, the initial pages (brief presentation of the case) and final pages (case report) of each adventure have white letters on black pages. The rest of the pages follow the editorial standard of white pages and black letters.

For those who enjoy this literary genre, *Investigar* is an excellent choice. However, for readers-players accustomed to lots of action, combat, magic, death, and constant tests, this gamebook may be a little monotonous. Much of it focuses on visiting locations, talking to witnesses, cross-referencing information, and reaching a verdict, which is not a bad thing, as it accurately simulates the detective investigation routine of the time: little physical action and a lot of mental exercise. This possible frustration for the reader-player occurs when, for example, someone wants to be a police officer to fight crime intensely and riskily every day, when 90% of the time is actually spent patrolling without any incidents or dealing with the bureaucracy of the sector.

Certainly, what sets *Investigar* apart is its graphic design, as it is very rare to see hardcover gamebooks with illustrations that greatly aid in the immersion of the reader. The handwritten letters, telegrams, and notes found in the adventures look like they were written on torn pieces of paper, with the handwriting changing for each writer. The reports on Scotland Yard letterhead, victim records, postcards, playing cards, photographs of corpses, and police sketches are impeccable and add an even more special touch to this edition. In other words, it was worth every penny of the crowdfunding success that gave rise to it: R\$ 127,062 raised thanks to 506 supporters, which reached 158% of the expected amount<sup>3</sup>.

Unpublished additions to gamebooks can also be found in the paratexts: Garcia gives an enthusiastic acknowledgement that teaches how important it is for family and friends to believe in our projects and how crowdfunding platforms helped him publicise his creations. The author dedicates a second page of acknowledgements solely to Gino Baiense, responsible for the illustrations in *Investigar*. In addition, as an appendix, Garcia included the seven most voted (micro) stories from a literary contest promoted by the studio itself in order to ‘[...] encourage writers, publicise their content and value national literature.’ Finally, there is a page of self-promotion explaining what GGAC is.

In a private conversation at the launch of *Investigar*<sup>4</sup>, I may have asked the most obvious question of all (‘Was it hard work writing so much?’), and I deserved the most predictable answer (‘Wow... very!’). Even if a next one takes a while, we wait patiently, like detectives solving their cases.

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<sup>3</sup> You can learn about their launch campaign at: <https://www.catarse.me/investigat>.

<sup>4</sup> I shared the photos in *Alarums & Excursions* #591, giving Lisa Padol spoilers about him. It took us a while to finish reading-playing, but now it's done. ☺

## COMMENTS #9

JOHN REDDEN: I agree! 😊

LISA PADOL: Looks like someone got interested in reading, huh! 😊 1) If the mirror lies about the witch's beauty, it will lie forever until she becomes very old, and Snow White will remain a servant forever (sad ending); 2) If the hunter kills Snow White, he will deliver her heart to the witch and, over time, regret it. Then he turns himself in to the police and tells them about the witch's plans, and they arrest her too. In his cell, the hunter finds inner peace, but the witch suffers forever, because the mirror stays with her in her cell and tells her the truth every day: she is getting uglier day by day; 3) if Snow White does not accept the apple, she keeps it and makes a pie for the seven dwarves who, when they return from work, all eat it without hesitation. Then, she and the dwarves fall into a deep sleep because of the spell.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: Thanks for the recommendations! 😊 I don't know much about VNs, I studied them briefly in my PhD, but I know they are a highly consumed product in the East. I feel that Western culture has preferred gamebooks and interactive fiction, but they all have a lot in common.

BRIAN CHRISTOPHER MISIASZEK: I think that true branching choices are only found in gamebooks/interactive fiction for more experienced readers (aged 11-14 and up), which is a shame. I don't see the bad choices in these interactive texts as a lack of incentive. On the contrary: I think they pique curiosity even more. I highly doubt that a child would become discouraged by making choices that result in failure. Perhaps it is a reflection of educational policy that overprotects children, shielding them as much as possible from the frustrations that life will naturally present them with one day 😞

# DENIZENS OF THE LIBRARY #9

A 'zine for Ever & Anon, copyright 2026 by Brian Rogers

## All About Me

Some bits of upheaval around the Rogers household as a shake-up at work means I'll need to break in a new boss, which is always a chore. Things with the special-needs kiddo are increasingly complex as its hard to tell his issues from the DSM coded issue of "Teenage Boy". Him being home for 14 days straight between doctors' appointments and school vacations and snow days did not help anyone's sanity. Still, we soldier on, and I got to say the most bogie thing ever to a friend about cooking, that I was "[out to pick up some Armagnac for dinner tonight since we ran out of cognac.](#)" The definition of first world problems.

We have a *Swords of the Serpentine* game this weekend and I do wonder what they will be attempting. The villain has shot his immediate bolt against them to no avail and needs to fall back and regroup, but the last targets of his vengeance are just back in town... will he try to get them right now, or will he hall back to the swamp temple of his small god to regroup? I'm honestly not sure: if the players quickly move against him he will bolt and they can beard him in his lair; if they fall back and wait they might be able to catch him in the act, but that might also mean he kills his final targets and goes out in a blaze of glory, giving the PCs a pyrrhic victory.

In other news, I was introduced to *Harmonies* at library board game night and have become quite enamored with it. I borrowed it and my lovely wife also enjoyed it. We may have doubled our board games! I enjoy the basically non-competitive parallel play of it, and my wife agrees: it's an order of magnitude more complex than *Ticket to Ride*, but it is essentially everyone working solo puzzles on their turn and chatting with other players when not.

The Star Wars players would all like to see more, and are tossing between freeing the Flaxak, recruiting the pirates, or some combination of the two, while also wondering what is on the data crystals that Roist'r stole. Their text messages are a hoot, and I will likely share more on this next month.

## Inside the Library:

Let's catch up with the Denizens shall we? Neither library game had sessions in February as there was a Real World Library Politics kerfuffle with the administration and a parent complaint<sup>1</sup>, followed by a school break week, followed by two weather closures. The last time we saw the Denizens it was December, and they had just decided to not invade an Owlbear cave to recover remains to instead continue their trek to the capital.

### Session 55 (January 5, 2026)

Having handed their sleds, dogs, and defense of Ulrich monastery over to Sir Rosh the Denizens and their ally/prisoner Loorha-ged-Thylorh continue the road south through the Frost Range. There is plentiful evidence that the Empire has spent the last year keeping the roads in full repair, and their arrival at the first way-station finds it completely repaired and expanded from the burned out state they had left. All evidence of the Green Dragon Grunerflugel's assault has been cleared away, and pagoda/temple in the inexplicable patch of jungle deeper into the mountains behind the waystation has been rebuilt as a space for more troops.

On their arrival Alire explains their errand in oblique terms – the Denizens are not 'on book' at the moment – having ignored the implied directive to return to Axis weeks ago in order to pursue Oolay'ah-ben-Ethra-mah-Lanoorah – but Commander Farstrider recognizes them from the stories of their last visit and immediately offers them food, shelter... and a job. You see, the pagoda's reconstruction uncovered a stone block on the floor that, when moved, revealed a passage below<sup>2</sup>. He had sent a five-person company down to explore it, had one break a leg in a pit trap and have to be pulled out, and of the remaining four two were killed and two traumatized by the spirits within. This is clearly outside of his team's capacity... could the Denizens assist? He is willing to trade them first pick of any treasure below plus a letter of transit on the next courier dragon to Axis. After some debate between the older and newer members of the team, they agree.

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<sup>1</sup> About their kid not having a space in a scenario where I have space for 10-11 players and 20 kids asking to play. I am blessed by both my direct contact there and the library deputy director being active or former gamers who 'get it'. But we did have to have to have meetings and work up a new sign off sheet

so all the parents know the rules... it's not the kids complaining mind you, but the parents. Which I find increasingly bizarre as I age.

<sup>2</sup> Leading to *Bristanam's Cairn*, by John Nephew, *Dungeon Magazine* #6, just with everything being re-chromed for Yuan-Ti.

The Denizens interview the two survivors, who were psychologically and physically crippled by the encounter with the ghosts below – hair turned white, aging a decade, stammers, sudden silences, breaking eye contact – and Alire and Numina are as gentle as possible with the questioning. They get the rough layout of what is below, as well as confirmation of a single human-appearing ghost that arose when one of their number opened the treasure-filled coffin. “Did he touch the treasure or just the coffin?” Alire asks, but there are limits to their memory of the incident. Both said they felt something... missing in their psyche while down there. Numina takes a moment to re-examine the statues – abstract figures in obsidian and jade – they found in the temple, and backed with the knowledge impaired by her Cloak of Ages she identifies it as 2 of a 5-statue set carved in service of Tiamat.

After a night’s rest (giving time for Numina to trade a spell slot for *Turn Undead*), the group descends. It’s bizarre to watch Quint’s polar bear slither down through the hole, but the beast makes it. Quint comments on feeling something lessened himself but he can’t place it. Avoiding the revealed pit trap where the passage north splits east and west, the group splits with it, with Alire, Numina, and Sol taking one curved branch and Quint and Mikeala the other, trusting from the descriptions that the two connect. Each group finds a small chamber midway through the arc.

The younger Denizens find a storeroom full of various armor & armament and spend time rooting through it for things to loot. They turn up a shirt of obviously enchanted chain armor with an extended skirt, and two serpent shaped javelins likewise redolent with magic.

The older Denizens’ room is filled with skeletons that they recognize as Yuan-Ti remains. Much is now made clear. This space is connected to the Forbidden City – perhaps the dungeons nearby that their former travelling companion Xela had been looting connect to there? – and the curse that blocks all non-elvish gods from acting within it is in force. This is why Quint, the Denizen’s sole non-Elf, felt off but none of the others. Whatever fell spirits are down here, they are almost certainly Yuan-ti and blocked from their final reward<sup>3</sup>. Then an Ankheg, sheltering the winter in the jungles unnatural warmth, popped out of the ground and was immediately kacked by the heroes... it’s been a long time since a single ankheg was a threat to them!<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It was great fun watching the three older players bring the two younger ones up to speed on everything that happened in the summer of 2024 when they were last in the Forbidden City. The youngsters were Flaggerbastard

The two groups met up again at the end of their arcs, completing the circle by both entering a room with a door north (which would be directly under the passage they used to enter) and a single object: an ornately carved wooden chest, covered in complex intertwining designs that picture serpent-men, dragons, mountains, temples other figures which are not readily identifiable. There is a lid on the box, but it does not appear to have any sort of lock. There is intense debate about whether to open it, which they ultimately do with the magic hand created by Mikeala’s crystalline glove. Inside are ashes.

When nothing happens, Quint touches the box to take it, and the living flesh touching it summons the spirit of a Yuan-Ti warrior-priest, who quickly engages the party in combat. The entity’s focus is on Alire, identifying him as part of the living wards that hold in the Green, the eldest green dragon who the Yuan-Ti attempted to deify in the past (leading to the Elf Queen’s curse on their city, etc. etc.) The battle is fierce and it appears the entity could almost immediately heal from any damage done to it (save Numina’s holy attacks) until Mikeala uses her magic hand to toss the entity’s ashes across the room. This breaks its regenerative capacity, and from there the battle is short.

### Session 56 (January 21, 2026)

The Denizens know this was not the spirit that haunted Evander Oakheart and Elodie Quicksilver<sup>5</sup>. Taking a moment to catch their breath they proceed into the final room. There the coffin lies there, but closed, surrounded by five plinths, three of them holding abstract statues made of ivory, bluestone, red marble. The group circle the room warily, taking in the wooden beam design overhead and realizing that too much fire or sound could bring the roof down. Numina confirms the three statues are the rest of the set and likely make a portable shrine.

There is considerable discussion of what to do: bring down the roof? Burn out the coffin? Open the coffin? Numina and Alire speculate that if they just bring the coffin to the surface outside of the cursed area the spirit inside might be forced to move on...before the younger members’ avarice gets the better of them and the coffin is opened. This of course triggers the specter within, as well as summoning a quintet of spectral chromatic pseudo-dragons that emerge from the walls. The battle is fierce, taxing the heroes to their utmost, but eventually Numina’s holy magic destroys the entity.

<sup>4</sup> They had previously fought ankhegs in sessions 1 and 17, and Sol wears a breastplate made from the remains of the session 1 monster: her chitin chiton.

<sup>5</sup> The soldiers have names. Did I not mention that?

At this point a fierce battle emerges over the treasure. The newer Denizens were completely enamored with the concept of the pile, trying to figure out what to claim from it., while the more established members took a “let’s split up the gold and each take one thing, leaving the rest for the imperial garrison,” per their agreement with the garrison commander<sup>6</sup>.

Quint was adamant that he wanted the Yuan-Ti corpse’s pearl studded crown, and Alire told him “you know that’s cursed, right?” “Don’t Care! It’s mine!”<sup>7</sup> Sol convinced Mikeala to claim a periapt of proof vs poison on practical grounds: she doesn’t have an item in her necklace chakra and they know a green dragon is coming. Well, coming back. For the other three older players, they picked out jewelry (a bronze crown with onyxes, a gold torc with emeralds, a dagger whose hilt has 8 small rubies), all of which have significance with political factions they know are in play (the Yuan Ti, Loorha-ged-Thylorh’s Moonwreck kin, and the Drow, respectively, as the rubies are arranged like spider eyes).

Two days later a copper dragon landed, disgorging mail and troops, and with Commander Farstrider’s sanction the Denizens are given space for the return flight, buckling into the harness and being suspended in the air as the great wyrm carried them from the edge of the empire to Axis in two days. It was exhilarating, if a little overwhelming, as of them only Sol had ever seen the world from the air.

Upon their return to the capital city, Alire and Numina returned to their apartments, with Quint going with Numina so the latter could re-introduce him to her connections at court. Mikeala went to the Archmage’s schola to report and Sol staying outside the city. Much to Alire’s amazement, the walking corpse Lurche and Infernitas the animated be-jeweled skull on a platter were waiting at his apartment! It seems that Alire and Numina’s friend the Necromancer Aslan Nightshade has passed, and Nightshade’s will named Alire executor. Unfortunately, Infernitas lets him know with a cackle, “the masters’ menagerie has gotten quite out of hand” and it’s now Alire’s legal duty to clean it up before something gets out!

“Oh well that’s just great!” he complains, while calculating just how much STUFF in in Nightshade’s wizards tower.

## Comments on E&A 9

**Pedro Panhoca da Silva** re the prince's pocket: I have players who'd be driven nuts by that non-decision.

**ChrysalisM:** Hurray for High School Theater! RE Phyrenia: well... that's an interesting science fantasy setting. very much everything but the kitchen sink.

**John Redden:** re being part pig or part cow, I love living in the future. If you end up developing powers the best names are "Razorback" or "Minotaur". LOL at "the war has reached a critical point between Atlantis & Mu".

**Clark B Timmins:** Loving the treasures! Owen K. C. Stevens did a series of minor treasures for *3E* back in 2002 that these are reminiscent of, and I used the hell out of those. re the glass sarcophagus: of course they will let the mummy out....

**Lisa Parol:** Love the LARP element of *CoMC*. The Kiddo wants to finish the book and then see if there is *CoMC/Leverage* Fanfic. RE food as GM compensation: in the *Girl Genius* game where I was splitting GMing duties, one player always hosted; if I was GMing the other GM's family would bring homemade dinner and vice versa. It was an equitable arrangement! RE the *Knaves*: in their defense, they weren't scheduling a session with just the two of them, and I've been clear about the rules for GP:XP so they weren't totally childish... just trying to maximize their reward. Though you can see what happened next lastish. re *Star Wars*: yeah, it definitely lost the *Bebop* feel, but it's only *Leverage* in that this part of the adventure lent itself to a mild con. REYCT Clark Timmins on players always winning: Vincent Baker's 25% loss ratio means knowing what constitutes a loss. In a supers' game the PCs may 'win' the fight but not rescue everyone in danger, and that should definitely feel like a loss. Being defeated by the villain and put in a deathtrap? maybe, maybe not. REYCT Joshua Kronengold: I remember using one of those dice bubbles when I showed up for a restaurant game, but I had never heard of the Amber bubble. <snort!> REYCT Jim Vassilakos on players playing NPCs counter to NPC goals: while we didn't have that, being 'confused' in *13th Age* means you attack one of your allies, and the player of the party Wizard realized quickly that throwing his daggers at them was both legal and the weakest thing he could do. I let it slide because it made sense for the soldier/wizard to be fighting hard against the confusion effect and felt overly punitive for him to expend daily resources outside his control.

<sup>6</sup> The HS students were legit shocked at the behavior of the middle school students, forgetting that was them 2 years ago.

<sup>7</sup> (Wife, later: “was it cursed?” “WELL IT IS NOW!”)

**Mike Carr:** re Clerics: I have the same problems you do for *Under the Giant's Shadow*. I ended up with divine magic having a dice pool mechanism but clerics having both divine magic and limited arcane magic as scholar priest warrior was so integrated into *D&D*. I'm still wrestling with it. REYCT Elf on sneaking: does this mean that no one could sneak before the publication of *Greyhawk* as there were no thieves? Or that everyone could attempt to sneak and thieves had a chance for silence? I know the OSR discourse runs heavily to the former because the idea is you can try anything and the DM adjudicates your chance on the fly. REYCT Lisa on Tarzan & planes: strangely, Flash Gordon canonically crashed every plane he flew...at some new location on Mongo teeming with adventure. When a friend designed a 'Men's Own Adventure Game' *Soldier of Fortune*, a piloting roll covered 100 miles, and therefore a trip of 1,500 miles to get to the adventure site needed 15 skill checks where failure = crash and we would inevitably crash. Frustrating, but genre appropriate. We would then steal a plane and use it for a dogfight in the final act, where the combat piloting rules took effect. REYCT Joshua Kronengold on game length: *V&V* clocks in at 47 pages! New game lengths are nuts!

**Attonarch:** REYCT to Brian Misiaszek: 164 sessions? Yikes, we have a lot of catching up to do! It does seem like this group of heroes has hit a groove, but they also went back into that damned cursed tower. The dummies. Reiterating that I am really enjoying these write ups.

**Myles Corcoran:** As you saw, the 3rd petrified guard has returned as a Paladin of Kor; apparently he was just in a snit. I am glad you're getting to play in some games, and that the 2nd Mausritter group is going well. REYCT ELF on *Cage of Sand*: you weren't the only one who forgot it became less cozy! REYCT Josh on my *V&V* work: stop wearing me down! Mind you a lot of the initial work is done from the LSH supplement I wrote for the game, and the realization that I could do all the art with the Public Domain characters I've been working on does make it a little more likely. re YCT Lisa; I may change my business card to read "Meatware Wrangler"

**PUM:** RE NBA: (We had a conversation in email but I wanted to include it in the cocktail party) When I first ran *Mutant City Blues* I had the same issue of wanting more trad rules, so like you I divided general abilities by 3 to be a constant bonus; *MCB* is only a Yes/No to "do you have this investigation skill" and not "you have but can spend pool points for bonuses" which make the change easier. You might want to look at that for mods.

**Patrick Riley:** REYCT on modes of play; your desire /examples to stay in character as much as possible reminded me of stories of method actors who once they

are on set never leave character... which can end up annoying the hell out of everyone else on set if they are pedantic jerks about it. I recently heard a story about Eric Stolz's time as Marty McFly before the directors realized his all-Method 'this is a *Twilight Zone* episode horror' take on *Back to the Future*'s premise didn't work and replaced him: when they told Christopher Lloyd that they had let Eric go, Lloyd had no idea who they were talking about as Stolz had only ever introduced himself or responded to Marty during the weeks of filming. This is not me saying I think you take things to pedantic jerk levels; I just wanted to share the anecdote. RE D&D rules: These days I'm a fan of "every class and race has its own way to break the "rules" but I want to keep it so that 85% of their rules are the same as everyone else's. My fighters get attack bonuses based on the raw d20 roll; my rogues get to mess with initiative, rumor collection, and equipment purchase; my magic-users get arcane spells and conjured-not-recruited henchmen; my clerics get a flexible miracle dice pool. But the general rules for armor, HP, attacks, skill checks, etc. are constant. Let me dig into rogues a little more: since I am using side based initiative. The rogue rolls his own initiative die and takes the better of his or his parties. If both he and the party lost initiative he can make a risky attack to seize the initiative, but if he fails he is vulnerable for the rest of the round. If he has the initiative he has some special moves he can make - like splitting his attack bonus into multiple attacks - and if he doesn't he can forego his action to automatically get initiative next round. Basically this is an attempt to make them the lightly armored, low HP fast sneaky fighter. I strongly recommend you ditch a skill list for a 13th age "player defined background that gives bonus inside its penumbra"; I have found it so much more versatile and helps PCs with world building. What I ended up doing was "humans can recruit and manage hirelings better; dwarves don't need to map cause they can't get lost and sense the room sizes; elves can see secret doors and see through most illusions; halflings are very hard to surprise and get a surprise bonus. Each race gets a single dungeon-useful bonus. RE you being "Excessively Negative" a few years back at work when the team had turned over quite a bit I was dinged for being too much of a naysayer for pointing out x didn't work last time we tried it when what I thought I was doing was saying "this tactic didn't work last time to reach this objective, so we need different tactics".

**Gabriel Roark:** That's a whole lotta Arduin! Enjoy!

**Roger BW** re spouse being possessed by an ancient evil being good grounds for divorce: well... this is American in the 1930's, so maybe not. The PCs should confer with their client about her husband's disposition!

**Mark A Wilson:** of all your reasons for cutting back, the tribunal has accepted "starting new *D&D* campaign" as valid. And fingers crossed on all the games! re *Once Upon a Time*: I was mildly disappointed in this when I played it as some of the players really just wanted to race through their cards rather than tell any sort of tale.

**Avram Grumer:** re Improv "You hit my sister with a brick!" / "Yes, and we were in couples' costumes of Crazy Kat and Ignatz Mouse... she wanted it!" re *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*: I should probably give that another go; I'm not sure 17-year-old me who was reading it to be trendy while reading Denny ONeil's initial run on *The Question* got it. RE Your thoughts on Hot and Cool media for *D&D* vs *Traveller*: this make a lot of sense. *Traveller's* little black books not only feel more complete but more thought out in a way that discouraged hacking. I never really thought about me designing new lifepath tables for *Traveller* (as opposed to when I hacked out a whole *Feng Shui* inspired engine with a *Reign*-style lifepath, as opposed to making and tweaking new classes for *D&D*. re having to explain the Afghanistan joke: the perils of playing with youngsters. re YCT Dylan Capel on the Hobbit: I don't think you were around when I was posting my Hobbit RPG. You can find it here: [SubplotKudzu/Hobbit](#) RE *Twilight 2000*: it has always been of interest to me - especially as a precursor to a *Psi-World* or *Cyberpunk* game - but as you say the furry, weird rules with heavy GM prep are a problem. I had hoped the new edition would tone a lot of that back but no joy. reYCT Jim Vassilikos about dungeon group sizes: I may not want 100-strong, but the rules for Humans in Under the giants Shadow are heavily weighted towards trying to get a 1:1 or 2:1 ratio of NPCs to PCs in the deeper delves.

**Patrick Zoch:** re Saltmarsh: I hate it when the reason the computer didn't do what I expected was because I messed up... Every time I see FGU I think *Fantasy Games Unlimited*. OK, I understand the rules and all but using a lance to take out a swarm of bugs is just making my brain hurt. That was a lotta bugs! LOL at Gray Shame

**Joshua Kronengold:** Everyway character creation is collaborative? Do you mean Player to GM or between Players? re Star Wars: There was never any thought about killing the kids; IGn8ius did posit taking some hostage...RE "Handle the failed pilot roll"... I'm confused? Everyone agreed KT's failed pilot roll was the most *Star Wars* thing that could have happened in the "nothing ever goes smoothly" rule of *Star Wars*. I had them roll the dice because I half wanted that outcome - either the "Oh crap now what" that happened or the heroic flight in to grab them were equally good - and KT isn't a PC, she's a not terribly bright droid that keeps

anyone from having to have dice in Astrogration or Starship Repair. REYCT Myles on *Amber*: yeah, Psyche isn't smarts. I have seen that several times in play.... re *D&D 3E*: "GM also let NPCs use positively unfair tactics in order to inspire the PCs to do the same;" At least you acknowledge all of this was unfair! re YCT Pedro on False Interactivity: I kickstarted "[Mystery Under Magi-Mart](#)", and while it's adorable there is really one worked out path that takes you all the way to your goal of becoming a professional adventurer. At least most of the abrupt ends are quite funny. re YCT Roger BW: yup, that mirrors my experience with how *7th Sea* PCs were messed up! RE yct yourself: this month's zine is much easier on the eyes, thanks! re YCT Jim on absent players handling other parts of the fight: This is what I generally do, but I had the sudden image of telling the players Absent Sue's PC is helping in offscreen stuff, handling their fight, and then turning back to Absent' Sue's PC and seeing just a pile of monster corpses around her as she's just held off an army while no one was looking. <giggle> at Witch and Catfish

**Brian Miziaszek:** re Habana: Yeesh, Brian, that all got messy! Thanks for the sympathies on the household illness; we got through it but 't'wern't fun. I'd love to say we've all been healthy after that but I'd be lying.

**Jim Vassilikos:** re Monster Economy: I always try to have some reason for active monsters to have the trove - often they are planning to leave their lair at some point to go to an open city to spend it, or they have their own economy inside wherever they live.

**Everyone else, RAEBNC**



## Stating Up Regrets 9: The Face

Thisish's hero from Jon Morris' *League of Regrettable Superheroes* is a detective-hero with the ultimate face for radio, I give you radio announcer/newsman by day, evilly visaged crime-solver by night... The Face!<sup>8</sup>

The Face started mining the vein that the longer-running Steve Ditko hero The Question would play out for some time, in that his shtick is his weird looking mug. But while with the Question, opponents say "Hey, that guy ain't got no face?!", foes of the Face say "Oh sweet Jesus what is that thing?! RUN!" because the Face's shtick was the single most effective fright mask known to man. It is perfectly molded to Tony Trent's face, so looks 100% realistic, and its goblin-meets-devil styling so shocks people that it gives Trent vital seconds to out-draw, escape, or pummel foes. Trent was a good enough detective to maintain a long maskless run of just mystery comics after super-heroes started to wane, but he wore the Face for years.<sup>9</sup> He also gets a 'Girl Friday' in the shapely form of his secretary Babs Walsh, who clearly kinda gets off on the violence of it all.

Like so many other heroes of the day, Trent was a solid combatant, with call outs for marksmanship & fencing, and as mentioned a capable detective. What does this mean in V&V? He has a Journalism Area of Knowledge as Tony Trent is a radio announcer and reporter, which helps him track down leads and solve crimes. His other AoK is Education, justified by and justifying his rapid acquisition of crimefighting skills. For abilities, once again, we've a 'one device + skills' hero. To the Oracular Bones!

The Face's Ability roll is a 1! He rolls his 3 abilities + 1 weakness, discards 1 ability, and may discard a second if he wants to lose the weakness. This is as good a time as any to make use of this rule on page 3 "A character with few powers tends to be lesspowerful than a character with many. This being the case, the GM is encouraged



to upgrade the usefulness of the powers received by a character with few powers in order to make that player capable of contending with more powerful characters." A great bits in any RPG design.

But first, let's look at the Weaknesses table. The oracular bones gave *Reduced Agility*, which absolutely *won't* work. What will? *Special Requirement*: "A requirement the character must fulfill to be able to utilize some or all of his super powers. Examples are 1) a magic word that must be spoken, 2) a secret formula that must be taken to prevent one's powers from going away, 3) powers that operate only at night, during the day, etc. 4) Etc."<sup>10</sup> We can always ignore the oracular

bones, so we will, so he has a weakness and 2 super-abilities.

The Face isn't the Question: his mask *is* his super-power; it'd be wrong to minimize it. It's an *Emotion Control: Fear Device*. Devices have 3d10-ability's Fatigue for charges; *Emotion Control* costs 8 Fatigue/success if it targets one person, or 8/use if it's a radius. This is clearly a radius, and the dice say he has 9 charges. That should be plenty.

"Charges? But isn't it always on?" you ask. Yes and no. This is the *Special Requirement*: the Face can only activate *Emotion Control* if his visage shocks people. Meeting him before won't help if he emerges from the shadows and you lay your peepers on that horrific mug, but he can't turn it on after you've been looking at him for 5 minutes.

For his other ability, I'm going with *Heightened Training*. I like the idea of Tony Trent starting out way out of depth and getting better fast. Tony, his growing frustration about the crimes he was reporting on but couldn't stop, was pushed to act when he saw people dressed as police



kill a man. He acquired his mask, found people to teach him combat skills, but got started immediately. Every level he gets not just his regular training, but a training in unarmed, sword, and gun, granting +1 to accuracy or damage. Once he hits 8<sup>th</sup> level at the war's end he's +4 to hit and damage with his trained attacks. No wonder he thinks he doesn't need the mask!

<sup>8</sup> The Face first appeared in *Big Shot Comics* #1 in 1940, created by Mary Bailey (artist) with eventual comics legend Gardner Fox writing as "Michael Blake" from an idea by editor Vince Sullivan. He is in the public domain. This image taken from <http://www.internationalhero.co.uk/f/face.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Here is where I get a little frustrated with the good souls of the internet who catalogue public domain heroes as there is altogether too much commentary on the limits of the Face's shtick and it only lasted him 64 of his 108 appearances. 64! Lady Satan had about 6!

<sup>10</sup> I can't tell you how much I love that "4) Etc." right after the prior "etc." I look more into the V&V Weaknesses later thisish.

*"The Emotion Control: What does it do?"*

You'll be shocked to learn that *V&V* offers no mechanical guidance, merely it's chance to hit, the rules to shake it off, and that "characters under the influence of Emotion Control **must** behave accordingly." While this can be made to work, I like putting a little more rigor around it, especially since it's the Face's only power. So, let's lay out the levels of having the tuna salad scared out of you.

- 1) His *Emotion Control* attack occurs *before* initiative if the *Special Requirement* is met.
- 2) For three turns after the *Emotion Control* attack, the Face has the effect of the *Heightened Defense* power (-4 to be hit when conscious and mobile): hit or miss, the mask is so unsettling all of his opponents are thrown off their game.
- 3) The first turn after the *Emotion Control* attack, the Face has an Initiative Interval of 7, meaning that with his 14 Agility he will at least act on 15, 8, and 1, and at best on 24, 17, 10, and 3. Again, this is because his opponents are thrown off by the mask. The second turn after the attack his initiative interval is 10, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> turn it is 13, and then the standard 15 for the remainder of the fight.
- 4) Anyone who is hit by the *Emotion Control* attack acts as if Fatigued until they shake it off. Fatigued is what happens when you have 0 fatigue points left. This means all movement rates, carrying capacity, non-device damage, and basic characteristics for the purposes of saving throws are halved, and in this case cannot Evade or Roll With attacks. He's just that terrifying.

This all feels right to me: as many as 9 times an adventure the Face can leap out and terrify people, getting a free attack, functionally a free evasion per turn, and playing hob with the action economy...for 45 seconds. After that he could be in real trouble if people who his *Emotion Control* didn't hit are still standing. The use of Fatigued as a condition here has some precedent, as anyone who is Mind Cotrolled fights as if they are Fatigued as fighting against the control slows them down.

*But how do you play it?*

Tony Trent's singular power really lends itself to solo work, as all the imagery of his altered initiative interval gets fuzzy when he has allies. Also, since the radius effect of *Emotion Control* gives a chance of hitting his allies... Still, the image of him lurking in a corner in his blue tux, hat down to shadow his face, engaging in conversation with the other heroes until he slips out and reappears at the fight is not without some charms.



*The regrettable world.*

As with Lady Satan in DotL 8, The Face is one of the Eye's wartime agents. Given that the war there lasted longer than in our world, the Face would have stayed behind the mask for the full 15 years of the war – including jumping between the Atlantic and Pacific theaters – before 'retiring' as a crusading radio newsman the 20 years to 1975. A less strenuous job that monster hunting, Tony Trent is a mere 10<sup>th</sup> level vs. Lady Satan's 15<sup>th</sup>, but still very well positioned to be a contact for the Eye and the current

Regrettables. I have to imagine that Tony, less mystically savvy than the Eye's other wartime agents, finds the Eye's temporal shenanigans a trifle disturbing. I also wonder if Babs stayed with him once he stopped punching people as often.

*Regretting what I said to you...*

Lisa Padol finds my using the questionable scale of Bozo vs. Hugh in the 1940's artwork a bit brain melting. You are absolutely correct! It's the game mechanic equivalent of comics where the heroes break the panel walls to interact with themselves in prior panels, lovingly making fun of the form. In comparison, Space Monks of Cosmic Harmony make so much more sense.

Myles commented on Grant Morrison's aborted update of Bozo as Gonzo the Iron Bastard; I am grateful that didn't come to pass as that sounds horrible.

Joshua Kronengold questions the propulsive power of Bozo's beanie: the idea that Physics could ever have



applied to Bozo is, on the painted on smiley face of it, absurd! 😊

Nextish:  
we get  
weird  
again!  
Strap in,  
and cackle.

## Villains and Vigilantes 1.0 PCs

I've spent months making V&V 2.1 heroes using public domain heroes as templates, but on a snowy Presidents Day I decided to play around with V&V 1.0, with these results.

### Looking Back in Time

This is old hat, but it doesn't hurt to reiterate. In V&V 2.1, you roll 1d6+2 for your super-abilities and roll 1 weakness. You must drop 1 ability and can drop your weakness if you drop a 2<sup>nd</sup> ability. Weaknesses are never *mandatory* and given V&V's nature their hinderance is highly variable. Players also get to make up any origin they want and pick between the various ability tables as they roll.

These are all major changes from V&V 1.0, with its random origin types, each with a different number of powers on different power tables, and no weakness. Since this is my first 1.0 PC in 40 years, we will base it on me. Strength 8, Endurance 9, Intelligence 13, Dexterity 10, Charisma 12. That seems fair. My higher-than-average Int gives me +1 Hit Point, my lower-than-average Strength means -1 damage in direct combat. My higher-than-average Charisma gives a +/- 5% reactions. Characters have 1d6 HP per level, but all 1<sup>st</sup> level PCs start with 4 HP, modified by their basic characteristics, so 5.

I have to randomly roll 1d10 for my origin type<sup>11</sup>. I get a 4, for an origin of Homemade. "This character trained himself secretly and created any decides he has completely on his own. While one of the least powerful characters, Homemade characters command great respect if they reach the higher experience levels." Huh. I wonder if there are any rules for that last bit? (spoiler: no) OK, so somehow I trained myself to be a super-hero. Sounds legit.

Homemade heroes have 1d4 abilities (not as many as some origins, but more than others) from List B, which is a curated 20 abilities for this origin type. My rolls are

14: Armor. The list notes that there is a 95% chance this is a device and a 5% chance that I somehow trained myself into organic armor. I roll a 78, and devices come with a 10% chance that it has 1d4 additional special abilities built in. 07! I have 3 special abilities "which are determined as for Animal/Plant Powers as explained above." OK. And that is? "The player may choose the specific type of animal or plant whose abilities he wishes to have... The Gamemaster must decide what kind of powers each will be and their effects." Huh. Now, clearly, I am not picking an animal type for my armor, but does that mean I get no say in what the armor does, or I pick a rough concept for the armor and the GM defines it?

<sup>11</sup> Note that if you roll 9 you are a nonpowered adventurer with a lifetime of training, and a 10 means you're extraterrestrial. Since your first PCs is supposed to be based on you, if I were to roll these I would need to reroll with a d8. Have you had a lifetime of training? Are you an extraterrestrial? I DIDN'T THINK SO, so try again.

<sup>12</sup> which is ye olde English for the day after tomorrow

1. Mind Power: "The player may choose one psychic power, increased intellectual ability, or etc. Examples include telepath, photographic memory, hypnotism, meditation, etc. The Gamemaster must determine all factors concerning the ability chosen." Well, that's a little clearer than the Armor to Animal/Plant powers connection. Let me, um, meditate here.

13. Heightened Constitution: +2d10 to my constitution. And the dice give me... +3 <Sad Trombone>

Now, is where things get weird. Given how loose the 1.0 rules are I totally get the Mind Power "player gives idea, GM refines rules" but am less thrilled with the Animal/Plant powers "player picks animal and GM picks powers and refines rules" for Armor as it takes away a lot of my creative input. But the next stage of character creation takes the cake: Trimming. "After finding the character's super powers he must be 'trimmed' to remove any abilities which would not logically exist with this other powers... If the character came up with three or more powers, then the Gamemaster decides which of them does not belong and removes that power from the character's list of powers. If only two powers were rolled, the player may decide which he wants to drop, while if only one power was gained it will, obviously, remain and cannot be 'trimmed'." This is a big old WTF?! The GM decides which ability I have to drop? WHY?!

In any event, rules being rules, I need to be strategic. A +3 on my Constitution is clearly the one I want to go, but it would be easy for the GM to say that either the rigor of mastering my Mind Power or the effort put into making my armor would be more logical than Mind Power & Armor going together. Fortunately, I get to define my Mind Power before trimming! Time to borrow from Josh's secondary PC in my *Legion of Super-Heroes* game (which was borrowed from a PC in my high school campaign, which was borrowed from the Justice League villain T.O. Morrow): Precognitive Invention! That's right I, an English major working in Human Resources whose highest technical achievement is building sets for the school play, have trained my mind to see the technology of future and replicated it to make my armor. Apparently, I really expanded my garage woodworking. But now these two powers clearly fit together more than either with Heightened Constitution; we will say the GM approves.

OK, this is a workable concept, codename **Overmorrow**<sup>12</sup>. As a player I no longer have any say in what my abilities do. The GM could be as generous or parsimonious or silly as they wish, taking as much or as little of my input as desired. I would love to see a Gernsbackian silver age DC retrotech vibe, maybe a little Atomic Knight<sup>13</sup> meets Adam Strange.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Atomic Knight is worth a google for his pre-Crisis version, because any comic with post-apocalyptic knights riding giant Dalmatians is just plain fun.

<sup>14</sup> Adam Strange is a classic DC character, an American explorer snagged by an alien transport beam to the world of Rann, but he can only stay for a few days before the 'zeta beam' wears off and he's whisked back to Earth until he can find the next zeta beam site.

## Putting on my Gamemaster Hat

The player handed me this and I admitted that yeah, the Mind Power of Precognitive Invention and the device-based armor with equipment made the most sense and trimmed the Heightened Constitution. I'm not sure the player realized just how little use Armor was in 1.0. See, it's a defense type as opposed to 2.1's ablative damage absorption, and for those of you familiar with 2.1's combat chart would think Armor should be a good defense type. But in 1.0, you compare your 5 best defense types against the attack type, add the 0-20 scores for each of them, and that's the % chance to hit. If you don't have 5 defense types, the attacks base to hit is substituted. With Armor as his sole defense, Overmorrow reduces HTH's chance to his from 5 to 1... for one of those iterations. With no other defense types, the other 4 default to the base of 5, meaning it has a 21% rather than 25% accuracy. Woo 4% protection. It's sad really. Heightened Constitution would at least be a second defense type, boosting the reduction to... 7%. OK, maybe not worth it....

As GM I'm supposed to make sure that every hero has a combat worthy power; the armor is our best bet. Let's go as practical as possible: the armor increases his strength by 13 points to 21, giving him the strength of 5 men. I heard his request for retrotech, so he has a backpack mounted jetpack for flight, and a power cord attaches that to his futuristic pistol so they run from the same battery. This is a flight device and power weapon device, both at about 3/4 the regular strength (so 16" range and 1d16<sup>15</sup> damage for the power weapon, and 45 mph flight, and yes, 1.0 devices have fixed ranges and speeds). Very straightforward but, as the brits would say, ticks the boxes.

As for the Mind Power, as a GM I want it to be more than just invention; yes that makes sense to tie the PC together, but I also want to be able to feed the player clues and such. So Overmorrow's precognitive flashes a) act as the Gimmick power where everything has to be invented retrotech, giving him 3 more items now and treating his Intelligence as 10 pts higher for inventing new ones: that's a 69% chance taking 2 months per new item, with the schematics of the inventions coming to him in his trained directive dreaming. On nights when he is not working on something he can, at GM discretion, get precognitive flashes, which I am picturing as similar to Wesley Dodds *Sandman Mystery Theater* dreams, in that they are symbolic and inconclusive but helpful and direct Overmorrow to some crime to come.

Looking up Gimmick it looks I as Gamemaster have to decide what each starting Gimmicks does. *Sheesh*. At least the player decides what their later inventions are. (For the record, Gimmick only nets you your 1d10 initial items; the inventing rules say 'use the rules for Gimmick', which is why I boosted his effective Int by 10; I felt it needed some sort of bonus as a power.) Let's say the remaining three a force field gizmo, a double dose of the armor, and an electromagnetic radio scanner? Now his defenses almost work.

## Is V&V 2,1 an Improvement?

Damn Skippy it is! Let's see what this would look like in contemporary V&V. For starters I wouldn't be tethered to the origin type or its lower number of powers, but this didn't turn out too badly. Still, I'd be rolling 4 powers and 1 weakness.

My new 4<sup>th</sup> power, Magic/Psionics 27 = Ht. Intelligence B: +15. Doesn't suck. Also essentially replaces the mechanics of the Precognitive Invention, so we will say that the *cause* of my now 28 Int is my precognition. Improved Invention, yes, but also improved Fatigue, HP & Detections. The precog powers opened by my homemade meditation regimen offers many advantages! Quick, train in Research/Technology!

Weakness 37 = Phobia/Psychosis: Ok, I can see this, so I'm keeping it to keep 3 powers. Like the OG precog inventor Thomas Oscar Morrow, I can see the future and the future sucks; I am driven to stop it and have nightmares of the days to come when I am not doing so.

Devices 10 = Armor B: keeping the die rolls in order I would have a 78+30 = 108 Armor Defense Rating, which is great<sup>16</sup>, and the 3 bonus powers that I decide with GM Veto. Still, the Ht. Strength, Kinetic Jetpack, & Force Pistol are fine.

Magic/Psionics 57 = Psionics: this replaced Mind Power, and with my new power I don't need to make it Precog Invention. Still let's make it *Precognition*, but a broader based one. Not only can the GM feed me plot points in my dreams, but also I can add that +15 from my Ht. Int to other things. Outside of a fight I add +15 to my Charisma for reactions, as I can see the discussion ahead of time and know what arguments work (reactions now +5, not +1). When I concentrate, I can add +15% to my detections over and above my Ht. Int/precognition passively boosting them. In a fight I add +15 to my Agility for Initiative & Accuracy as I can see how the fight is going to go (starting initiative is 25, +4 to hit), and I have an extra +15 calculated Fatigue on any evasions or rolling with attacks; not a huge thing, but an edge (at the start of the fight I should roll with 6 points (68 fatigue divided by 10, round down) but can instead roll with 8.)

Skills 34 = Heightened Endurance A: +3. I mean, still sucks. Definitely dropping

Overmorrow in 2.1 is much cleaner than in 1.0. With the weakness driving his motivation he's much more Silver Age as well, showing how many ways Dee & Herman improved on their design. Armor works the way you think it should work as a reliable defense; Psionics gives a mess of small gifts that are versatile in play; the precognitive invention is much better integrated into the game mechanics. We end up with a very capable hero who, if a bit on the typical side as a flying, armor-wearing, energy blaster, stands out with his distinctive psionic power and motivation. I'd play him.

Goodnight, Speed Centaur, wherever you are.

<sup>15</sup> Have I bought d16s to even out the curve of 2d8? Of course! Is this insane? Of course! I therefore did it anyway.

<sup>16</sup> Every time I'm hit I roll vs my ADR. If the roll is lower, the damage reduces the ADR, otherwise I take it as normal.

# Cowman Baloney Face

## THE NEVERENDING SAGA #6

BOMBING THE STRAITS OF YOUR MIND, MAN

BY MATT STEVENS

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ALL ART BY ME THIS TIME



Jesus Tap-Dancing Christ, the world is f\*cked this month.

But it's OK, I'm more than happy to talk about something else.

### SHADOW OF THE MONSTERS (IGTHEME)

As I've noted before, I joined a younger D&D group in the 2000s. I watched them play video games -- a field I avoided most of my life -- and when they signed up for *World of Warcraft* I tagged along. WoW was an evil but well designed game, and you could see this in the boss fights. Most bosses had unique attacks, usually AoE (Area of Effect) spells that could wipe out the whole party if they weren't careful. They required careful coordination and practice to defeat.<sup>1</sup>

You couldn't adopt these strategies for standard TTRPGs, though. There won't be online tactical guides that tell PCs exactly where to stand and what to do in each fight. (Shouldn't be, anyway.) You won't get multiple attempts, either; death won't be the trivial annoyance it is in WoW, not even in D&D. If you don't beat the boss you die, and if you die the game ends.

So I prefer to draw on other sources for inspiration, such as *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005). If you're not familiar with that CRPG, put down this PDF and [watch some clips](#). (I'll wait.) It was a true masterpiece, visually and conceptually. What I liked about the Colossi was their mythical quality. They were buried beneath the earth, suggesting incalculable age, and most were (naturally) of incredible size. Players had to climb on their backs, find their weak spots, and attack them there, as they did with many monsters of myth and legend.

As I said in my "D&D replacement" (CMBF # 4), I'd like to give monsters unique weaknesses. Sadly, few examples from folklore would work well in gaming. Vulnerability to particular enemies ("no man can kill me" "I am no man!") wouldn't work unless particular PCs show up; vulnerability to certain weapons, like silver, would lead to "weapon caddies" and look like that fight between Big Ben and Miraclemann. ("He must have a weakness! Now is it vegetable, animal, mineral...?") The "weak spots" we see in games like *Shadow of the Colossus* may be the best route to follow.

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<sup>1</sup> They could also drive the players into incandescent rage. Check [the infamous "50 DKP MINUS!" video](#) for a raid leader losing his shit after a botched boss fight.

## THE FIRST ABILITY SCORES

Ability scores (as we know them) preceded D&D and may go all the way back to David Wesley's "Braunsteins" of the late 1960s. I don't know if Wesley's game had them, but Dave Arneson was a player, and when he set up a Napoleonic "Braunstein" of his own ("The Kingdom of Spain"), he *did* use several abilities: Looks, Brains, Sex, Guts, Health and "miscellaneous."

Later, Arneson was inspired to create a "fantasy Braunstein" which became the Blackmoor campaign. Every Blackmoor PC had two sets of stats: Weapon abilities and "personality traits." The latter were rolled on 2d6 at first, and included Brains, Looks, Credibility, Sex, Health, Strength, Courage, Horsemanship, Woodsmanship, Leadership, Flying, Seamanship, and (added last) Cunning. As you can see, some of them would return later, more often as "skills" than ability scores, just like the Weapon abilities. I have no idea how they were used.

Later these "personality traits" were reduced to 5, all rolled on 3d6: Brains, Looks, Health, Strength and Cunning. Surprisingly, this list was more or less unaltered in the first draft of *Dungeons and Dragons*, although "Looks" was changed to "Appearance." There was no Dexterity; that must have been added later, either before or after the final name changes, which gave us the six scores we know today.

The weird one, for me, is "Cunning," the prime requisite for Clerics. I can see why Clerics need some kind of "wisdom," depending on how it's defined, but "cunning"? Unless you're playing Medicis in the Vatican, I don't see why it's so important in spiritual matters.



*Sources are The Making of Original Dungeons & Dragons 1970-1977 (2015) by Wizards of the Coast and Blackmoor Foundations (2024) by The Fellowship of the Thing, Ltd.*

## COMMENTS ON E & A # 9

### Me

Damn it, *Pulp's* author was *Tony Goodstone*, not Todd Goldstone. Also -- and I'm sure people have already pointed this out -- *Land of the Rising Sun* was printed on 8.5 x 11" paper, while *Blades in the Dark* was on 6 x 9". So the fact that BitD has twice as many pages doesn't mean it had a higher word count.

**Brian Roggers**

Sorry for misspelling your name. Won't happen again!

Your daughter's archeological dig in Northern Maine: Cool! Is it an indigenous, Viking, or colonial site?

*Strength in V&V*: I'm surprised they didn't use a logarithmic system like *Champions* (or BRP, the DC RPG, *Masterwork*, D&D 3E, etc.). Without it you can't get strong enough to smash your opponent in the face with an aircraft carrier, something all True Superhero RPG Fans should aspire to.

*Charisma*: One reason I'm pedantic about Charisma is it's an issue in *Traveller*, where one of the government types is "Charismatic Dictator." Most players assume it means "rule by a popular dictator," but as I wrote in *SJG's Journal of the Traveller Aid Society*, it probably means a dictator who took power in a *coup d'etat* or revolution. I understand that this ship has sailed, though. Hell, with "Rizz," the now-standard conception of Charisma has entered Gen-Z slang.

**ChrysalusM & Falicity**

Welcome! Glad to see new, younger contributors.

Of course you are welcome to use my Favor mechanic! As I said, starting Favor is Charisma - 8 for most characters, but I subtract larger numbers for higher-status PCs. You can be a Prince or Princess, for example, but you'll have to pay for it in Favor points.

**Lisa Padul**

**Brian Mishaszek and Appearance**: "Appearance" stats have an interesting history.

- As noted above, Blackmoor had Looks and the first draft of D&D had Appearance instead of Charisma.
- Notoriously, Len Lakofka's article in *Dragon* # 2 replaced Charisma with "Beauty," but only for female characters. Thankfully this was too sexist even for 1975 and wasn't widely adopted.
- "Comeliness" was re-introduced in AD&D1 (with *Unearthed Arcana*) before being dropped for good.
- *Chivalry and Sorcery* had Personal Appearance and "Bardic Voice" attributes, while Charisma was an average of Appearance, Voice, Intelligence, Wisdom and Dexterity scores, plus bonuses for tall or strong characters.
- SPI's *Dragonquest* had a point-buy system for attributes, *except* for Personal Appearance, which was rolled randomly.
- The old *James Bond 007* RPG had a point-buy system, but weirdly, you only paid points for an *average* appearance. The logic was that average-looking spies stood out less, and were thus better spies, than ugly or good looking ones.

Appearance stats are a lot less common today. I think the obsession with appearance reflects 1970s/80s nerd culture, the old belief that "girls don't like us because we're ugly." Today we realize girls didn't approach us because *we were weird as hell*, and our appearance had little to do with it.

*Ping's DM dickery*: I want to emphasize that *Ping was a great DM* and I really enjoyed his games. I found some of his rulings ridiculous -- like **HEROES FEAST!!!** -- but they didn't anger or frustrate us, we just found them funny. (**HEROES FEAST!!!** became a meme in the group.)

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*Vehicle repair:* I'll note that 2FTs repair rules take up 3 paragraphs, or one half-page. First paragraph tells you how much it costs at a repair shop; the other two tell you what to do if a shop isn't available. In no case would you spend an hour of game time making repair rolls!

### **Lisa Franck**

*We Are but Worms: The One-Word RPG:* Alright, I try to be open-minded, but this is the sort of new-fangled product that gets my cranky, old man eyebrows twitching. Even for a dollar, that one-word better be pretty fucking mind-blowing. (I suspect the one word is "bullshit.")

### **Myles Corcorin**

*Our group beating the white dragon:* I agree about "I win!" spells in D&D, but in fairness Ping knew how to deal with them: He gave his high-level monsters absurdly high Magic Resistance scores, but also gave us Reduce Magic Resistance spells. That meant we had to survive the fight for a several rounds, get the MR down, and only *then* bring out the big spells. (The white dragon was a lower-level opponent and we beat its MR immediately.)

Ah, I loved *What's New with Phil and Dixie?* and I think it holds up well. I use one of their panels as my BlueSky avatar (a crab-like alien holding a sign saying "do not suspect I am not human"), and I remember many of their gags. One had two drunk heroes -- spaceman and barbarian -- staring at the reader.

Spaceman: "Mutants."

Barbarian: "Trolls."

Spaceman: "Mutants."

Barbarian: "Trolls."

Spaceman: "Mutants."

Barbarian: "Trolls."

Spaceman: "Maybe they're mutant trolls?"

Barbarian: "I can live with that."

Finally the bartender steps in: "You two are staring at the mirror again!!!!"

### **Patrick Ryley**

*D&D Rambling:* It's funny that you're unfamiliar with D&D 4E, because it responded to some of your issues. For example, it had a unified system for "spells" that worked for all classes, and incorporated many special class abilities into that framework.

*"If you are going to redefine the standard six stats from their D&D usage, why not rename them?"*

Well, I call this the African Borders problem. As most people know, the modern nations of Africa got their borders from the European colonial powers, who didn't know (or care) much about realities on the ground. So they're arbitrary, and divide up ethnic groups in all sorts of bad ways. After independence, they could have changed these borders, but decided not to. Why? Because they realized there was no perfect way to redraw the lines, and trying to do so would have led to endless bloodshed.

I feel the same way about central stats. OK, not the “bloodshed” part, but the fact that the choices will be arbitrary. Over 50 years of RPGs and we’ve seen endless synonyms of “strength,” “reflexes,” “brains” and “health.” None are perfect, and none of them ever will be. So why not stick to the original six? They work just as well.

“Someone with an 8 in any stat can’t have a 17 Strength?” Nope, or at least not without special circumstances, such as superhuman size. It’s purely a game balance thing. (*Two-Fisted Tales* had a “Weird” stat, which indicated the maximum difference between scores, but this time I went a different route.)

### **Roger BeeW**

“There is this ongoing narrative out there in social media space that GMing is very hard and unrewarding, and nobody wants to do it, and the people who do want to do it are bad at it.”

Huh. I can’t say that’s 100% wrong. Heck, the first critique of D&D that I ever heard was from my father, who played a single game with us as kids and reported that “it depends too much on the Dungeon Master.” He wasn’t wrong!

On the other hand...Some of us find it *very* rewarding, especially when it goes well. I don’t object to people playing GM-less games, but I think they have to acknowledge some of the downsides:

- They require *more* rules, not less. (Or at least higher “contact” rules.)
- There are fewer opportunities for secrecy and surprise.
- There will be less preparation in advance.
- The “story,” being more of a collective effort, may have less of an individual stamp to it.

How crippling will these “downsides” be? I don’t know.

### **Avram Greumer**

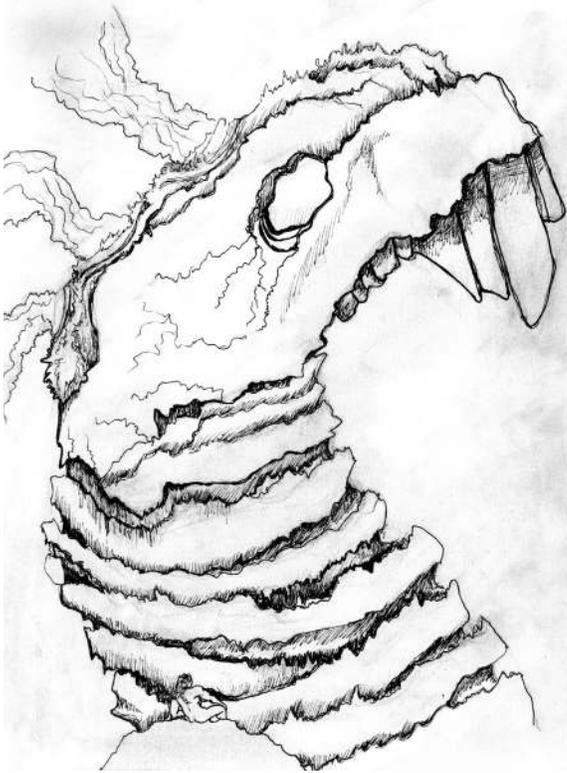
Happy 60th, although I understand the ambivalence, being only two years younger.

Ah, the Brooklyn Brainery! I taught an introductory stats class there in 2012. (Right by your house? Either you moved or they did, because it didn’t seem close at that time.) The Improv class sounds fun.

*Traveller*: Huh. You’re right that there are far fewer third-party career paths than new classes in D&D. (Official ones took a while. *Citizens of the Imperium* came out in 1979, two years after the game.) Maybe it was *Traveller*’s slickness, as you say, but I can think of other reasons. Career paths didn’t matter as much as D&D classes; the skills & benefits you got at the end weren’t unique to your career. A Brythian Death Ninja would have lots of cool new powers; a Diplomat, not so much. Also, so many *Traveller* players were **in** the military, it may have made sense to them that their characters would, too.

Your remarks on Antiqua, Fraktur and “Judenletern” were fascinating, timely and disturbing (although the way they switched positions in 1941 was weirdly funny). It’s only after I published last issue that I saw the parallel with “political” posting. I had many further thoughts on that subject, but they were so disorganized and disparate I don’t have much to say off the top of my head.

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### Joshua Knonengold

Yikes! On your health scare. Hope you're OK now.

I am curious about *Good Society*, especially as I worked on an Austen game of my own several years ago, and I'd like to see what they came up with. "The second is handled by giving PCs and NPCs ... separate goals that are at cross-purposes." That's certainly compatible with conventional RPGs: It was a feature of the original Braunstein, and you can't get more old-school than that!

While I can't define "Narrativist mechanics" precisely, I think I have a clear enough idea to say (for example) that *Fiasco* is on the Narrativist side and *Mutants and Masterminds* is not. Having read *Fiasco*, my reaction is that the semi-collective character generation is the best part, working out connections between them before the game properly begins. If that was something the "just normal people" game lacked, it would be easy enough to change.

### Brian Miziaszek

"It's been a long, grey-beige & miserable winter of deep snow, bitter cold, & persistent electrical gremlins discharging my car's battery (killing two)." I hope you mean it killed two *batteries*, because that sounds like your BMW is on a murder spree. (Age of menace indeed!) And yes, Mark Carney's speech was great, and was widely admired down here, too. So sorry the times have made it necessary.

### Jim Vassilikos

*Where do monsters spend their treasure?* It's hard to answer questions like these and still take standard D&D seriously. The thought of a Beholder floating into the local apothecary, a bag of coins slung around a stalk, buying all the Visine in the shop... It's a world that collapses into parody if you think of it for more than ten seconds.

"I didn't know we were doing a Dungeon Master as Dick IgTheme." No we did not! I use the IgThemes as vague starting points, particularly when I don't have much to say about the specific issue. I guess we could have a GM-Dickery IgTheme, but since many New York contributors have GM'd each other, I worry it could become a Festivus-style Airing of Grievances.

SEE YOU NEXT MONTH, FOLKS!

# De Ludis Elficis Fictis

by Pum (AKA Paul Holman), Harrow, ENGLAND.

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March 2026

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## Recently I have mostly been ...

... playing in Michael Cule's Wednesday evening GURPS campaign with the High Wycombe RPG group. We are all beginner mages who have been "recruited" into the Institute of Magic in the city of Aegis, the city now of two thousand gates. Our studies continue, whilst our extracurricular activities have included investigating a large slug-like demon living under the city's sewer system and apparently blocking the gods of the city, preventing them from performing their duties maintaining the city. Uncle previously explained this to me when my soul was stolen into a soul jar, which left me in a nowhere like somewhere where he could reach me — so now I'm a prophet of Uncle (or maybe just a messenger), but anyway, I'm on a mission from a god! Apparently there's a champion of The Daughter that I need to inform about all this, so that they can fix it.

Boardgame of the moment is Iki<sup>1</sup>, which I have now played 3 times recently. It must be a pretty good game, as I'm still enjoying it, even though I don't seem to be that good at it.



The theme is that the players are Japanese merchants wandering around a main street in Edo, doing business with the shops and craftsmen there, in a kind of rondelly, worker movement/placement way. The shops are at fixed positions on the board and provide their printed actions when you visit them.

The craftsmen are cards you can recruit at the start of your turn, and set up in any one of the two vacant backrooms that each shop has. So when a merchant visits a shop they can also make use of the services of one of the craftsmen that may be there, providing an advancement bonus to the craftsmen if it belongs to another player. There is also a neat sort of auction mechanic where each player first picks a distance their merchant will move along the main street, from 1 to 4 spaces, and no player can pick a distance already taken by someone else. Then moves are executed in order from least to most. So you can move a small distance and go first, having first pick of the available craftsmen, or move further, but later, when some of the craftsmen have already been recruited.

It has one big random mechanic that initially looks as if it could swing the game enormously, but experience is starting to show that there are sensible ways to at least somewhat mitigate this. The swifty random mechanic is that three times during the game a fire breaks out in a random location, and may remove some of your craftsmen there if you are unable to put it out. To begin with it felt like those unlucky enough to be affected by the fires were randomly handicapped, but we are starting to see tactics and strategies to avoid this.

Overall, a good game IMHO. First time we played it took quite a long time to go through all the rules, I think mostly because they are very thorough. Once you're familiar with the rules the game moves along fairly briskly and is playable in an evening, even with the maximum of 4 players.

## IgThots on City Building

At the time of writing my previous contribution, I didn't think I had much to say about city building, but after reading other people's comments, in particular those of Patrick Riley and Patrick Zock, they triggered some thoughts or comments to form in my head.

Perhaps the most obvious thing one thinks of when setting about building a fantasy city, or indeed any other adventure game setting, is a map (and I do like a nice map!) However, in my experience, and reflected by several other's comments, maps are not of much importance for city building. I've dabbled with mapping out the details of the major population centres of my fantasy campaign world, mostly because I just thought it is something I ought to do,

<sup>1</sup> <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/177478>

but I never got very far, and never found it really needed in game.

However, what I do plan out in advance is the concept of the city: how large is the population? What are the main activities in this place? Is it the capital of somewhere? Is it a major trade centre? Who rules the place and how do the politics work? What is the crime level like? Which factions of the world have a significant power-base here? Which factions of the world have a particular interest in this place and why? Who are the big and medium movers and shakers here? (Small movers and shakers, if any, will occur on an improvised, ad hoc basis.) Where is the city geographically in the world? Is it a landlocked city, or does it have a port? If so then is it on the coast, or on a river? Is the city known for anything interesting in particular?

I have quite a lot of history planned out at a high and medium level of detail for my fantasy campaign world, which very much informs the details of specific places and plot lines that may come up. So, for cities I also consider what the history of that region is and how the city fits into the arc of history so far.

Having said all that, all the above could kind of be regarded as a map of sorts, but a descriptive map of words, rather than a diagrammatic one of geography.

When it does come to proper conventional maps of cities, the largest I've actually used are the very occasional district map, if required for a specific scenario or situation. Other than that, the occasional ad hoc battle map as required when things get tactical. For everything else city-wise, theatre of the mind has thus far been sufficient.

## Night's Hacked Agents

I've now played a couple of sessions of my hack of Night's Black Agents and they seemed to go well. I still have a lot of the rules to go through and hack, but progress so far is promising. As the vast majority of my hack is to treat all abilities except Cover, Network, Preparedness, Health and Stability as fixed dice bonuses, my hacks mostly involve rewriting point spend rules to other mechanics, mostly dice roll modifiers.

Whilst rewriting the rules, I took the opportunity to also remove any mention of vampires and the supernatural from the character creation rules that I provided to the players. This meant that they were really surprised when they stumbled across their first supernatural vampire minion.

Things players say on finding out that vampires are a thing: "Oh, it's like Jason Bourne vs Dracula ... but we're more like Hot Fuzz vs What We Do In The Shadows."

## IgTheme: Monster Combat Tactics

*The best/worst/funniest monster combat tactics.*

I haven't got much to say on this. The only relevant thing I recall is the occasion at college when I was running D&D for a fairly high level group of PCs (10th to 16th level ish, IIRC.) With all their levels and magic items they were smashing their way easily through anything and everything they encountered, until they opened a door and saw on the other side a funny looking little critter with a pair of antennae and a funny propeller-like thing on the end of its long tail. "Aaaargh! Rust monster!!" they cried out, as they ran away like frightened little children. Despite all their prowess and advanced capabilities, I recall that they ended up defeating it by the crude manoeuvre of basically smashing the door down on top of the rust monster, and then jumping up and down on the door until it stopped moving.

## Comments

**#9 Matt Stevens:** RYCT Michael Cule re our knowledge of US politics, we kinda have to keep well abreast of it. As the only superpower in the world, a lot of what the US does has a significant effect on us in the UK, as well as much of the rest of the world. It's in our interests to pay attention.

As far as Starmer is concerned, I wouldn't say awful. He inherited a crappy state of affairs, and has been let down by several of his colleagues. Also, he is far from the most charismatic person, which should not be a requirement of our national leader, but has been made so by the news media.

**#9 Elf:** I could probably have a crack at your database, but I'm sorry I just don't have time. Something involving labels for each characteristic you want to assign, possibly several categories of labels — one for the bundle it is in, one for genre (you can select more than one), etc. A lightweight database system like SQLite may very well suffice, with a frontend crafted in Python or some similarly simple programming language. However, I am a little out of touch with the industry since I retired from IT over 4 years ago now.

**#9 Myles Corcoran:** sorry to hear you've been unwell — I hope you feel better soon, if not already.

More mousey adventure goodness please! 😊

====### Everyone else, RAEBNC ###====

# Twisting the Rope #10

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## That Day in Paris When We Wandered Through the Rain

Primroses are blooming in the back garden. The daylight lasts long enough now that I'm not walking home from work in the dark. Songbirds are nosing around the front garden waiting for us to put out bird feeders. Spring has arrived.

We finally got a replacement for our central heating boiler today (16th March). I'm dreading our next electricity bill after weeks of electrically powered spot heating.

In a one-two blow for home heating our solar thermal system is also acting up, even though it was serviced in early February. We had a brief power outage and it's been blinking red since.

The current madness in the chip manufacturing sector and the massive appetite of the AI behemoths gobbling up the future production of chips and memory has our little IT department worried about the hardware refresh that will be needed in about 18 months time. I am crossing my fingers and hoping for the AI bubble to burst, knowing that will be painful for so many people, but better I feel in the long term both environmentally and in terms of human flourishing.

## Mutterings

The University staff gaming club continues to thrive, with our contribution to the Digital Disconnect day on campus netting another four members for the group. One of the newcomers is already a confirmed gamer, and brought his copy of *The Quacks of Quedlinburg* to the session, which I thought boded well for the new addition to the group.

The *Mausritter* game I'm running has attracted more players than I can comfortably GM, which is a nice problem to have. My chance to step out of the GMing role came with the first session of *Vaesens*, the Free League Nordic folk horror game. The GM is on top of his material and the group is lively and engaged. We had lots of laughs and a few moments of proper tension, although the greatest threat to life and limb was a rotten stair-board and a rusty nail, which through a truly crappy series of rolls nearly killed one of the PCs.

*Vaesens*'s mechanics<sup>1</sup> are similar to *Blades in the Dark* and the *Kriegsmesser* game too. Roll a pool of d6s and get at least one '6'. Unlike *BitD* and *Kriegsmesser* '4's and '5's don't grant a messy or partial success. This results in a fairly high failure rate even with large pools,

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<sup>1</sup> I understand this is common to many of the Free League games derived from the original *Mutant Year Zero* system.

with a 23% miss chance even with 8d6. I wonder if this doesn't introduce an unintended comedic element, with repeated failures definitely feeding the PC-eating rotten stairs.

The ameliorating mechanic is to allow a PC to 'push' a roll, and re-roll after a failure, but this risks acquiring a condition (fatigue, a wound, mental stress, and the like), which only make future rolls less likely to succeed. I do wonder if the dreaded death spiral is unavoidable in such a system. It is dark tales and horror though, so perhaps that is warranted by the genre and setting.

I've also run three sessions of *Mausritter* for the staff tabletop group at work, and I'm surprised at how much gaming we get done in the time slot, particularly compared to my other group. Admittedly the sessions with the work group usually run 3–4 hours, while the regular group barely hits two hours in the window we've got. Also, as we have been playing together since 1999 we've grown comfortable with digressions and general chat.

So I am gratified to find I can still run a 3–4 hour session at a good clip and get through a good amount of material in that time. I was worried that I'd fallen into a rut.

## A *Mausritter* Campaign

This is the continuing write-up of the *Mausritter* campaign 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:

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

*CanCan, an ex-dancer and tin miner, played by Marie.*

*Gwedolene, an ale-brewer, sometimes accompanied by Victor, 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.*

*When they got to the top of the stairs and into their shared room CanCan pointed at the sleeping Odette. She lay on her cot with the ring-filled purse clutched in her paws<sup>2</sup>. "She won't have me take it," CanCan muttered. "And believe me I've tried."*

In the morning, Odette was still holding the ring. "What next?" asked one of the mice. "I suppose murdering each other for a bit of jewelry," replied Ambrose. Odette reassured everyone that she just felt the ring warranted further study and she thought herself the best placed to carry that out. No one was convinced, but they didn't press the issue.

One of the wharf guards showed up at the Trout's Tale tavern to tell the group that he had spotted Fergus, the mouse suspected of the murder of Pepper Chit, creeping around River Nest during the night. The guard was unable to apprehend the suspect mouse, who

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<sup>2</sup> "Ah, there's the plot," said Pete. "Let's go the other way"

fled when detected. The only detail that the guard was able to supply was the direction Fergus fled: down river towards the Bandits' Log.

The Bandits' Log was the local name for a fallen tree that spanned the river a short distance from River Nest. It was known as a hideout for miscreant mice and vagabonds. The guard guessed that Fergus could hole up there and remain close enough to River Nest to sneak in at night.

"The Bandits' Log it is then," agreed the company. They prepared for a short journey and informed Wendy Foxtail, the mayor of River Nest, of their intentions, before setting out to pick their way along the river bank towards the fallen tree.

After about an hour the log came in sight downstream. Dark, sodden wood reached across the water in an imposing natural bridge. Atop one of the remaining branches that stuck out of the trunk on the nearside bank sat 4 crows. The corvids watched the approaching mice with interest.

"Do crows eat mice?" asked one of the group. "Sometimes," croaked the largest crow.

"Do crows have sensitive hearing?" asked another. "What do you think?" replied the rest.

There followed a brief exchange in forest-pidgin with the birds. Yes, they had seen another mouse hiding about in the log. And, yes, they were quite hungry. Sky and Gwen quickly merged their rations into something resembling a food offering and laid it on the bank, before the mice retreated to a safe distance.

The crows fell on the grub with delight. Between beakfuls, the largest crow called, "watch out for the wriggler!"

Skirting inland from the bank the mice avoided the feeding crows and arrived at the crown of the tree where it stuck in a tangled mess of branches, mud and river debris to the bank. They picked their way through this maze and found themselves standing on the top of the trunk, gazing across the river. Sky eyed the wet, slick surface of the fallen tree. "Watch your step. It would be all too easy to lose your footing and get swept away in the river."

CanCan spotted a couple of holes in the upper side of the log. "Hidey-holes ahead," she cried. "I haven't been down a mine in ages. I suppose this will have to do." With that she clambered down into the nearest hole.

She popped up moments later. "Just a little, musty room. Stinks of fish."

The others persuaded her to check the next hole with backup, and they examined a second chamber, chewed out of the tree. This one was larger, cleaner and obviously well-used, with two grass sleeping mats and a small earthenware jug with clean water.

The third hole was the charm. A twisting passage snaked through the tree into the heartwood. Ambrose lit his electric torch and led the group, shadows leaping on the walls of the tunnel as they moved forward. A voice called out, "State yer business!"

After a brief but tense exchange, the mice assured the residents they were only looking for a fugitive mouse called Fergus. Ham and Sham, vagabond fisher-mice, reluctantly accepted this explanation. Sham was fascinated by Ambrose's lamp, and the two fell to discussing the magical power of electricity. The two parties exchanged cups of beer, which Gwen noted reflected very favourably on her own brew and not so much on the fishers' ale.

There was a moment of terror when Speedy scuttled out from behind one of the sleeping pallets, all legs and mandibles. Luckily Ham was able to introduce his centipede pet before the visiting mice could attack it. "He's a sweet sort of a fella, once you get to know him," reassured Ham.

Nearer the access tunnel, CanCan and Odette were less sure and kept their distance from the many-legged creature. This proved fortuitous, as they were close enough to the exit to hear the sound of feet on the top of the log above them.

The two mice ran back up the passageway to the surface in time to see a mouse, presumably Fergus, run along a branch and jump off into the water below. Odette gave chase, confident of her time dam building that she was a strong swimmer. She executed a beautiful dive into the water right next to the struggling Fergus and grabbed him by the tail.

Above, CanCan readied a rope into a lasso, and threw it to Odette. Fergus was not cooperative, unfortunately, and struggled mightily. It was only when Ambrose and Gwen joined CanCan on the rope, with a net Ambrose borrowed from Sham, that they pinned Fergus and were able to hoist him and Odette from the river.

With the suspect trussed, and the fisher-mice profusely thanked, the group returned to River Nest on foot. They quickly spirited Fergus onto Horace's flat boat and told him to make haste up river, back to Oak Home. They did not want to argue custody of Fergus with Wendy Foxtail.

Once safely home, the mice brought Fergus to Moira, their mayor, for questioning. She was pleased with the group's success, though sorrowful at the story of Pepper's untimely death. Sky and Gwen broke ranks and made sure to tell Moira of the ring and its part in the sorry affair. Moira suggested trying to destroy the ring, or at least lock it away from all mice, but Odette wasn't having any of it. "More study is needed," she insisted.

Sensing an alternative, Moira offered, "perhaps then you should visit Magnolia, the wizard in the south. There is no mouse I know who is more versed in enchantment and spell-craft."

"Well then," the mice chorused. "We're off to see the wizard!"

## Comments on E&A #9

**General comments:** Many thanks to Baran Yenileyen for the cover art. Lovely work!

**Brian Rogers:** I loved your description of the Paladin in the Knave game gaining a crab-spider hench-pet. It had a proper old school “take what the dice give you and run with it” vibe. The later medusa summoning and subsequent antics trying to escape the problem that created were excellent (*chef's kiss*)!

Lady Satan is highly regrettable, yes indeed. 30 years fighting Nazis, monsters, and Nazi-monsters would leave a body “too old for this shit” I’d say, but the image of her missing an arm from feeding a grenade to a monster is too sweet to pass up.

**RYCT me re *Everway 2e*:** Yep, I thought it was ridiculously long too. I’m too old for such back-breaking books, particularly when I’d almost certainly run a game pared-down to the basics and ignore most of the setting details.

**RYCT me re write-ups:** Mine are all after the fact write-ups from my notes and (failing) memory. Think of them more as a barstool re-telling of the events than a strict record.

**Re *Villains & Vigilantes* complexity:** I played a lot of BRP-derived games as a teen, but I’ve lost the system mastery to absorb and play the modern *RuneQuest*. I suspect I’d have an easier time playing the original 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.

**RYCT Dylan Capel re page counts and comments:** For me, the APA is already past the size I can comfortably write completely in a month, so I have to skim and prioritise. I don’t have much to say about dungeon crawls and *D&D*-adjacent material that hasn’t been said before, for example, so I’m usually light on relevant comments for that stuff.

**John Redden:** Good luck with any subsequent heart surgery.

The Morgan’s Tarot has lovely art. The odd card names and imagery remind me of a long-ago series of alternative *Everway* decks that I and others<sup>3</sup> contributed to A&E in the misty past. If I may dredge up some old material, I’ll share *The Invisibles* fortune deck idea I had over 17 years ago below.

**Clark B. Timmins:** I particularly liked the *Ashbinder Charm* magic item. Not flashy, not something an adventurer would carry, but something beneficial to people suffering a loss. Nice worldbuilding by example.

**Lisa Padol:** **RYCT Erica Frank re altered Tarot decks:** I never think of divination and am more comfortable using a deck as oracle in RPG context. Even then I’m happier fiddling with *Everway*’s Fortune Deck format rather than the classic Tarot symbolism.

Thanks for the positive comments on the *Kriegsmesser* write-up. I really enjoyed that campaign, and I think the characters were a large part of that.

I’m aware of the arachnid ticks. They give me the heebie-jeebies.

Re the gashapon containers for varieties of dice: Lovely idea, and I grinned at the *Amber Diceless* one.

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<sup>3</sup> I believe Matthijs Holter and Avram Grumer were two of the other contributors.

**Matt Stevens:** re “Flaggerbastard”: My sessions are full of jokes, and have been for years. There was just something about Phil’s delivery of the word in the context that broke us. I guess being 15 years old didn’t make it any easier to get back in character.

**Erica Frank:** Re itch.io bundles: I have no idea what I’ve purchased from itch.io in the various bundles I’ve bought. It’s a chaotic mess, and the folks who run itch.io seem to like it that way as I’ve never heard of any serious attempt to provide a tool to organise one’s collection. I don’t have the energy or pig-headedness to tackle the problem either, so I can’t be too disapproving.

**Re Glitch:** I have *The Art of Glitch* book in digital form but it doesn’t include a high resolution map either. I never realised that Tiny Speck went on to become Slack Technologies.

**Pum:** Re *Irish Gauge*: I enjoyed it, and think it has replayability. I don’t have a desire to own a copy though, so it falls into the category of I’d play that again but there are so many other games to play I don’t need to seek it out.

**Re Tudor Talents:** That was my longest single campaign of my gaming career I think at about 4 ½ years total, and I remember it fondly. I don’t think I ever finished the write-ups in *A&E*, and at this remove I doubt I even know where my notes for the campaign are or if I’d be able to decipher them.

Don’t let Pelgrane Press see your old-schoolification of *Night’s Black Agents*, or the Men in Black will visit and explain at great length where you are doctrinally insufficient.

**Patrick Riley:** Re unanswered questions in *Mausritter*: Often, the elements I introduce on the fly are discarded or ignored as the players move forward to the next shiny thing that interests them. I am a very improv-heavy GM, and sometimes I forget to reincorporate all the stuff I throw at the PCs to see what sticks. For Horace, I think he was also under the thrall of the ring and wanted it for himself. He lacked the violent urge that Fergus obviously had, and didn’t act on his desire but did try to keep his involvement a secret.

**Roger BW:** I’m glad you described the “low mass” sphere of electron-degenerate matter as impossible under current theories (and those theories are 24<sup>th</sup> Century physics!). The lowest mass observed neutron star is about 1.17  $M_{\odot}$  and I suspect electron pressure at anything lower than that would overcome the inward gravitational force and pop the neutron star. Those pesky elder races and their gravity manipulation!

Your first picture from the Strand Magazine looks like a game of musical chairs that’s about to get heated.

**Re heirs in *Pendragon*:** Stats were never Greg Stafford’s strong point. I remember a cartoon<sup>4</sup> in “Murphy’s Rules” that read: “Cutting Mistakes: In a 30-minute RUNEQUEST battle (Chaosium) involving 6,000 armored, experienced warriors using Great Axes, more than 150 men will decapitate themselves and another 600 will chop off their own arms or legs. (John Rees)” The accompanying cartoon by Ben Sargeant showed a recently beheaded Viking warrior saying “Oh damn” as he trips over himself.

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<sup>4</sup> Left out for copyright reasons.

The small amount of *Mythic Bastionland* I've played scratched the *Pendragon* itch for me, without the manorial management part, which I agree is tonally out of keeping with the Mallorian inspiration.

RYCT me: The scale rules in *Mausritter* limit themselves to mouse-sized and warband-sized, a scale at which you need at least a band of ten mice to even make a dent in the opponent.

*Nettle and Bone* is another corker, and very much starts off in Kingfisher's horror style.

**Michael Cule:** RYCT Roger BW re the Doctor Who episode where the moon was an egg: Damn, I'd just about managed to suppress that memory.

Re Beaver/Bavière: There's many a Lusty Knight happy to have a beaver before him before going into battle <sup>5</sup>

Re waking up amnesiac: The TV show *Dark Matter* (2015) makes use of the trope quite effectively too.

**Mark A. Wilson:** *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen* is a lovely piece of design and writing. Old pal and one-time A&Eer James Wallis is the author. I played a session of the game set in the world of the Arabian Nights, which involved a palm-date fruit paste used as a rectal salve that attracted amorous camels. Perhaps the less said the better.

Good luck juggling the combined workloads.

**Avram Grumer:** Happy solar orbit increment memorial.

**Dylan Capel:** *Roll For Shoes*<sup>6</sup> is a lovely piece of discover-in-play design that suits my sensibilities. There was much discussion in A&E back when I was contributing about design-at-start and discover-in-play character building. Both have their place, obviously, but I do tend to bounce off PCs with 20-page backstories.

**Joshua Kronengold:** I hope the medical issues were short-lived and easily resolved. Sam has been suffering from anemia due to GAVE (gastric antral vascular ectasia), which involves gastric bleeding and it's a proper pain in the arse (as well as the abdomen).

Re the Trump card trap in *Amber Diceless*: Yes, Psyche is more magical/mental strength than intelligence, but the players established Gauss developed his top rank Psyche through diligent scholarship and big brain stuff. The trap was later revealed but after roughly 35 years I have no idea who was behind it.

Re *Everway* magic in the 2nd Edition: I admit, shamefaced, that I haven't really given the new edition a proper read. The sheer size and weight of the books threaten my nose and glasses should I nod off while reading in bed.

Re *vi* and learning how to quit the program: Famously this oddity led to the joke that a good source of random passwords was to give a 1st year (freshmen) CompSci or Mathematics class an open *vi* session and to record their keystrokes as they attempted to quit the program.

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<sup>5</sup> I'll get me coat.

<sup>6</sup> Created by Ben Wray and available here: <https://rollforshoes.com/>

**Brian Misiaszek:** Your map-making works excellently, kludgiest method or not. It does sound time consuming. How long does it take you from start to finish for one of the floorplans, for example?

**Jim Vassilakos and Timothy Collinson:** (Jim) RYCT to Mark Wilson re the king plotting a planned tax on adventurers: The cunning devil! Has the king no shame? Maybe not, but he did manage to collect enough for a new ballroom wing of the palace.

(Tim) Re reMarkable PaperPro: A couple of my work colleagues swear by their reMarkable devices. How good is the handwriting recognition and conversion to text? The company's customer service does sound exemplary.

## Counting Back to None

Back when Grant Morrison's comic *The Invisibles* was coming out regularly I thought about creating an *Everway* Fortune Deck for the setting.

For the most part I kept the four-element approach of *Everway* but added Spirit as a fifth element to be in keeping with the five elemental correspondences of the members of an *Invisibles* cell.

Taking five elements and an inner and outer expression of each, sort of like yin/yang or active/passive, gives us 10 cards per suit. I chose the following suits: The Divinities, The Court, The Conflict and The World. Here are some card suggestions:

*The Mirror (Divinity, Spirit, Outer) - knowing oneself*

*Buddha (Divinity, Spirit, Inner) - ego negation*

*John Lennon (Divinity, Water, Inner) - Self Expression*

*Nurturing Mother (Divinity, Earth, Outer) - Fertility*

*Voodoo Gods (Divinity, Earth, Inner) - Syncretism, synergy*

*The Robber (Divinity, Fire, Outer) - Theft, violence, force for greed*

*Aztec Gods (Divinity, Fire, Inner) - blood, old ways*

*Vengeful Father (Divinity, Air, Outer) - Law, obedience*

*The New Age (Divinity, Air, Outer) - Adaptability, gullibility*

*The Priestess (Court, Spirit, Outer) - ??*

*The Fool (Court, Spirit, Inner) - Dane, innocence*

*The Queen (Court, Water, Outer) - Lord Fanny, intuition*

*The Soldier (Court, Fire, Outer) - Strength for the cause, or for harm*

*The King (Court, Air, Outer) - Intellect for the common weal*

*The Magus (Court, Air, Inner) - Intellect for oneself*

*The Hand of Glory (Conflict, Spirit, Outer) - ??*

*The Time Suit (Conflict, Spirit, Inner) -*

*The Invisible College (Conflict, Water, Inner) - ??*

*Royal Monsters (Conflict, Earth, Outer) - Breeding for success, weakness in the bloodline*

*Barbelith (Conflict, Earth, Inner) - ??*

*Liquid Information (Conflict, Air, Inner) - revelation, lies*

*Key 17 (Conflict, Air, Outer) - Language reversed, failure of communication*

*Et In Arcadia Ego (World, Spirit, Inner) - contemplation*

*The Ganges (World, Water, Inner) - The birth canal and the Styx*

*Glossolalia (World, Air, Inner) - static, confusion*

Clearly that's mostly just the junk off the top of my head, but I think you can see that the Fortune Deck could be adapted to the Invisibles with a little work.

The Water element of *Everway* has some overlap with the impression I have of the Spirit element from the Invisibles setting. I need a clearer distinction between the realms of each element. Say, Earth: Practical matters, money, organization, supplies as well as endurance, fortitude and resilience. Air: Leadership, decision-making, control, language. Water: Freedom, "Splashing around", non-verbal sensitivity. Fire: Action, combat, vitality, physical energy. Spirit: Sensitivity, magic, prediction?

Other potential cards that occur to me include "Cyphermen", "Leather", "the Head of John the Baptist", "One Man Fall", "Sex Magic", "Movie Semiotics", "Dulce Facility", "The Harlequinade", "Tits out on the Sweeney", "Pissing off the Empire State Building".

Needs work, obviously, but John Redden's image of the Morgan Tarot lastish got this to bubble up from my subconscious again after more than 17 years.

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John Redden



**Reddened Stars** number 9  
(E ka hoku o ula`ula`ole)

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USPS:  
88-2636 Mamalahoa Hwy Captain Cook  
HI 96704-8809

310.418.1550 mobile

808.328.2328 land line

## **Mix Natter And Anti-Natter**

### **Regardance**

We continued watching the second season of Foundation. Sometimes its confusing and sometimes amusing.

I am continuing to read Children of Ruin, the second book by Tscaikovsky. I am over half way through it.

We saw a live performance of Spamalot at the Aloha Theater in Kainaliu. It was well done. Ever who did the props did an outstanding job.

### **Stressful but Necessary**

It is likely I will have heart surgery this month. I had a CT scan yesterday at Muanalua Hospital in Oahu. After that I met with the surgeon that will perform the surgery. He told I was in good shape to complete it. And I would be to drive a vehicle after two days. Also I would have no problem flying to California. That's important to me since I want to be at our Northern California mini-con at the beginning of June.

Stay tuned for results.

We were just walloped by a storm across Hawai`i. The Big Island got hit with some hurricane force winds at times. Streams and flows flooded a number of places. The USA mid-west and east coast isn't the only place clobbered.

## Ignorable Theme



How do I build a city? This one is unique. I drew it for my West Coast 2030 campaign I was running in 2006.

It's basically a collection of ships and boats in the Pacific Ocean. You can identify at least two battle ships and three aircraft carriers.

The purpose of the structures was assigned as the players asked for something. Where is the market? Where is the hospital? Who is in charge? Where are the weapons? And so forth.

The small boats are living quarters. Energy to drive the Faux Island comes from the ocean

## Sum Comments

**Brian Rogers**, I'm happy to read that your daughter in school enjoys her major and is active in the archaeology field.// I enjoyed WEG Starwars.// A nice breakdown of V&V.// Moon in Hawai`ian is Mahina.

**Pedro** and **Camila**, which pocket? Interesting.

**ChrysalisM**, Welcome. That's common sense for city building.

**Self**, I spaced out and bumped my zine number up one.

**Clark Timmins**, that is an excellent list of magic items. And each is nicely detailed. I like Solar Petal Offering.

**Lisa Padol**, are you looking to telecommute and/or travel to a job?// Re bot (i.e. AI screening), the one advantage of being 80 years old this year is I will

never search for employment again.// The player who let his cleric be killed was incredibly arrogant. He left the group when we started playing Traveller.// See *Stressful but Necessary* for an update on my medical situation.// Re maps, What happened to McSorley's ale house? (Which I've actually been to.)

**Matt Stevens**, re no politics. How about socioeconomic analysis?// I agree with analysis over polemic. It is very easy to become frustrated with politics in the USA now.// For star ship repair in Cosmos, it is easy. For the most part the star ships are self repairing. It is different when rebuilding is required.

**ELF**, no ICE in Minnesota. Fascinating. // Re database, I've always worked with Structured Query Language (SQL). There are non-SQL database managers. Check out MongoDB and Redis.// Septopolis, nice.

**Attronarch**, the adventures are consistent old school gaming. I like it when the characters are gathered talking before they go dungeon delving.

**Myles Corcoran**, you should have seen the winds and storm that just slammed Hawai`i. The worst one since 2004. That one generated tornadoes.

**Paul Holman**, re a trip to Venice. Excellent. The only place I've been to in Italy is Rome, for a little over a week.

**Patrick Riley**, re role playing, game structure, playing make believe and story telling. I would say its very different for a campaign and a one-off or one-two-off game. It's been a long time since I played in a campaign. I think the last campaign I played in was Traveller-GURPS in Northern Calif.// I hope Kublacon is better than Dundracon.// Joshua, who runs Traveller uses Mongoose for ideas.

**Gabriel Roark**, re air sharks. I know I mentioned this before. A TPK occurred when a duck cast a fireball at an air shark that was in a three dimensional *dungeon*. I then reset the scenario so they could try again.// Keep up he skating.

**Roger West**, I like that compact city definition.// Re AI. I don't see a bursting bubble. I keep seeing these vehicles with no driver or the driver acting as a monitor. A visit to the Jelly Belly factory last year I witnessed a number of AI production streams. My complaint with AI is that it should allow people to work less hours for the same pay as if they worked full time. That would require a shift in culture. It should allow employees more time to write, play music, engage in artistic endeavors, sports, etc. As it stands now, AI is used to make the wealthy and powerful even more wealthy and powerful.// My set of IEEE magazines I receive each month have a number of definitions and variations of quantum computing. We will see what occurs.

**Michael Cule**, I've also been losing some weight. I am now below 200 lbs, or 90 kilos. It has nothing to do with drugs. It probably has to do with anxiety and not being as hungry.// Glorantha always gives me a bit of nostalgia. I used to love playing in that milieu years ago.

**Mark Wilson**, re E&A contributions. Don't worry. What ever feels comfortable.// Good luck on Search Engine Optimization.

**Avram Grumer**, I read Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance somewhere in my ancient history.// I appreciated the poem.// Celebrating Newton's birthday. I don't know how to practice alchemy. To me that's a fantasy thing.

**Jim Eckman**, I think of Trump as dictator, not emperor. He even said when he was elected a second time, he even said "I'm going to be a dictator for a day". Of course to him a day is four plus years. // Democracy is already seriously damaged in the USA. I would use the phrase neo-proletariat instead of serf.

**Dylan Capel**, there is nothing wrong with skim reading. I call it speed reading.

**Patrick Zoch**, The Saltmarsh writeup is a beauty. A master campaign file is an interesting concept.

**Joshua Kronengold**, ick. More medical stuff.// After letting the cleric getting killed, the rest of the dwarfs just went on fighting. I'm glad that group stopped gaming long ago.

**Brian Misiaszek**, I detailed read your zine. I continue to enjoy the mix of a campaign and historical based fiction.

**Vassilakos, Collinson** and **Rader**. I continue to enjoy the writeup of the social interaction on Jewell. Doggy Style? \*giggle\*.

## **Jargon Zen**

While staying at the temple the visiting monk asks the master, I want to fish for a golden fish tail. Do you approve?  
It's okay if you catch the golden tail of the fish, but can you eat it?

## **Humor**

What do you call a fly with no wings?

A walk.

# Notes on Elaria Construction Materials and Marks

Clark B. Timmins

## Age of Obsidian (founding to 600):

- Foundation stones are typically 24-48 inches in length and 12-24 inches in height and width. The exterior sides are left rough dressed or even partially irregular to aid in stability. Materials used are granite or fieldstone. All stones have mason's marks on interior surfaces. Exterior surfaces have occasional benchmarks. Some stones will have assembly marks or quarry marks.
- Ashlar blocks are typically 6-24 inches in length, 3-8 inches in width and 12-14 inches in height. Materials used are limestone or granite. Almost all stones have a mason's mark on an interior surface.
- Every structure will have a cornerstone inscription. Every cornerstone will have a small interior void that originally was filled with wine, oil, and grain and then sealed with masonry.
- Ceilings/roofs typically are timber with lead sheeting.

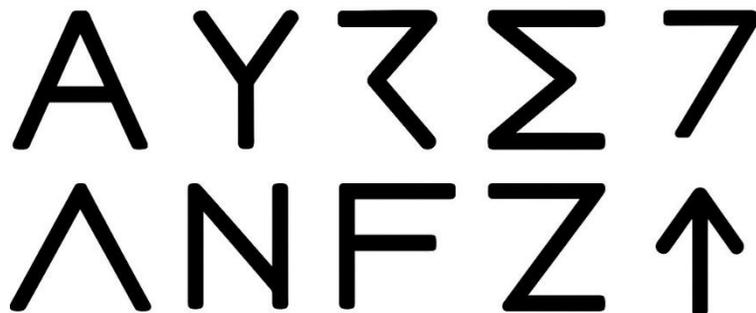


Figure 1 - Age of Obsidian Example Mason's Marks

## Age of Stars (600 to 900):

- Foundations typically reused Age of Obsidian structures; new foundation stones are typically 18-36 inches in length and 8-16 inches in height and width. Materials used are granite or limestone (they typically are laid in 2- or 3-coursed foundations). Most stones have a mason's mark on an interior surface. Exterior surfaces have occasional benchmarks. Some stones will have assembly marks.
- Ashlar blocks are typically 12-24 inches in length and 12-16 inches in height and width. Materials used are limestone, sandstone, or fieldstone. Most stones have a mason's mark on interior surfaces. Some stones will have quarry marks.
- Every structure will have a cornerstone inscription. Many structures that rebuild or expand older structures will have a builder's plaque near the cornerstone. New construction often uses a ceremonial masonry stone in place of the actual cornerstone. This ceremonial stone was almost always originally set upon a small amount of wine, oil, and grain.
- Ceilings/roofs typically are timber with lead sheeting, usually over slate.



*Figure 2 - Age of Stars Example Mason's Marks*

### Age of Wonder (900 top 1092):

- Foundations typically reused Age of Obsidian or Age of Stars structures; new foundations are often random rubble in trenches with lime mortar, encased with courses of burnt clay brick. Exterior surfaces have elaborate benchmark plaques made of bronze.
- Walls are almost always built with burnt clay bricks typically 12-18 inches in length, 4-6 inches in width, and 1-2 inches thick. All bricks have a molded manufacturer's mark on one of the concealed surfaces. Some bricks will have assembly marks. All exterior walls are built as cavity walls.
- Every structure will have a builder's plaque near the main entrance, usually inside.
- Ceilings/roofs typically are timber with copper sheeting over slate.



Figure 3 - Age of Wonder Example Brick Marks

## Comments on E&A 9

**Rogers:** *re:* Chumbawamba – *wot?!* One of my favorite bands, even after they got famous. But more before they did. Sages indeed.

**ChrysalisM:** Nice Alolan vulpix.

**Felicity:** *“Vulpix: Use Powder Snow!”*

**Redden:** *re:* “This month we flew to Oahu” for heart surgery?! Hopefully that went as well as it could. I must say, though, that most people fly to Oahu for other things. You might need a new travel agent.

**Elf:** *re:* database. Going from MS Excel to MS Access is fairly simple. You can open your .XLSX file directly into Access and it will “database”-ize it. It won’t automagically put it into normal form or fix any Excel mistakes in structure, alas. I don’t personally care for Access, but many people like it. Also, Neopets KS looks like a fail to me. Maybe something good will come out of the Go Weave a Basket jam.

**Roark:** *re:* Arduin. Back when, I found those slim grimoires to be endlessly fascinating. I’ve wanted to love, but failed to enjoy, almost all the remixes done by others. Looking forward to your additional comments on Arduin’s Portal to Adventure. Looking at your pictures, I think... *“dang... should’ve done that...”* And then I think... *“I don’t need more gaming stuff...”* Have you ever played the *Swords & Dragons* card game?

**Bell-West:** RYCTM – fair enough; that’s hard to disagree with. I like your stamp image, too. I have this theory that an entire campaign could be presented as a series of postage stamp images...

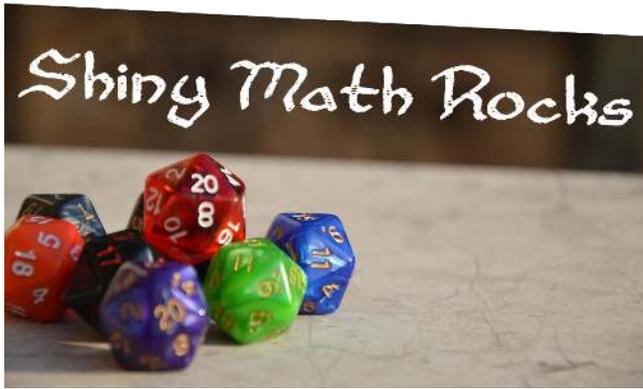
**Cule:** *re:* “Jarathir: ‘Can you tell a Truth cultist too much information?’” – love it. Lines like that, it’s why we play RPGs!

**Grumer:** You've got my vote for best designed zine o' the issue.

**Zoch:** *Saltmarsh* might be a good fit for me, too. I have several guys in my neighborhood that want to spin up a short "D&D campaign". None have any RPG experience (but all have good boardgame experience). I admit to *D&D* burnout, and I've tried to steer the plans to... any other RPG. They don't know enough to really grok what I'm saying, though, plus they've already bought some books. So... *D&D* it is. And then I start thinking about the campaign and the ones I'm most familiar with I'm also least interested in running again. Your comments on *Saltmarsh* have reminded me that it's a fun place to game – especially for the DM.

**Misiaszek / Vassilakos** RYCTM about the similar look of the undead monsters. Yep. I am not much of an artist, so I pull stuff from public domain image sites. I didn't want to have a "serious" image for one and a "cartoon" image for the other. Serious for both or cartoon for both would be OK, but I had limited search time. I've also had a hard time finding non-AI-generated "undead" critter images... so I used what, as you have noted, is basically the same image for both.

My group's fighter is so dumb he thinks "Critical Role" is a type of bread.



## SMR Issue #6 for E&A #10, Apr 2026

[Erica L Frank](#) (call me Elf); [Eris Lord Freedom@itch.io](mailto:Eris.Lord.Freedom@itch.io)

### GM-less Games On Hold

The GM-less games have stalled out: Wanderhome on Tuesdays was stopped after three sessions (plus three “prep” sessions) on the grounds of “we’re mostly enjoying this, but two of the gang aren’t really interested, and it has some awkward slow spots.” It’s set aside as “not calling it done/never again, but we want to do something else for a while.”

Which is fine, except I’ve done a lot of work in converting Glitch locations for Wanderhome. I’d like to write up a lot more of those and publish them; that’d probably require art help:

1. Someone who can draw a map of Ur (we have ref docs, and maps of each region with “streets” on them, but a full high-res map was never available), and



Map of Ur made from the Soundscapes album & end-of-game image releases

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2. Artwork for some or all of the individual locations, because itch’s indie game scene is very very anti-AI. (And the AI pictures for the locations aren’t great, just better than what I could come up with on my own.) Maybe I can contact the still-active Glitch fans (all 7 of them) and see if any of them does art. And wants to do art for free.

I have a few dozen locations; not all mapped. I could expand that to over a hundred and have a nicely detailed map suitable for exploration & adventures.

The Friday pirate game is stalled for logistics reasons – we keep having someone who can’t make it. (Last few weeks, that’s been me – a convention, followed by an illness, followed by bad internet service.) I’m not sure if we’re still playing it, or we’ll be looking at something else once we’re all together again. I may suggest that the BOB structure is a bit too vague for us: it’s not so much “GM-less” as “nobody assigned in advance to be GM.” (The Quiet year is GM-less. BOB games are more “GM-full” – everyone gets to GM, but there’s no mechanism for how they take turns.)

The Tuesday game decided we liked the idea of GM-less games and wanted to explore other options. We did 2 weeks of Fiasco (Boomtown), in which we created a set of the most horribly corrupt and backstabbing characters that have ever inflicted their drama on the Old West. We had a blast.

## Running Brindlewood Bay

And then I said I'd run Brindlewood Bay, because I really want to try a mystery game that doesn't have answers at the start. The game pitch is "*Murder: She Wrote* meets Lovecraftian horror." ...Please forgive me if this has already been covered in a previous issue of E&A. (I noted that it's been mentioned; I'm not sure how much of a "what this game is" anyone has done.)

It uses a PbtA framework (2d6 rolls;  $\leq 6$  is a failure; 7-9 is partial success; 10 is full success; 12+ is success with a bonus) but BB has some unique traits.

**Setup:** The characters are all elderly widowed (or otherwise partnerless), retired ladies living in the same town. They are "Murder Mavens" – a book club devoted to murder mysteries. Also, they sometimes solve real crimes. The local police are not happy about this.

**Maven Moves:** Instead of Playbooks, there's a set of standard moves, and each character gets 1 unique "Maven move" at the start of the game. (They can acquire more during play, but it's never going to be PbtA's common "here are 4 things you do that nobody else does.") There are two sets of Maven Moves available; the standard set is based on TV show detectives, and the alternate set is mostly based on detectives from books. Examples:

### Sonny Crockett

*You have a very stylish wardrobe—people say "Wow!" whenever they see you around town. Describe your Style in a little more detail and then add Stylish Wardrobe to your Cozy Little Place. When you use it to get an advantage on a die roll, leave it unmarked.*

### Sherlock Holmes

*The first time you encounter a Suspect, you can declare something about them based solely on their appearance. This information is absolutely true, but it is not a Clue, nor can it conclusively solve the mystery.*

**The Cult:** At start of game, the *players* know there is a creepy dark cult involved with the murders; the *characters* do not. They'll discover that through play.

**Cozy stuff:** Each Maven has a "cozy activity" – something she can do to relax & enjoy life; this serves as both flavor/aesthetics and a game mechanic: The way to remove "Conditions" gained from adverse results is through the "Cozy Move" where you share an intimate moment with another Maven. Each Maven also has a "Cozy Little Place" with some items that can be tapped to give advantage (roll 3d6 instead of 2) once.

Not: Once per session, or once per mystery. Once. Experience can adjust that – there's an option to clear all the items in one's Cozy Little Place and make them re-usable. So, that's twice. Per character. Ever. The item remains available for narrative purposes, but it no longer affects dice rolls. (Except, as noted above, some Maven Moves change those rules.)

The murder mystery itself has no answer in advance. Instead, there's a pack of Clues, and a pack of Suspects, and as the Mavens investigate, they eventually form theories about what happened. At some point, they sit down with their pack of Clues and make a roll; if they roll high enough, their theory is correct.

Some people love this mechanism. Some hate it. There are reviews online and strong opinions in several directions. (It's been mentioned in past issues.) I love it; one of my longstanding issues with mysteries in TTRPGs is that they mostly run in a few categories:

1. The GM drops breadcrumb clues and the players have to find them, assemble them, and guess the answer. In this, it's the players' skill, not the characters, that is needed to solve the mystery.
2. The GM drops breadcrumb clues, and if the players don't catch them/assemble them correctly, they make some dice rolls, and the GM tells them what they've realized. This is a delicate dance of "feed them info so the game doesn't bog down forever" and "back off so they can try to have that final lightbulb moment on their own."
3. The GM railroads the players into a set of events, force-feeds them clues, and explains the meanings of anything they missed. They're not so much playing a game as walking through someone else's story, possibly with dice-rolling to see how injured they are by the end of it.

All of those are deeply unsatisfying to me. They are all understandable – TTRPGs weren't created to cover "mystery" as a genre; they were created to cover "war reenactment" with a later supplement of "with elves, wizards, and dragons." They were created as an adventure-conquest game with a side of storytelling, not as a solve-the-puzzle game. You can ramp up the storytelling and tone down the conquest without drastically changing the game structure, but when you move to other genres, it has problems.

Mini-rant; feel free to ignore: TTRPGs do not cover romance or sitcoms well, either. They're also lousy at soap operas. They have problems with superheroes despite several noble attempts. Coverage is weak for thrillers or adventure stories where the goal is "survive" rather than "win." And so on. The farther

you get from “battle-oriented quest,” the more innovative both the mechanical rules and play structure have to get.

There are exceptions, single games here and there that cover a different genre. Fiasco’s actually very popular. But there’s no such thing as a Fiasco campaign; it’s a one-shot game. It’s much more a “shared story-building game” than an RPG.

The other-genre that’s closest to popular is horror, with Call of Cthulhu – but that’s rarely played as a “horror” genre game where characters gradually become aware of hostile nonhuman influences in the world (and that’s the end of the game). It’s usually “roaring-20s dungeon crawl where bad choices/poor die rolls will take you out via ‘insanity’ instead of damage.” CoC is often played as a monsterhunt.

So I’m excited to try a game that’s built around an entirely different genre, one that is not “take out the bad guys.” (The Brindlewood Mavens are ill-equipped to “take out” anyone.)

Potentially worth noting: I don’t really care for mysteries as a genre. I don’t read mysteries. (I have read a handful of them. I don’t hate them, but there are literally hundreds of other books on my to-read list ahead of the next “I might read that someday” mystery.) I almost never watch mystery shows by choice, so it was fascinating to me to realize I recognized almost all of the “Maven moves” from both TV and books. (I had to google for the names of several of them – “Rick and A.J.” did not click for me, but I knew what *Simon & Simon* was.)

I figured that “I know all these names & understand why those are the game mechanics associated with them” was a good starting point for “I could run this game.” (The only names I did not recognize even after googling: Mma Precious Ramotswe and V.I. Warshawski.) And my reason for not running mysteries was a lack of interest in playing the breadcrumb game of trying to drop the right kind of clues, or nudging the players to put them together the right way, or making sure the correct suspect is the right kind of sinister to make them suspicious, and so on.

BB nicely dodges all that. I don’t have to make the clues fit together correctly; that’s their job. I don’t have to make the Secret Killer act suspicious, but not so suspicious that they know from scene one that he’s the guy. I don’t have to invent red herrings or steer them away from them. I don’t have to make the Jealous Ex seem “creepy and suspicious, but not actually guilty of murder.” And so on.

I have to make the setting plausible and roleplay the suspects. The former is easy for me; the latter is

not, but hey, that just means opportunity for growth, right?

Besides. I have a setting/mystery I want to use. I am writing up “Lost in the Clouds,” a BB murder mystery investigating the 30-year-old death of Lan Wangji’s mother, blatantly stolen from *The Untamed/Mo Dao Zu Shi*.

Officially, she died of illness. It’s possible she actually died of illness. (It’s possible she died of “illness” as a result of how she was imprisoned.) It’s possible she took her own life. It’s possible someone killed her. It’s possible she escaped. It’s possible the truth is a bit weirder than that.

All of those have been explored in fanfic. It’s interesting that the fanfic community hasn’t latched onto any one of them as “the real truth.” We don’t even have 1 or 2 of them that are “the standard thing” with the others as “yeah someone wrote that but nobody thinks it’s what actually happened.” However, suicide is very high on the list of standard “what really happened” assumptions.

(I have a story in mind for her that’s “absolutely nobody is going to believe it’s what happened but they will have fun with it.” But it’s not attached to Brindlewood.)

For the Brindlewood Bay mystery:

- I’m using The Untamed/CQL canon as a base (there are some differences between book/tv, incl. the death details of Lan Wangji’s father)
- Everyone is using courtesy names, no birth names, no titles (because I am dealing with US & Canadian English-speaking players and “Chinese names, family name first” is going to be hard enough to deal with)
- Modern setting: “Cloud Haven” is a Buddhist spirituality and martial arts retreat; they moved to the Brindlewood Bay area about 15 years ago
- I invented names for 6 characters: Lan Wangji’s parents (only addressed by title in canon), the man she killed (which resulted in her imprisonment), and three others who don’t exist in canon. I spent far too much time poking around at name generators and translation sites trying to come up with
  - plausible Chinese names
  - easy to pronounce for American gamers.

I am handwaving past any language difficulties. Lalalala; characters all have cellphones with perfect translation apps, and also a guide, because I don’t have time to Americanize the whole thing and figure out how that would work.

After the game is over, I will write up the mystery and post it at itch.io. And probably at AO3,

because it more-or-less counts as fanfic. And for that, I have to consider whether to address the language issues. I also have to decide whether to use the canon character names/setting etc. details or to file off the serial numbers so it's less obvious where it came from. (If I decide to do that, I'll probably put the "original" at AO3 and the "genericized" one at itch.io.)

Nobody will need to see the show/read the book to play the mystery. Nor will it spoil the show. This is a background character's distant-past death in canon, with no details provided other than 'she died.' I can't even remember if the illness is canonical or implied.

We had Session 0 for "Create characters and figure out how the rules work, or mostly how they work."

(Which is good, because I didn't quite have the module written up. I think I have enough of it now.)

I have nine suspects. Or rather, I have nine people on the suspect list. One of them is Lan Xichen, who was nine years old at the time of his mother's death. I don't think he's a *plausible* suspect, but he had access to her, and potentially means to cause her death. (No motive whatsoever for murder, but accidents are possible.) Four of the suspects are deceased. I have four non-suspect characters; most (all?) the other BB mysteries don't have non-suspect characters.

The other mysteries have 4–5 locations, so I have limited myself to 5 location writeups. I'm hazy on how those will work in play but I have notes for the handful of places I'm pretty sure they'll want/need to visit.

The suggestion is to have at least 20 Clues and 6 Void Clues, so I have those.

This will be my fourth time GMing in the last 30-ish years. Previous GMing includes 1 session of Fate with my formerly weekly GURPS group, about 7 years ago, 2 sessions of Fate Accelerated with a superhero shared-universe group (they've figured out how to make FAE work for superheroes, but it takes a lot of constraints & managing expectations). Other than that, I'd have to go back to my early college years when I ran D&D and Champions (and tried to drag the group into GURPS and failed).

Session 1 went well. Or at least, they all enjoyed themselves. They have met, I believe, 3 people, 1 of whom is a suspect, and have acquired 1 Clue, and managed to spend almost two hours discussing the ramifications of those two details. (Normal Brindlewood adventures don't have non-suspect characters, but normal adventures aren't investigating a decades-old death that happened on another continent.)

I'm nervous as hell but looking forward to running this.

## Collapse of the Neopets TTRPG

Between last issue & this one, the Neopets TTRPG has been pulled: The kickstarter has announced it's being cancelled, and the Neopets company has cut ties with the team they hired to make the game.

The [short version](#) of events:

- There was a Neopets TTRPG kickstarter. It raised almost half a million dollars.
- Geekify ran it; they had a license from Neopets. Nobody at Geekify had TTRPG design experience.
- It ran late. Nobody was surprised.
- They released a beta/playtest version on Google Docs
- It was a disaster. A thinly reskinned D&D 5e game using the OGL permissions.
- The "Perks" section (renamed from Feats, of which I know exactly nothing) said "This section hasn't been paid for" and was blank.
- It included a mention of discussing with your table how much sex/romance/sexuality you want in your group. (Note: Neopets is a very G-rated site with absolutely no sexuality topics allowed anywhere.)
- There were comments. Lots of comments. I have saved out a copy.
- Geekify announced the [kickstarter is canceled](#).
- Drama roundups available in [the usual places](#).
- If anyone's interested, I saved out the g'doc version with the community comments.

I'm still working on my FAE-based Neopets game. I just now have to decide whether to release it with the Neopets names for everything, or to attempt to change them to avoid weird copyright issues. (Or whether to throw in spoof-ish content so I can insist "this is parody." Humor isn't required for parody but it makes it easier to argue.)

## Solo Play: Cage of Sand, part 3

Game link: <https://lucillaes.itch.io/cage-of-sand>

### Cast of Characters

Protagonist: **Anni Joutsen**, embroidery artist

1. **Anton Kumala (3 of Wands)**, a wealthy merchant, waiting for his ship to come in
2. **Sir Godfrey of the Ocean (Knight of Cups)**, a knight looking for smugglers and tax evasion
3. Barigrotir "**Bari**" **Bristlegrog (the Emperor)**, a dwarf judging the contest & selecting artisans
4. **Vamirelion (5 of Swords)**, elven former merc, exiled in disgrace; skilled woodworker

5. **Elenwen Crow (Wheel of Fortune)**, priestess of the god of luck, runs games of chance
6. **Remi Longfoot (7 of Swords)**, a hobbit thief & fake contestant with his knotwork
7. **Lady Linyive the Widow (6 of Wands)**, half-elf, a ranger who won accolades for arresting bandits
8. **Her Grace, Maritha of Heliot (the Empress)**, duchess entering the contest with her tapestries
9. **Lady Phoebe (6 of Cups)**, her daughter, age 6
10. **Stregori Zrin (4 of Swords)**, a tapped-out mage looking for an apprentice while he recovers

The town of Baysheer is holding an arts festival; the best artists will be selected to create pieces for the upcoming royal wedding.

## First Loop

### Act 1: Awakening

Awake from a vague nightmare. Set 3 details that will be the same at the start of each loop.

### Act 2: Interactions

3 minor, 2 major per loop. 1<sup>st</sup> loop: Remi, Maritha, Elenwen minor; Bari & Phoebe major.

### Inciting Event

**The Magician** — The opening ceremony of the arts pavilion the next morning.

### Act 3, The Turn

Discover 6 deaths: Stregoriz Zrin; young Lady Phoebe; Vamirelion & Lady Maritha; Remi Longfoot; Sir Godfrey of the Ocean, with several of them involving brutal, grotesque dismemberments

### Act 4, Revelations (New stuff starts here)

"A disaster occurs. At the end of the loop all remaining characters, including your Avatar, die mysteriously."

Remaining characters: Anni (obviously), Elenwen, Lady Linyive, Anton, and Bari Bristlegrog.

**Draw a card** for "Last thing Anni perceives before death": **5 of Wands**

5 of wands is a conflict, often caused by misunderstandings. I am especially fond of the Robin Wood tarot version, where the 5 staves being wielded would form a proper pentagram if people just shifted their stance a bit and cooperated instead of attacking each other.

In this deck, it looks like monks defending a temple; there's stone steps, and braziers burning what might be incense. I'm going to eschew trying to imply that the 5 people in the card are the 5 deaths

remaining. (Mainly because I tried, and just couldn't make it work in my head.)



5 of Wands from the Robin Wood & Calandra tarot decks

Instead:

After the death of the knight assigned to enforce the law during the festival, a lot of conflicts broke out, people accused strangers (or their neighbors) of thefts, of cheating, of the murders. Fights erupted, and there were several more deaths, not just the ones involving the 10 named characters. When Bari was found dead at the opening of the pavilion one morning, the whole place erupted into chaos. Anni was struck on the back of the head with something heavy, and she fell; the last thing she saw was Bari's body, blood seeping out from under it, and she heard the sounds of angry yelling and tables crashing as the world went dark.

**Draw a card** for "First thing the rest of the world perceives," or their reaction: **Temperance**.

In the aftermath of all the deaths and conflicts, the town realizes it desperately needs a return to peace and tranquility. However, it also wants to find a way to move forward with the festival — to keep a foot in each of two worlds, both the normal hum-drum of everyday life, and the excitement (and income) of a royal arts faire. The wiser leaders speak in favor of temperance: of blending those two interests and finding a safe way forward.

Next step: **Reflect on the events that have occurred. Record one or more Revelations** [from a list of 10 questions]. I'm going with three of them this time.

Select a character. **What do they know** that your Avatar doesn't?

Stregori Zrin, the first to die, is a mage who is sensitive to the flow of energies in the area. He sensed something wrong, and went to do something about it - and was killed for his trouble.

Select 2-3 characters. **Describe a bond** they share.

Lady Maritha has known Vamirelion for years; he is the first private citizen rather than someone from the land-owning gentry who bought one of her tapestries. Her curiosity was piqued when she found he'd be putting it in his private home rather than a gallery, temple, or castle, so she visited him. They struck up a friendship focused around art and craftsmanship, and Vamirelion could sympathize with her worries about her husband's military activities. He doted on young Phoebe. When little Phoebe died, Maritha sought out the most talented swordsman she knew, for protection and the possibility of vengeance.

Do any other characters **perceive the time loop**?

Stregori Zrin will be aware of the time loop immediately at the beginning of the 2nd loop, and he'll seek out others who are aware. However, since he was killed first, it may take him a loop or two to sort out who else is involved.

### End of the First Loop.

Instructions here are "Clear your space and shuffle the character cards. Make a new mark on your tally sheet and return to Act 1." (Tally sheet? I'm supposed to have a tally sheet? I suppose that means "note that this is Loop 2.")

Notably: It does not say to reshuffle the "event"-ish cards. I suppose that sets a limit on the game: There are 11 cards in the "stuff that happened" stack, and 48 remaining unused. So: 4 more loops, with the potential of swapping out a few cards in the "setup" set (there's rules for that), or 3 loops if I swap out more than a few.

Or, of course, I can reshuffle those. It's not clear if running out the deck ends the game, or they should be reshuffled at that point, or at the start of each loop (which would increase the chance of duplicate events). (A problem with a 1500-word game is that sometimes info that was clear in creator's mind doesn't make it on to the page.) For now, I'm going with "don't reshuffle" and we'll see how far I get.

...To match classic time loop stories, it would make sense that it takes 4-5 loops before you get "repeat" events, or the same event applied to a different person. However, considering how long these take, I don't think I'm up for playing a 20-loop game.

The rules allow for ending the game at any time and just leaving it unresolved: "You can decide whether the time loop closes or if you simply abandon your Avatar to their fate. Write the conclusion of your story and shuffle all cards back

into the deck." But for now, I'm heading off to the second loop, because the rules/events change a bit.

At the start of the second loop, Anni is not yet aware of the time loop.

## Second Loop

Yay we are actually at THE TIME LOOP BEGINS.

I have not read all the rules in advance, and many of them have separate "first loop: do this; later loops: do this other stuff" – and I just didn't read anything other than the first-loop instructions.

The deaths caught me by surprise, because, while I knew it was a horror game, I had not read ahead to see "oh wait, everyone *dies*," before doing the setup and making characters.

### Act 1: Awakening

Instructions for not-the-first loop include: Review the Act 1 cards & events; choose a vague memory from the previous loop that haunts you; for each tally mark (1, at the moment), pick an element that seems repetitive or out of place.

Act 1 cards – The Devil: Wakes to a goat braying outside her window; 8 Pentacles: She sews the cuffs onto a shirt's sleeves; Death: Replaces a vase of dead flowers with fresh ones.

She has a vague memory of talking with the duchess. She knows Her Grace is entering the contest, and has seen her retinue (and maybe her) at a distance, but of course they've never met. The nightmare she can't quite remember must've included meeting the duchess; Anni supposes she's a bit overwhelmed by all the famous and wealthy people who will be at the festival.

The sleeves... bother her. They're simple enough to do; she remembers laying them out last night to finish in the bright morning light, but... she was so sure she'd finished them and readied this shirt to be delivered. She frowns as she stitches the cuffs to the sleeves. It feels familiar. (Of course it does. She's done this more than a hundred times, with countless shirts, many with different fabric but most, like this one, plain undyed linen.) The nightmare must've unsettled her, that she feels like she's already done this specific task.

### Next issue: Second Loop, Act 2: Interactions

This section will have 3 minor and 2 major interactions with 1 character card & 1 other card each. "Minor" interactions reveal small details about the character and/or world. "Major" interactions have a key based on the suit, and "reveal important

information, expose weaknesses or change the nature of the relationships between characters.”

This time, I packed away the deck with post-its labeling the sections (setup cards, character cards, “used” events, etc.) so getting started should be easier.

## Comments on E&A #9

There’s been some discussion about “maybe remove comments from the page count restriction.” On the one hand, I can see the value of that. On the other, while comments are often compiled in one spot at the beginning or end of a zine, there’s no requirement for this; someone who folded their comments into their other content would be stuck with a smaller page count than those who separate them out. I’d prefer not to have rules that encouraged some kinds of content, and some kinds of formatting, over others.

## Denizens of the Library #8 – Brian Rogers

I only played V&V once or twice; I have no memories other than a vague “we rolled up powers, right? That was less satisfying than designing them ourselves in Champions.” (I could be misremembering.) However, I do remember the constant problem in superhero games regarding speedsters & martial artists – trying to make sure the “brick” and “ordinary agent/spy” characters got enough time in the spotlight to balance out the faster characters.

Champions was consistently troublesome for this; there’s a “Speed” stat that’s disconnected from agility/dex. Most supers had a speed of 5 or 6 (actions out of 12 phases), and that worked fine – but 4 was max for a “normal human” (so, the James Bond-ish superspy), and a speedster with something like 7-9 got to act a lot more. (The sweet spots for “super-speed” were 7 and 13; those weren’t just “got more actions than everyone else,” but specifically got to act in a phase where nobody else acted.) Normal people had a speed of 2; the victims at the bank had to wait a very, very long time to do anything in between all the hero & villain actions.

RYCTM: A dungeon-crawl that’s specifically “reclaim lost land” does fix many of the ethical problems with dungeons. Allowing for negotiations with the current residents does more. I don’t believe that all dungeon/temple/tower-etc. adventures are morally wrong, just that... wow, the hobby has a whole lot of “abandoned” dungeons lying around in various foothills, where “abandoned” means “not inhabited by humans that owe fealty to the king whose name is on maps of the area.”

## Children’s Interactive Fiction, Pt 9 – Pedro Panhoca da Silva & Camila Lourenço Panhoca

I enjoyed the Cinderella interactive fiction writeup, and it gives me ideas of what kind of simple visual novels or twine games I could write as practice. I hadn’t really thought about using fairy tales with basically pre-established endings, where choices just serve to change the flavor text.

## East of Neither, West of Nil #4 #1 – ChrysalisM & Felicity

I am aware of tulpamancy. Or at least, of tulpas as they seem to appear in modern fannish settings. (I am active on Tumblr. I have a Homestuck liveblog that’s been sitting dormant for years, and I keep thinking “someday I will get back to that.”) I have mixed opinions about a lot of the “alters/multiples” communities, but most of it comes down to “eh, you do you; it’s all good as long as you’re not demanding other people keep track of the details.”

(There are some blogs on Tumblr that seem to want “read & understand this 1200-word post of 8-pt grey-on-pink text, with blinky lights in the background, explaining 8 separate personas using five different sets of pronouns, before you like or reblog anything I’ve posted.”)

Hi, and welcome to E&A!

## Reddened Stars #8 – John Redden

RYCTM – I adore the Morgan’s Tarot; I have colored my version (but it was a long time ago, and I used colored pencils; most of the colors have faded). I got it because I was getting too “rote” in my tarot interpretations: I was good at memorizing, so I could recite text from the books but not figure out how to do a “reading” outside of that. Morgan’s tarot requires that you read the actual cards.

Also I came up with a 9-card spiral reading (starts in the center and moves left, down, & around) reading because the Celtic Cross didn’t seem to work well for it, at least for me. I still don’t like working with the Celtic Cross layout.

I’m also fond of the [Discordian Tarot](#) (PDF) and have plans to eventually make an actual-cards version. <https://discordia.org.uk/tarot.html> Older link using ancient formatting. (Zipped to save space because half a megabyte used to be big! Postscript version because PDF didn’t exist yet!) (However, the Discordian Portable Temples are long gone from the internet; I hope to find a copy on one of my backup discs at some point.)

I hadn’t considered using my Morgan’s Tarot for solo RPGs, but now I probably will. (However, most

solo RPGs require the standard 78-card 5-suit deck; they have a key for card meanings.)

## An Unlooked For Zine #8 – Lisa Padol

Lasers & Feelings/Honey Heist – L&F does not result in a character leaving play when either stat gets too high; HH does. L&F doesn't have a mechanism for changing your stats – it's (they're) set at creation and it stays there, since it's not so much "two stats" as "one stat on a line, closer to one side or the other."

I am surprised to notice that there's not already a Jeckyll/Hyde L&F hack on itch.io.

RYCTM: I have no objections to personally designed tarot decks, to tarot decks with a specific focus, to ones that draw on different lore details (swapping Strength and Justice, elements for suits, etc.) I get annoyed at some of the "I don't like the symbolism in the traditional decks so I made it BETTER" decks. (...The Lovers is not a romance card; it should not look like a romance scene.) I don't directly mind "added cards" but I mind "added cards because the normal deck is incomplete" with the implication that anyone not using *this* deck is somehow doing tarot wrong.

It's very subjective. Sometimes the writing or the art strikes me as too ego-laden for me to work with the deck. Sometimes it seems too cutesy. Sometimes the particular theme seems to override anything like the traditional meanings. (Cats. Dragons. Fairy tales. Whatever.)

I grew up with Wands = Fire; Swords = Air. And then I got into Feri tradition, which has them reversed. It doesn't just change them – while it's still Pents = Earth & Cups = Water, their relationships to the other cards change because the other elements have changed. (But that's getting pretty far from RPG topics.)

For Cage of Sand: the setup took a long time because I decided to let it. I could've just drawn 10 cards for characters, thrown a name on each of them, and gone with that. Instead I took time to consider the world as it was unfolding; I wanted something that felt solid to me.

I also like doing the steps one at a time, so, draw one card, figure out who that character is and where they fit in what I have so far, and then draw the next card. Young Lady Phoebe was a complete surprise; I did wind up editing the Duchess' details a little bit, but I had already decided "she has 3 children, the oldest of which is a young teen."

Some journaling games have very little setup: Here's you, the protagonist; draw a card or roll a die and here's your starting gimmick thing. Some have

more, a full character sheet and details to keep track of. (Someday I will try Ironsworn, but for now, it looks like a lot of tracking the kind of data that was one of the reasons I stopped playing D&D.)

I hadn't seen Numberless Secrets but I have recently acquired Hearts of Wulin so I'll look at it.

Re Paid GMing – a recent set of discussions on Bluesky gave me a realization: A paid GM is not "playing a game with friends, and doing the world/NPC actions while everyone else does a single character." A paid GM is "event coordinator for a small group of attendees who have specific requirements." It's a fine gig if that's what people enjoy doing. But most GMs don't approach it that way; they seem to be thinking "I will do the part of the game I like, and get paid for it, and that means I have to do a little extra of the parts I don't care so much for."

It doesn't click that they have moved the other players from *friends* (or potential friends) to *clients*. The relationship is different.

And that's aside from the reality that, to make it a *job*, they're going to need to run several games a week, often the same one with different groups, and put a notable part of their time into advertising/ outreach to keep enough paying players.

I have zero problems with "Convention gives free passes/maybe other goodies to GMs," just like I have no problems with "convention gives a free membership to panelists" or staff members or even performers. Those people are still attending the convention. And they're *not being paid by the players* (panel attendees, artists, con members, etc.) directly. (Let me know if I'm wrong about that – I have no idea if gaming conventions now include "pay \$30 to play THIS game with THIS GM" in addition to general reg costs.)

## Cowman Baloney Face #5 – Matt Stevens

Ooh, interesting info about clerics! I always liked playing clerics and was annoyed at how many groups treated them like Walking First-Aid Kits. I knew they were vaguely based on medieval notions of crusaders/ fighting clerics, but it hadn't clicked that the spells/ turn-undead aspects had to come from elsewhere.

If I ever write up a high fantasy ttrpg gameworld, I'll have to consider the tropes that feed into the standard "classes" very carefully. (I would like a Fate high fantasy world. Fate has problems with spells.)

If you haven't seen Leverage yet, I can't recommend it enough. It's delightful, and *the show never betrays the viewer*. It doesn't have, "in this episode, THIS is the angry guy because we need an angry guy and the normally-angry one is busy doing something else." The characters start out awesome

and talented – and still have things to learn as the show develops. They don't bring up backstory details and then forget them later. (Instead, you get what look like random backstory details – probably were – and they often turn into recurring bits.) And there's no episode that you wind up thinking "oh he would not say that."

Re OSR things: There is an argument that, by not having stats/charts for some abilities, they leave it open for the GM & player to figure out what they can do. So, old D&D, only thieves can pick pockets, climb walls, hide in shadows. Newer OSR: No stealth skill! If you want to hide, describe where you're hiding and how, and the GM will tell you what kind of bonus/penalty you get, and you make a roll!

This is pitched as "freedom" and "flexibility" and not "persuasive players get to do what they want; shy players, or those who don't share the GM's mental image of the situation, get to die and make a new character."

RYCT Lisa Padol: You wouldn't need a new system for Whale Whores, but a game jam would no doubt collect several variants on existing systems.

- A Lasers & Feelings hack where your stats are "Whale" and "Whore" and you are trying to roll above or below your number based on what activity you are attempting
- A Wretched-and-Alone solo journaling game using a block tower, wherein an unwilling sex worker navigates a whale-shaped map trying to find freedom. They probably don't. (Wretched games are not biased in favor of winning.)
- A [MOSAIC Strict](#) supplement of Whale Whores to add to your mermaid-based ttrpg
- Artwork of whales in lingerie to add to the whale whore game of your choice
- Something incomprehensible in Twine involving poetry and a whole lot of ocean-based words
- Whoring supplement for 7<sup>th</sup> Sea
- Whaling supplement for Thirsty Sword Lesbians

### Twisting the Rope #9 – Myles Corcoran

I have Everway; I like the Fortune Deck mechanic. I'd like to find a group to play it someday. (Found a group once, but the logistics were too complex for me to keep attending.) It'd be interesting to see alternate takes on the fortune deck.

### De Ludis Elfcis Fictis – Pum

RYCTM Lisa Padol: Hyphens, endash, emdash... and minus, which is used in equations.

-   -   —   -  
r   N   M   +

I cannot overstate how annoyed I am that I can tell these apart on sight. (Minuses are shorter and higher than endashes, the same size as the crossbar in + and ÷.) (Also, in many modern fonts, the endash and emdash do not perfectly match the capital N or M.)

### Firedrake's Hoard #7 – Roger Bell\_West

RYCTM: Agreed on the different types of decks – if I used the Cosmic Tarot for gaming, I'd get very different stories from it. That's another part of why I wanted something different from the RWC deck. The Calandra is obviously using a lot of the RWC symbolism and meanings, but the art is different enough that I'm happy with the results.

I could see an NPC tarot system that was "minor NPC: draw 1 card, consult this short chart; recurring NPC, 3 cards, here's a longer chart with more details; major NPC: 10-card spread, complete with backstory."

### Bumbling Through Dungeons #8 – Mark A. Wilson

Wait, there's a new 140+ page version of Baron Munchausen? I have the original; it's like 12 pages. (24? Something like that.)

I vaguely knew there was a new edition; I didn't know they'd added STUFF. Apparently lots of stuff. Including rules for online play. Okay, I have to go [buy this](#).

### Going to be Ad-Libbed #7 – Avram Grumer

Lightning Bugs & game terminology: One of my annoyances of the indie gaming revolution is the lack of editors looking for things like consistent terminology, book structure, and gameflow organization in the book.

*Blades in the Dark* is atrociously arranged. Mid-game, with multiple people with physical & PDF gamebooks, it was hard to flip back and forth to find the sections we needed.

*Brindlewood Bay*, although I'm loving what I've seen of it, is unclear on a few details of character creation. It spends a lot of time on establishing the vibe and approach, but character creation is... scattered. Some parts are at the beginning; some aren't mentioned until the "Session 1" section.

*Fate* write-ups are prone to pretending that this is the first TTRPG someone has ever encountered, rather than assuming they are coming from D&D and will need very clear info about how "combat" is going to be very, very different. (And that "stress" is very much not "hit points.") And the SRD's writeup for Challenges is terrible; it made no sense to me until I'd seen them in a game.

"If you have stress available" should be "if you have empty stress boxes" or else "take three stress"

should be either “mark three boxes” or “remove three from your stress pool.”

...Those sound clumsy. Immersion-breaking, to some extent. “Take stress” (or “gain stress”) sounds more natural than “mark stress boxes.” In which case... the mechanic should maybe be renamed. Or at least they should be consistent in how they refer to it.

RYCTM: The fantasy name generator is definitely not to be trusted for historical or linguistic accuracy. And it gets a lot of ridiculous results. However, rerolling is free and quick, so I do a lot of “eh these all suck – NEXT! Okay, now I have one I can use.”

The Bobson Dugnut quality can be a plus for some games. “This is Random Bartender #542. His name is... uh... Jedidiah McConnal.”

### Ronin Engineer – Jim Eckman

Sorting out the waves/generations/whatever of TTRPG history is always going to be somewhat subjective; it’s not like we have any nice sharp lines of “okay THAT era is over; NEW era begins with this game...” So many of the early games were made in direct reaction to and conversation with each other. I suppose there’s a point where that stopped happening – where new games were likely to not reference an existing game on a similar topic just because the creator didn’t know that game, rather than “everyone in this hobby works to know every single game in the hobby, even if they don’t play them.”

### The Dragon’s Beard #94 – Patrick Zoch

RYCT Roger: I don’t like gunpowder in D&D, in part because of the history of gun development & related technologies (although I suppose that can be handwaved; I am not enough of a historian to notice), and in part because I know what happened to warfare once guns appeared: Armor quickly became near-obsolete, because the expense and hassle of armored troops was countered by the speed and power of bullets.

- Guns appear (of a type useful to armies): 1500s.
- Late 1500s/early 1600s: Some troops stop wearing (steel) armor. (Pike troops yes; gun troops no.)
- 1700s: Armor is pretty much gone. Guns are cheap (compared to suits of steel) and a good shot will destroy a whole suit of armor. (Well, not “destroy.” But one shot through armor can leave it unwearable until it’s repaired, which is often not an in-the-field operation.)
- Armor does not re-appear (on a large scale) until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century with Kevlar – something

strong enough to slow/stop bullets and still light enough to wear in the field all day.

The fantasy of medieval-ish knights & such falls apart when you make guns widely available. And even if artificers are “rare” – it doesn’t take many guns to make the cost & maintenance requirements of armor obsolete.

And that’s without getting into energy weapons. Or, pardon me, “magical creatures” that breathe fire, throw lightning bolts, cause earthquakes, summon blizzards, etc. If you’re facing those, you need speed and agility more than steel plates. So it’s possible a D&D-ish setting would already be questioning the value of armor.

Once you bring guns into the campaign, you’re playing in a very short time-window before other technologies drastically change in response to them. Once armies have guns, they don’t need bows. (Bows were better, for a long time – but bows take extensive training and physical fitness.) Pole arms are less useful when facing guns. The types of swords change to match the new battle standards.

Guns, like the printing press, are worldwide society-changing technology. I don’t like games that believe you can just drop them in without changing the rest of the fantasy-medieval world.

### Accidental Recall #8 – Joshua Kronengold

RYCTM: There are, of course, tarot decks that are not majority-men, and several that are all-women. (I’ve yet to see one of those with art that resonated with me, although I keep considering getting the Motherpeace Round deck.)

As I mentioned above, I’d also forgotten *Cage of Sand* was an “everyone dies” game, or hadn’t noticed that when I started. So when I got to that point in the game rules, I had an “Oh!” moment of my own. (It’s possible I’ll hit a “what the hell is this?” moment during play; I haven’t fully read through the “after the first loop” parts of the rules.)

Re respect for the dead, and skeletons: In a D&D-ish world, it’s possible that “respect for the dead” includes “find a cleric to banish/send their spirits to rest” and refusing to further desecrate the body with swords, axes and maces. Probably not for most people, but I could certainly see communities/cultural groups that treated it that way. They might have skills focused on trapping the undead rather than attacking them outright.

RYCT Jim Vassilakos re the Head of Vecna: From what I was told, within the game, they weren’t acting based on rumor; they found the Head of Vecna. (Presumably it was missing an eye.) And they decided they needed to gain whatever Tremendous Power

might reside in Vecna's head – Vecna's spells, perhaps? Knowledge of horrific necromantic lore? The language to command ghosts? Who knows.

So. One character volunteers; they cut off his head and then describe how they are attempting to install the HoV in its place.

Only, they don't move very quickly, so he's already dead; it doesn't work.

Ah, they think; we must do the switch *faster*.

Volunteer #2 is beheaded, and the HoV is rolled into place like Indiana Jones stealing the golden idol.



And just like Indy, the results are not what was intended. Volunteer #2 is dead and the party has failed to gain the terrible magics that no doubt reside in the Head of Vecna.

Oho, they think. You need magic to get magic. We need a cleric at the ready to heal the person to make the new limb "take."

Volunteer #3 is beheaded, HoV is installed on his neck, healing spell is cast...

I believe, but am not certain, that at this point, a die roll was failed. This cemented the party's believe that it was a matter of technique and luck of the dice, rather than "NO YOU NITWITS; YOU CANNOT CHOP OFF YOUR HEAD AND REPLACE IT."

It is possible the first healing attempt was a "heal wounds" and they later tried with a different kind of healing spell.

Repeat until the entire party but one is dead.

At no point did the party decide "hey, I wonder what powers we'd get from the Ear of Vecna" or "one of the Eyes is here; I bet that has some of his magic." Nope. They had a head; they were gonna install a head on someone. As soon as they could figure out how to sever a spine in a way that leaves the owner alive long enough to replace his skull & related bits.

### **Traveller PBEM: Plankwell, Ch 54 – Vassilakos, Collinson, and Rader**

Thank you for the link to Guildsman 6 and the tarot article. I haven't had time to read it in detail, but I've extracted it to Word so it's easier for to review.

### **Misc Other Topics**

(Because I have a blank half-page and that just looks wrong.)

The [Solo But Not Alone 6](#) charity bundle has two weeks left. 90 items, \$10, proceeds go to [Take This](#) which is focused on mental health issues in the game industry & communities. If you've been curious about solo TTRPGs, this is a good way to get started – get a whole lot of them, download whatever looks interesting, try playing the ones that seem appealing and review some of the others to boggle over the creativity in the gaming hobby.



Steam's [Spring Sale](#) lasts until March 26. Notable items include:

Resident Evil 3 (\$4 instead of \$40)

Fallout: New Vegas (\$1 instead of \$10)

The Long Dark (\$3.50 instead of \$20)

Star Wars Jedi: Survivor (\$7 instead of \$70)

Hades (\$6.24 instead of \$25, for those who didn't pick it up in the Hugo packet a few years ago)

Tiny Tina's Wonderlands (\$6 instead of \$60) – ooh, this looks pretty, even though it's probably outside of my skillset.



The [TTRPGs for Trans Rights in Idaho](#) jam has completed its collection phase, and its related bundle should be available on March 30th. It will have over 500 items, and probably have a \$10 minimum donation.

# OVERLORD'S ANNALS

ATTRONARCH, THE EXALTED OVERLORD OF UNCONTESTED VASTLANDS

VOLUME 5 · ISSUE 4 · APRIL 2026

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## IN THIS ISSUE

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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 share three session reports from the *Conquering the Barbarian Altanis* Dungeons & Dragons campaign.

Fresh adventurers go on three different side adventures.

### 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](mailto:attronarch@mailbox.org) if you'd like to join.

### ATTRIBUTIONS

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*Torchbearer* illustration by Kickmaniac.

Typeset in L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X with Charter, a print-friendly typeface.

## CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 103

### Adventurers

**Bob the Dwarf**, *dwarf level 3*. Midget with big beard in search of an adventure.

**Hoffman**, *fighter level 1*. Bold, aggressive, and ugly. But good at heart.

**Leticia**, *cleric level 1*. Extremely righteous, borderline zealot, devout follower of Rasthri, Goddess of Strength in Revenge.

**Lugh**, *elf level 3*. An elf from faraway secluded area, suspicious of people.

**Cesar**, *halfling level 1*. Brawly trouble magnet, but has good head on his shoulders.

### Longgrass 11th, Airday

Bob has had it with Hagar the Haughty! Once again Hagar left without Bob, taking other adventurers on an expedition that will make them all rich. But not Bob!

Was it because Bob was defaced by a carnivorous giant fly? Or because he was scalped by an Altanian? No! It was because Bob now wields the mighty Wolfhammer, and Hagar surely envies him!

But Bob decided not to sit idly on his ass. No! He allowed his entrepreneurial spirit to blossom, and he recruited four promising adventurers: Hoffman the Fighter, Leticia the Cleric, Lugh the Elf, and Cesar the Halfling.

Then he found a local merchant who needs help: giant lizards laired close to where rivers Farhills and Cedarwade meet. Twenty-five gold coins per tail were sufficient to buy this newly formed party.

Bob then led the party to the described cave. They lit up a torch and descended into a dark hole overlooking the river bank.

Narrow and slippery limestone slopped downwards. It was broad enough to allow the party to proceed in single-file formation.

“Psst. Stop.”

Bob and Lugh halted the party.

Snoring in the darkness.

The party moved on slowly.

A slumped pig-faced humanoid was snoring.

A hand axe by its hip.

Snot-bubbles coming out of its snout.

Someone fired at the monster.

And missed.

The orc looked up, confused.

Hoffman gingerly smashed its head against the cave wall.

The beast slumped into eternal slumber.

The cave they descended to was quite large, spanning some forty feet wide and sixty feet long, if not longer. But the adventurers were preoccupied with the cave passaged that was lit. Low grunts could be heard coming from that direction.

Sneaking closer, Bob took a peek.

Four pig-faced beastmen sitting around a campfire.

They were blissfully unaware of the horror that is about to jump them.

The party released a volley at unsuspecting foes.

Cesar and Lugh had slain one; the rest fled east; splashing and tripping in the shallow stream.

One gasped as arrow penetrated its lung from behind.

“Onwards!”

Bob charged after the fleeing monsters.

His new recruits followed diligently.

Except Cesar. The halfling crossed the stream. Just to see what's on the other side, you know. There he found two wooden chests. Of course he took a look. The chests were filled with gold and silver coins.

Rest of the adventurers followed the stream. Bob halted the party at the narrowest point.

“We will wait for them here.”

Grunts could be heard in distance. Lugh could understand some of this primitive language. There were cries and complaints. Then somebody said “Go get the Bonecrusher!”

The party readied themselves. Weapons braced. Position reinforced.

Silence.

Silence.

Thunderous cheers.

Sounds of many feet running through the stream.

“Waaagh!”

Eight pig-faced beastmen came charging out of darkness. One towered over them, dressed in clinky chain-shirt and wielding a long spear with wicked barbed top.

The ranks clashed against each other.

Bob swung his Wolfhammer, but missed the Bonecrusher.

The orc sidestepped the attack, swung his spear at the dwarf's belly, breaking his ribs. Then he quickly stepped back, rotated the spear, and drove it through Bob's back. Blood and gore splattered all over the adventurers as Bonecrusher yanked the barbed spear out of Bob's lifeless body.

The adventurers tightened their ranks; as did their anuses.

Orcs roared and pushed through the Bonecrusher.

They were eager for blood.

Hoffman stepped forth.

Oh how glorious he was in his plate armour, shield, and superior dexterity.

He deflected blow after blow.

He left no error go unpunished.

Leticia was to his left; Cesar to his right.

“Waa—”

He smashed the face of roaring orc with his shield, then finished him off with a mighty blow.

Halfling was badly wounded. If it weren't for Lugh's quick reaction, Cesar would've been gone for sure. The elf dragged him out of melee, and then he stepped forth. Despite his pathetic strength and thin leather armour.

Hoffman killed another beastmen with a single blow, dropping its lifeless corpse in front of Lugh.

Shallow stream was getting clogged by orc corpses.

Leticia screamed as she crushed her first orc.

Hoffman followed with yet another powerful attack.

Then he jumped on the pile of corpses and bellowed a war cry.

Orcs hacked him to death, and added his corpse to the pile.

Stream was now more blood than water.

Blood stained cave walls all the way up to the ceiling.

Lugh was quickly brought down.

Cesar repaid his life debt by dragging the elf out of melee.

Both were messed up, barely remaining conscious.

Leticia was the last one standing.

Until she wasn't.

She held her ground for good time.

But her blows weren't connecting.

Her shield and plate armour were dented by orcs' relentless attacks.

She slumped to her knees, bruised and battered.

Bonecrusher grunted in ecstasy as he dragged the spear along the cave wall.

Leticia gritted her teeth.

This is a good death.

Law fighting Chaos.

Nothing to be ashamed of.

Lugh and Cesar had to cover their eyes from a sudden sunburst from within the cave.

Once they were able to see again they were amazed by the sight.

Leticia standing strong; her armour perfectly mint; her hammer and shield with yellowish glow.

Cleric screamed as she leaped from the corpses.

She smashed Bonecrusher's head with a single mighty blow.

Elf and halfling threw themselves at the last surviving beastmen. Together they were able to wrestle one and hack him to death.

Rejuvenated by divine intervention, Leticia fought like a Valkyrie of legends. She crushed legs of one orc, throwing him to the ground. There halfling jumped on him and stabbed him to death.

Lugh killed the final beastman.

Leticia moved the corpses aside. Then she took Bob's Wolfhammer.

The survivors then filled five backpacks worth of coins.

Five hundred gold coins and one thousand and five hundred silver coins, to be exact.

Beats whatever that guy would pay for lizards' tails.

They left the corpses to the stream.

The trio left the cave and returned to Hara.

Thus they were welcomed to the Barbarian Altanis.

## CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 104

### Adventurers

**Hector**, *fighter level 3*. Balding warrior in the dwarf corpse retrieval business.

**Ignaeus**, *elf level 2*. A slightly weathered looking elf with dull blonde hair and chiselled features. Seeks wealth and knowledge.

**Theros**, *cleric level 1*. Young idealist committed to proving himself to

Sashu, God of Justice and Blind Beggars.

**Thorm the Dwarf**, *dwarf level 1*. Ashen hair, beard, and eyes. Left his own clan due to financial trouble.

**Mayonnaise**, *elf level 1*. Albino elf with long white eyelashes, flowing white hair, magnificent white cape, and long two-handed sword.

### Longgrass 14th, Fireday

“We shall recover Bob.”

Hector accepted another mission to retrieve a dwarven corpse; something he was especially gifted at. He recently arrived to Hara, along with his fellow adventurers Ignaeus, Theros, Thorm, and Mayonnaise.

He collected information from Leticia, a retainer of the named deceased. Apparently he was a member of noteworthy Company that resides in Hara, and they wished his corpse to be retrieved.

Reasons did not matter to Hector, only future prospects. So he took his party to the described cave. Thorm remained outside, by the cave entrance.

Exploring the cave system by the entrance led the party to discover evidence of fight by the slow moving stream. There they also found a dead lizard—whose tail they promptly removed for the promised bounty of twenty five gold coins.

Axe heads, fragments of shield, and other iron shavings were lodged into the stream's bed. A naked and beheaded human was thrown on the south side of the stream. The man was dead.

Poorly concealed secret doors led into a small chamber that housed a simple desk, straw-bed and demonic idol of fat humanoid with ram head. Mayonnaise cracked open small chest by the bed. Three hundred gold coins, an emerald, and vial with dark red-brown liquid.

Opting not to follow the stream, adventurers moved north, exploring various smaller caves and labyrinthine tunnels. In one of the smaller caves they found two naked corpses of pig faced humanoids and a sack of rotten grains.

Following a long tunnel, which at one moment slopped downwards, led them into another sizeable cave with five exits. Blood trail indicated something had been dragged into south west tunnel.

Tightening their formation, the party proceeded forward.

“Stop...”

Both elves heard sounds of something munching on a bone.

The party stopped to discuss what should they do next.

Alas, their ingenious planning was interrupted by a giant lizard charging them out of darkness.

Adventurers withdrew back into the chamber, where all four could strike at the reptile. The lizard stood little chance against such coordinated violence.

Mayonnaise took the spear passed to him, and then promptly jammed it into the beast's skull. Next he flung the lifeless corpse to the cave wall like it was nothing but a little toy.

“Wow, are you THAT strong?” other adventurers marvelled.

Either way, another giant lizard tail to remove and drop nearby. After all, they did not want to be encumbered before cleaning out the cave system.

Going down the south east tunnel, adventurers reached a cave so expansive their torchlight couldn't even reach the ceiling. Even the softest of footsteps echoed. Sound of running water could be heard as if it was coming from all directions.

The party soon came upon a curious sight. A slain lizard, next to a dead orc. This orc was dressed and had claw and bite marks. Some twenty feet away from them were four orc corpses, all naked. They lay with broken necks and collarbones, as if they fell from above. But all also had deep wounds caused by slashing and piercing weapons.

A rope ladder hung from darkness, leading up the cave wall.

“I am going up!” Mayonnaise announced, lit up his torch, and climbed. It didn't take him long to reach the top. He stood on the edge, overlooking large cave and his colleagues beneath him. To the south was a shallow, slow stream, lazily flowing south east.

“Come down!”

The elf ignored the calls to return, and bravely went south, into the darkness, to explore the chamber and adjoining tunnels all by himself.

Hector, Ignaeus, and Theros waited for half an hour. Then they decided to follow the blood trail leading east. They encountered two more naked corpses. The trail continued south, down the narrow tunnel. Sound of frothing water could be heard up ahead.

The trio pushed on.

The stream was falling down a series of rocks, causing noise. It wasn't too high, but with all the rocks and slippery limestone, traversing it would be difficult. Stream after the waterfall was effectively an underground river, rapidly gaining depth.

Standing at the shore, adventurers scanned the chamber.

A giant lizard came charging from their left.

Another giant lizard lunged out of water from the south.

The trio tightened their ranks in time and successfully defended themselves from the initial onslaught.

Theros landed a mighty blow. Hector followed by splitting the reptile's head with his hand axe. Ignaeus missed.

Mayonnaise appeared at the top of the waterfall. There he stood, with a torch in his hand, and no missile weapons.

Unwilling to be useless, he hopped down the slippery stones with amazing agility, and joined the fray swinging his two-handed sword.

Theros, possibly distracted by such stupendous display of magnificence, was overpowered by surviving lizard. The beast stood on its hind legs and dropped its weight on the cleric. Then it bit sideways into his unprotected neck, decapitating him with one bite.

Hector avenged his fellow adventurer by severing the giant lizard's tail and letting it die in writhing agony.

Moments later Thorm the Dwarf joined them. He was yearning for some action.

To the south of the stream were two joined caves. A nest of large eggs indicated this was the giant lizard's lair. Close to the waterfall was a dwarf corpse missing left leg, left arm, face, and scalp.

"This must be Bob. What the hell is he doing here?"

Some mysteries can never be solved.

The party picked up Bob's corpse, three eggs, five giant lizard tails, and returned to Hara to collect their bounty.

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## CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 105

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### Adventurers

**Ignaeus**, *elf level 2*. A slightly weathered looking elf with dull blonde hair and chiselled features. Seeks wealth and knowledge.

**Thorm the Dwarf**, *dwarf level 1*. Ashen hair, beard, and eyes. Left his own clan due to financial trouble.

### Warmshade 3rd, Waterday

"Could we finish our investigation of the lizard caves? I am curious to know what is going on there."

Ignaeus was the only one to answer Thorm's call to adventure. The dwarf did not rest still, and he employed two retainers, Soalain and Glamina.

Next he hired a rowboat and crew to take them downstream to the cave.

"We will wait until sundown. If pirates or barbarians appear off we go!"

The party entered the caves few hours after sunrise.

They exited just an hour before sundown.

Ten torches burnt through.

They carefully navigated natural tunnels, exploring every nook and cranny. Always tense, always ready for trouble.

Trouble did find them, without surprise, in another lizards' nest. A giant centipede nested there, but it was summarily dispatched by Thorm's mighty blows. Alas, the eggs were sucked dry and were empty.

A truly valuable cache hid behind a chilly body of water, past wet tunnel. There a skeleton lay, dressed in pristine chainmail. A small, round metal shield was by its side. A curved scimitar to other side. All were in pristine condition, as if unbothered by all the moisture in the small cave.

Satisfied with their thorough exploration, the party recovered these three items and returned to Hara. There they sought identification service from the Wizards' Guild.

### Warmshade 8th, Earthday

Whilst waiting for the identification to be complete, Thorm and Ignaeus spent time going through all the notes and intelligence collected by other adventurers whose Company they had joined.

There was much going on in the region; and the Company had its fingers in many pies. But where to focus? Where to strike next? Who to ally with? What is true and what is not? Much was discussed, and much more has to be discussed.

Invitation came on the noon of Warmshade 8th.

"This is the Bender. It is a magical shield that allows you to deflect two mundane arrows shot at you, once a day." Tangay of Seven Stars presented the shield.

"And this chainshirt I decided to name Zealot's Mail. Besides additional protection it also nullifies any Druidic Magic cast on the person wearing the armour." he continued.

"Finally, the Volmorin's Blade! If the wielder points the blade at someone and yells "Freeze" the blade unleashes Hold Person upon them. Volmorin has been etched in the pommel, hence the name."

The duo was most satisfied with their haul.

But the question remains: what now?

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## IN NEXT ISSUE

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Adventurers under the tower toil towards their freedom. . .



# The PHOENIX NEST

## **BUILDING MY LEGACY**

This is some of the writeup of the Six Gods of Aegis. (Who have suddenly returned to stir up the overly calm political scene in the City.)

This is mostly lore but there is a list of religiously appropriate disadvantages that can be used to pay for levels of Divine Favour which is the mechanic I'm using to reflect Divine power in the City.

### THE GODS OF THE CITY

The legend of the founding of Aegis goes like this.

Once there was a world. It had life, it had people, it had mountains and seas and forests and all the things that people needed to live. They didn't always live well but they and their gods were pleased with that world and expected it to go on forever.

Then came the Dust. The world killer came through some weakness of the defences of the world, some sin of a human mind that looked where it shouldn't, some failure of a divine guardian. No one could say.

Before anyone could rally more than a few survivors the land was transformed into a plain of grey dust as many worlds had done before. The lost ancient civilization had mastered the elements of interdimensional travel and saw the signs of the Dust on many worlds. Perhaps they had brought the seeds of it their home. They thought of fleeing elsewhere but feared they would spread their world's doom elsewhere.

A last redoubt was established but it began to shrink as the Dust pressed in. No defences worked, no salvation could be seen.

**A zine for EVER & ANON 10 by  
Michael Cule**

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And then the Six Gods appeared. Their origins are obscure. Among the speculations over the centuries the following are preserved.

They are artificial intelligences produced by that final civilization.

They amalgamations of the psyches of the last survivors into super-intelligences. (The so-called Twentyman Hypothesis.)

They are products of magical experimentation that allowed the sorcerers access to a new, divine level of power.

That they are demons lying about their nature.

That they are in fact gods.

The Six do not react to any of these hypotheses, even the uncomplimentary ones, but just smile and shrug.

They created the Fane and the Wall which surrounded it, separating the City from the Dust. They sent Uncle out through the four Gates to fetch people who were doomed.

People who were facing certain death or worse than death. They were offered a place of haven and hope and they took the offer. (Some people didn't trust the Gods and they are memorialised each New Year.)

And when the first Four Tribes were present, the Wall expanded and new Gates opened and the process continued. The land was tilled, the Quarters were filled and then the lands beyond. There were four expansions in the first century. Then things slowed.

The Gods did not hand down any sacred scriptures but did make judgements and do deeds and their followers wrote those down. Eventually they established a line of Kings who lasted for a while: "We do not care for government. We have enough to do caring for the world." When the Regency replaced the Kings the Gods stayed out of politics unless the

politics threatened the City and their project to reclaim the world.

More on the Six next time.

## **THE WAY OF THE WORLD**

The Montjaro injections continue to be a bit of a slog. I don't seem to be losing a lot of weight nor reducing my waistline but there are definite changes to my ability to eat and I am tolerating the drug well as they increase the dose on me. I'm told that some people take a while for the drug to have its full effect and some people find they can't tolerate the side effects long enough to reach that level. We will see.

I'm off to Birmingham at Easter for the Annual British National SF Convention. I very much fear that I'm reaching the end of my con-going. I've decided not to attend Chaosium-Con UK nor Convulsion this year. Even Tringcon proved too much for me.<sup>1</sup> I am going to Stabcon at the start of July but it was having a grand idea for the game I could run there over the 4<sup>th</sup> of July weekend was what decided me. I am finding that drinking triggers the flare up in my knees overnight and con-going has always been a fairly lubricated holiday for me. Still I'll see how it goes.

## **CUNNING PLANS AND OVER-REACHING AMBITIONS**

The Monday Night group has had its team of Lictors run into a brewing rebellion against the Magistracy among the nobility some of whom are deeply annoyed with the Magistrates telling them they have been naughty The Lictors narrowly avoided being thrown in chokey and are now in the middle of hostile city with few friends.

## **GLAMOUR DAYS AND NIGHTS**

Player Characters:

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<sup>1</sup> THE PLAIN PEOPLE OF A&E And now they've cancelled the Spring meeting because of the lack of

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 rider and a slave in Vostor's family since he was five. The Wise Servant to Vostor's Bombastic Warrior.

THE JANITRIX A retired military hero, now the manager of the Insula the squad is living with.

PHARNASTES:THE CHIEF OVERSEER: A very important investigator.

SENATOR GEILBONUS SPEAKER OF THE IMPERIAL SENATE: Vengeful Uncle of :SENATOR PAULUS LONGVALE the Master of Circuses. Off screen and hors de combat.

SENATOR FALERIUS AGGARIUS Their landlord and (increasingly) Patron.  
FALERIA AGGARIA, the Senator's daughter

GREAT SISTER: Lunar goddess and sibling to the Emperor.

MAHEDRES An elderly Illuminate with a mysterious background. 'Grandfather' to SOR-ETTE A beautiful Healer and Do Gooder.

enthusiasm. We hope you're ashamed of yerself!  
ME: Just about always.

Lots of lawyers, some dressed in Black.

And an Even More Important Person than last time.

## **AVOID LITIGATION** <sup>2</sup>

We began an instant after the ending of the last episode as Great Sister listened to the Janitrix reporting on the events at the Senator's mansion and the discoveries made there.

So, there they were in the courtyard cleaning the blood off their weapons.

*PUM: You don't want blood rust, you know.*

*DRAK: If there's enough blood on my weapon it will become an iron weapon...*

*GRAHAM: If we have enough blood and we boil it down... eventually you'll have enough for a nail.*

*GM: Actually, eventually you will have a large pile of rust because you don't know how to forge iron.*

*DRAK: I have seen an anime based on that idea. It's over a million people have to die to make a blade.*

The band and Great Sister's bodyguard watched them as the incarnate Goddess and the incredibly senior NCO had words.

**GREAT SISTER:** Castellan!  
*The bat worshipping Senator's chief servant came over and bowed*

**CASTELLAN:** Yes, Holiness!

**GS:** Could you find a place for these soldiers to wait while I make arrangements?

**CASTELLAN:** You wish me to find a place for the assassins of my master?

**VOSTOR** He's not dead! Would be assassins: I'm prepared to admit that!

And the universe had a nasty lurch as the fact that the GM hadn't listened to the previous week's recording became plain. Drak had insisted on healing the fellow to avoid just the unpleasant consequences the GM had thought had occurred. The GM moved time back a fraction.

**CASTELLAN:** You wish me to find a place for those who have assailed my master, Holiness? For... uninvited guests?  
**JARATHIR** Preferably not the dungeon.  
**VOSTOR** We've seen that bit already.  
**KEANUS** He's got some exercise gear down there... Good for your back.

Great Sister assured them she would take their evidence later and asked them to be patient.

*GM: She spoke with the calm of a Goddess who appears about twenty six years old.* <sup>3</sup>

*DRAK: She's the only living goddess I've ever seen.*

*GM: That you know of. Make a luck roll.*

*DRAK: I had to open my mouth.*

*GM (After a roll) You have in fact seen Jar-Eel The Razoress from a distance.*

*DRAK: That was on a battlefield and it was messy.*

*ALAN: Isn't she a Hero?*

*GM: The word 'Hero' has a technical meaning and does not always not align with 'goddess'. There are people who worship her.*

*GRAHAM: There are people who worship me.*

*ALAN: In your dreams...*

*DRAK: There are people who cry out your name...*

---

<sup>2</sup> 10 09 25

<sup>3</sup> I don't know where I got 26 years old from: the writeup in LIFE OF MOONSON said 39

The Goddess let the Castellan take the unconscious and blood-stained Senator away.

They were taken to a quiet chamber where they could relax and even take a nap. Then the Janitrix and the Goddess came in.

**GS:** All right, which one of you is the officer.

**JANITRIX:** (*Poking the snoring Vostor*)

Wake up!

**VOSTOR:** Wuh!

**GS:** Can you please explain the set of circumstances that brought you into this place and caused you to assault the Senator.

**ESHAN:** We first saw him across a roof top... <sup>4</sup>

Eshan wanted to keep back the fact that they had met the Senator (in his Man Bat form) at the other Senator's house but Vostor put the kibosh on that, not wishing to have anyone lie to an actual deity.

**VOSTOR:** There was a vision..

**GS:** Why are you talking now when I'm interrogating your officer?

Which led to the explanation of the Janitrix performing a divination to discover where the other Senator's daughter was being held.

**GS:** At my temple? (*The Janitrix nods*) Harumph.

**VOSTOR:** There's corroborating evidence over in...

**GS:** Did I ask you to speak?

Inspired by his Loyalty Red Emperor Eshan managed to present a clear and coherent report despite the tendency of his

subordinates to mutter in the background and 'help'.

**GS:** (*Fire in her eyes*) Now then would one of you like to volunteer anything to add to that... No, would *you* like to volunteer to explain how you came to be here and explain how you came to chop the Senator's arm off?

**VOSTOR:** I was following orders.

**GS:** And your understanding of the orders was 'chop the arm off the Senator'?

**VOSTOR:** Not specifically but you'll notice that he's still alive.

**GS:** I had noticed this.

**VOSTOR:** I can change it. Did you want to know about the evidence in the tunnel?

She said that she had already explored the building and had found extraordinary changes built into this place since the Senator moved in.

**JARATHIR** We did not intend to attack the Senator. It was in defence of the other Senator since at the point where we accused him of having abducted the Senator's daughter he started casting magic and attacked. We were here to protect the Senator in case of attack. We did so.

**GS:** I will interrogate the Senator separately.

**JARATHIR** He was most concerned about his daughter.

**GS:** Yes, I can see how that might happen. Parents are often concerned about their daughters. I am most concerned about mine.

Now none of them had ever heard of Great Sister having a daughter. And they did notice the feeling look that went between the Janitrix and the Goddess. <sup>5</sup>

an early influence on HER when she was a more junior officer than she is now.

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<sup>4</sup> I refer you back to the previous episodes of this fine chronicle

<sup>5</sup> The Goddess' daughter is a background NPC in LIFE OF MOONSON: I decided that the Janitrix had been

Eshan thought with a Special Insight Human roll that both of them had a relationship to the Goddess' daughter. The Janitrix looked rather smug and pleased with herself.

Jarathir explained that the Bat-Worshipping Senator had started the fight in the courtyard and that they had identified him as the Man-Bat from the testimony of Keanus who had been kidnapped and ferociously interrogated by him. Which was how they knew he had kidnapped the other Senator's daughter.

**JARATHIR** It's a little circular. All the best things are.

**GS:** Are you dabbling in *philosophy*, young man?

**JARATHIR** I try to keep it out of office hours.

After interrogating Keanus and Sandene she then pulled a glass phial from between Her breasts.

**GS:** This is a phial of Styx Water. I keep it around for dealing with vampires, you know. An oath sworn upon the water of the River Styx is so potent that you will throttle if you betray that oath. I will do what I can to ensure that you are tried in front of my court and you will be swearing to the truth of that evidence on the River Styx.

**KEANUS** May I ask Goddess... Why is the water from the River Styx particularly good against vampires.

**GS:** Because they have been separated from Life and this will separate them from UnLife. One drop, one vampire *POOMPH*

**JARATHIR** Useful piece of information. For when we next have some available.

Actually, Keanus should have known that already, being a Humakti.

*GM: (Over muttering) Excuse me.... You could shut up when the Goddess is speaking!*  
*PUM: Oooo.*

**GS:** You will be released on your own recognizances and into the care of my servant here and she will take you back to her insula. There will be a fight about where the trial will take place. If there is *going to* be a trial. I will make a report up to my brother..

An expression of 'Oh, Mother. I'm going to have to report to my brother' crossed the divine visage.

She admonished them to not leave the city, to return to their regular duties, to respond when called to a court of enquiry or a court of criminal jurisdiction or whatever.

**GS:** Do not cause...*Please* do not cause any further disruption in the City than you have already managed to cause.

Drak asked if they should bang their heads on the floor as she rose and left and was told that Proskynesis<sup>6</sup> was reserved for the Emperor.

*GM: Oh and the Red Goddess should she turn up.*

*DRAK: Knowing our luck, maybe tomorrow.*

Vostor wisely waited for the Goddess and HER marching band to depart before complaining that he hadn't caused any of the disruption.

**VOSTOR:** We arrived in the City. Things happened and we responded to them. We didn't cause anything!

**JARATHIR** So you don't think you have any free will?

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<sup>6</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proskynesis>

**VOSTOR:** I didn't say that. We didn't kidnap his daughter. We responded to that.

**SANDENE** But you chose to draw your sword and defend the Senator and in doing so you chose to attack and cut his arm off.

**VOSTOR:** Yes.

**SANDENE** So you caused it.

**VOSTOR:** No!

**JARATHIR** You could have just stood there and been killed.

The Senator and his daughter were (after thanking the squad for the rescue again) were escorted home by a squad of the Great Sister's Guard.

At which point a bald angry old man in very fancy Senatorial robes turned up and began demanding to know where 'the bastard' was. Fortunately, Vostor's muttered reply "He's in bed" wasn't heard which meant Jarathir didn't feel compelled to chop his head off to keep the rest of them out of trouble. He had recognised the old man as the Speaker of the Senate, the noble and distinguished Geilbonus

"And where are the thugs he brought with him? I want them strung up and crucified! Now!"

The Castellán was apologising to the Senator and explaining something about legal stages to be gone through and that Great Sister had taken an interest.

The Castellán signalled to the Janitrix who shouted "Squad! Left-Right! Left-Right!" and marched them back to her place leaving the unfortunate Castellán to explain.

**JANITRIX:** (*When they finally got back home*) Well done. On the whole. You did what was asked of you.

**ESHAN** And we're not dead.

**JARATHIR** And being crucified is not a way I want to die.

**JANITRIX:** You have a list of ways you prefer to die? What's at the top?

**JARATHIR** At the point of orgasm.

**JANITRIX:** Have some consideration for other people, young man.

**SANDENE** He didn't say whose orgasm.

She told them to let her know when they were leaving the building in case court officials turned up wanting to arrest them.

**VOSTOR:** Arrest us for what?

**JARATHIR** Assault on a Senator. You may remember. It was a good half hour ago.

**JANITRIX:** Housebreaking...

And then she told them that the old Senator happened to be Paulis Longvale's uncle. She suspected the Castellán ("Old Albertus") had sent him a message.

Vostor felt outraged that there must have been staff at the Senator's residence who knew what was going on. He had 'loyalty' explained to him and Jarathir said that there was an extent to which what he was doing wasn't even illegal.

**JANITRIX:** If he is a Priest of the Crimson Bat, then it's his responsibility to go around finding people who can be fed to the Bat. It's just they don't normally do it in the Capital City.

**JARATHIR** And you don't necessarily choose people for political reasons.

**JANITRIX:** Some sort of politics *are* crime.

**VOSTOR:** This going to turn political isn't it?

**EVERYBODY ELSE:** It already is!<sup>7</sup>

**VOSTOR:** Vishi! Can you clean this please?

**VISHI:** Yes, master. You had a successful mission?

**VOSTOR:** We haven't been crucified yet.

**JARATHIR** No one died.

**ESHAN:** We may even get a trial.

Vishi was more than willing to do cleaning for his master's comrades and said it was going to be interesting to read what the news said tomorrow.

The Red Moon shone over the City and Keanus went to bed resolving not to be woken by any unusual noises.

Sandene of course was still up, doing maintenance on her equipment when she was approached by the beautiful young woman from across the way, Sor-Ette. You remember, the Illuminate's granddaughter. She was still having an existential crisis about her origins and her grandfather had still not turned up. She couldn't sleep.

"I've paid for a seer to look for him but he wasn't to be found. I managed to provide some of his hair and some of his clothing and the witch said she couldn't find him. Not anywhere. I was terrified that might mean he was dead but then she went all mysterious because they do that."

Sandene speculated that he might be on another plane or in a temple or other warded place. Or of course he could be sufficiently illuminated not to be found when he didn't want to be.

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<sup>7</sup> *GRAHAM: Can you just allow Vostor to be stupid please.*

<sup>8</sup> Martin, you will remember, used to be a policeman.

"I asked the Janitrix her opinion and she said it was best left alone. And I just don't know what the best thing to do is. I keep on doing my work at the hospital and I keep on doing my work for the Sister's Army. I just don't know anything anymore. A large part of our household budget went with him (because of course it did). I've managed to find the rent..."

**SANDENE:** He's not done this before? There's always a first time. Without anything more tangible there's not a lot really that can be done.<sup>8</sup>

**SOR-ETTE:** I suppose not. I also miss him. I'm used to having him around. It's not as if my life isn't busy. It's just there's a hole in it.<sup>9</sup>

Sandene, his player pointed out, was very high in the Death Rune and had zero in the Earth Rune which covers things like empathy. She really shouldn't have been the one doing all this counselling. Also they had been told not to get into more trouble.

*PUM: I will see your Earth Rune of zero and raise you 'Incapable of Love'. Sorry dearie.*

*GRAHAM: Here's a puppy.*

*PUM: They die too.*

They went on about the lifespans of goldfish, hamsters and spiders until the GM ruled that this was probably happening at breakfast after Sandene told them the tale of woe he had heard during the night.

**VOSTOR:** Where's she going to keep a goldfish? She hasn't got a pond.

Breakfast was oat porridge and spicy, small sausages. Vishi said they were lamb

<sup>9</sup> Here Drak made a coarse and unfortunate joke.

sausages with cumin. "There was a dip too but it burned the roof of my mouth."

At which point the Senator turned up

*ALAN: Which one?*

*GM: The one with the daughter.*

**SENATOR FALERIUS** Thank you for the services you rendered me last night and for the rescue of my daughter. I hope to reward you for them as you should be rewarded. But at the moment getting you involved in my affairs might not be a good thing and getting me involved in your affairs also might not be a good thing. I am even more grateful in that it has been confirmed the other gentleman, my Senatorial colleague, is in fact the Chief Feeder of the Crimson Bat. That's secret information but not by lunchtime. You will know because you come from that front that at the Battle of Whitewall, against the barbarians, the Bat made an assault and was destroyed and is now resting in its cage on the Moon. A large number of sacrifices will have to be made to bring it back to this plane.

**JARATHIR** Some people might think it wouldn't be worth the effort. Some people.

**SENATOR:** Are you muttering something I ought to be listening to? No. Good. And when the entire apparatus of the Cult was fed to the Bat that left vacancies which Longvale took advantage of and moved immediately to the top of the cult. I can only assume he is insane. It is the regular fate of the priesthood of the Crimson Bat. Eventually. When they come to the end of their career. If they die a natural death they are spared this but that's a difficult thing to time. Most people who join the cult do it as an alternative to being eaten right away. And once you're in you might as well rise to the top: there are better perks that way. But according to my sources Longvale volunteered. Which is crazy.

**KEANUS** Volunteered to do what?

**SENATOR:** To be head of the cult. He had the rank, he had the resources and he seemed to have some purpose in choosing it. He has been snatching people off the streets, apparently. Tax evaders. Anybody who thinks he's a traitor.

**VOSTOR:** Basically, anybody who opposes him.

**JARATHIR** He could have a true fanatical devotion to the Empire.

**KEANUS** He could be a nutter.

**VOSTOR:** I think nutter. Does anyone care what we think?

All but a few of the previous Chief Feeders had ended up in the maw of the Bat and therefore dead forever.

**SENATOR:** Are you actually a Trickster or something?

**VOSTOR:** What? How dare you?

**SENATOR:** Because if you start drooling and wanting to have sex with sheep it's often a sign.

The Senator hid his face for a moment and then continued.

"Longvale, you know his parents were killed in front of him? The old man, his uncle got the trial of the killer held in front of him and one of his greatest frustrations in life, which he has ranted about to me several times is the fact that the cult of Danfive Xaron took the condemned criminal out of his hands and put him into their rehabilitation program. He was stopped from avenging his family. I think he might want me as a replacement and if he can't get me he might want you. Be warned."

**VOSTOR:** He's got a whole lot of vengeance going on.

Jarathir noted that a lot of people who entered the cult of Danfive Xaron died in the first year. "The whole no making no eye contact with the opposite sex. The whole no enjoying life in any way shape or form thing."

The Senator said he was going to try to keep the whole thing 'on a non-lethal level' but that they should be aware that the Emperor was showing a certain amount of favour towards Longvale. "On account of Longvale promising to organise the best parade ever for him. He wants a big parade."

*ALAN: Would this<sup>10</sup> count as a tick towards Intrigue as we start to understand the politics?*

*GM: It does. So, what are you doing with the rest of your free day?*

*PUM: Not getting into trouble.*

*MARTIN: Staying in, mostly.*

*GRAHAM: How much would a puppy cost?*

*DRAK: We are not....*

A quick Evaluate roll gave an inflated-by-the-Capital sum of 5 to 10 Lunars per puppy.

Then they went to ask the Janitrix whether the insula had rules against pets.

"Pets," she said as she swept up the courtyard, "are at the discretion of the Janitrix. You're thinking of getting her upstairs something to console her while grandfather's not here? On the whole, a yappy dog would be a no. A cat who doesn't meow too much and might hunt some rodents would be entirely welcome and probably made a pet of by the entire building."

A kitten? "See what you can get."

"Vishi, change of orders!"

They came back with a six week old kitten that the current owner had named Stupid.

It was male, jet black except for a patch beneath its chin and had the good taste to hiss at Vostor when he approached.

Putting that aside he and Vishi went upstairs and presented the kitten.

The GM rolled some dice for Sor-Ette's reaction.

"Oh, how cute! Oh how thoughtful! Well, yes. I suppose... It would give me somebody to talk to..."

And again by the luck of the dice she did know a whole lot about raising kittens. She started giving Vishi a shopping list. He started bowing and taking notes. She was effusive in her thanks and praise for Vostor's thoughtfulness.

"It's not the same, but it helps." She stroked the kitten which bit her hand. Vostor took the opportunity to cast Heal on her hand and use his charm to ingratiate himself.

So, when the Chief Overseer of the Grey Soldiers came around, they were all at home.

**CHIEF OVERSEER PHARNASTES:**

I think you ought to know I've turned down the chance to investigate you. I felt I might have to act as a character witness for you. You did come round and tell me what you were going to do. I can't really investigate: it would look bad.

**KEANUS** You would have to recuse yourself.

**COP:** I might have to accuse myself.

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<sup>10</sup> 'All this political talk.'

**COP:** Given that there are two Senators involved it may go to the Emperor's Spoken Word: if mysterious people in black start lurking around you'll know. I have made a report stating how much I appreciated your co-operation in various operational matters and that in my opinion you show more signs of idiocy than treason.

He then pointed out several observers in the streets outside who were keeping tabs on the Insula. "They're not working for my department: I employ competent people."

I explained to them that they were supposed to stay out of trouble not stay at home. Drak said they thought that adventure was going to find them as soon as they stepped out of the door. Eventually, I got Pum to go up to the top of the building and meditate in an attempt to get his Truth Rune working again. (There was a lot of plunging into the very poorly organised rules to discover what on earth the procedures around Meditate were. Nearly a quarter of an hour was wasted thus.)

Vostor did the same and the two of them were up there all the day contemplating their swords.

Late in the afternoon, after a long relaxing day, partly spent getting acquainted with the kitten they resolved that they had successfully Kept Out Of Trouble. The squad of soldiers in black turned up just as they were thinking of going for supper.

"Tribune Eshan? This is your squad?" They were in the uniform of the Black Tribunal, the military-judicial branch and part of the cult of Moonson Soldier. The Janitrix had clearly let them in and when the squad looked over the edge of the balustrade they could see her having a word with her young messenger boy.

"I have warrants to bring you in for questioning. Take a moment to clean yourselves up and put on your proper regular uniforms. No, not dress uniform. No armour. Yes, bring your weapon. You'll be given a chance to surrender it to the court. You're not planning on anything funny are you?"

**JARATHIR** No, sir. (*To Vostor*) Shut up!

Vostor had earlier sent Vishi to get him a baguette anticipating they might not get the chance to eat properly. He had come back with a sandwich for each squad member, chosen to fit their tastes and a flask of water each.

**VISHI** (Taking a look at the warrant.) It just says called for investigation. There are no charges at this time.

**VOSTOR:** That's why (*my family*) sent him. He can read!

Night was falling when they reached the headquarters of the Black Tribunal. They had practiced their parade marching on the way.

"Wait here. Put your weapons on that weapons rack over there. And peace bond it please."

And they marched them into a tribunal room. At light infantry pace.

"Face Right! And Sit!"

There was a panel of black robed people beneath an enormous black sword on the wall.

"This is an enquiry imitated by Grand Senator Geibonus, into actions these soldiers have taken against his nephew, Senator Paulus Longinus. The accusation is that of invading the presence of Senator Longinus

and assaulting him with your issue weapons. I will point out that we do not require you to give oaths here but if you are ever found to have lied to a military tribunal that is an offence punishable by death. If you are ever found to have misled a tribunal that is punishable by death plus torture. Yes?"

**VOSTOR:** Is that death, followed by torture?

**BLACK ROBE:** No, it's torture followed by death.

**VOSTOR:** Why didn't you say that then?

**BLACK ROBE:** One charge of disrespect to a superior officer against whoever that is...

Jarathir wondered what Runes they might be wearing. Moon, Mastery and Law (I eventually decided after a frustrating search in the Lunar Gods book.)

The tribunal was just settling down to consider the accusations when there was a clatter and a bang and the door to the tribunal opened to admit a small person.

"Sorry to be late, I am Egregious FarSpeaker. I am the counsel for these soldiers."

The soldiers did their best to look as if this was not a total surprise to them.

He went into a huddle with them saying that "the Senator" had arranged for him to represent the squad. "I'm not totally familiar with military tribunals but needs must, eh?"

The tribunal then asked Eshan to stand and give a summation of the events of the previous night. "Accounting for the fact that your squad seems to have marched into the

home of a Senator..." One of the other robed figures muttered in his ear. "What? A High Priest? Of what? Oh good grief. The Senator and the High Priest of the Crimson Bat and assaulted him."

Eshan wrapped himself in his Truth Rune and Orated like his life depended on it.

The lawyer stood and said "Given that they were doing so at the request of another Senator I would say that this is clearly a matter of a Dart War and therefore not subject to the jurisdiction of this court."

**BLACK ROBE:** You are aware that partaking in a Dart War is an offence under military law.

**LAWYER:** Urk!

Jarathir raised his hand and asked the court to clarify the meaning of Dart War so they could say whether they had or not, him never having heard the term before.

**BLACK ROBE:** Do not come the Raw Prawn with me. <sup>11</sup>

Discussion broke out among the squad and one of the tribunal members shouted at them to be still.

Jarathir tried to explain everything but his Orate roll was so dismal as to irritate the chief of the Tribunal even more.

**BLACK ROBE:** You're trying to tell me that the Emperor's Divine Sister turned up at your little quarrel

**JARATHIR** With Her band.

**KEANUS** There were lots of witnesses.

**JARATHIR** And then the Speaker of the Senate turned up and demanded vengeance.

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<sup>11</sup> An Australian expression accusing the person addressed of feigning naiveté. I have no idea where that came from. THE PLAIN PEOPLE OF E&A: You

read it THE CRUEL SEA. ME: Yes, yes. But from what depths of my psyche....

**VOSTOR:** He seemed to have made a lot of assumptions.

**BLACK ROBE:** *(After two of them had said they had no idea the 'thugs' the Senator was seeking were)* Tribune, are you leading a squad of the mentally deranged?

Eshan explained the diverse nature of the squad and that they had tasks that included accepting medals from the Emperor. He handed over the paperwork of their original orders and the Tribunal went into a huddle.

They listened in to the judges' conversation.

"They've got the Emperor and his Sister involved in this. Look, this is way above our pay grade. But the Senator... There's only one thing to do."

**BLACK ROBE:** The judgement of this court is in two parts. The first part is that this matter is above the jurisdiction of this tribunal, imposing as it does on sacred and high policy matters. Therefore we will refer this matter upwards to the court of Supreme Justice. And we will refer the complainant to that court where he may argue concerning appropriate action. We will take careful note of all that has been said here and we will forward it to the Court of Supreme Justice. *(Their lawyer fainted)*. The second part is that that soldier there *(Vostor, who else)* is fined fifty lunars for impertinence in the face of the court."

He declared the court adjourned and told the usher to throw a bucket of water over the unconscious lawyer.

The Court of Supreme Justice was of course the Emperor's own court.

The Lawyer was uncertain whether he should disqualify himself or find a specialist who could take over first. They took him back to confer with the Janitrix.

Vostor went to see the young lady and tried to advance her interest in him. And got lucky!

*GM: A kitten can be an instrument of seduction. I'm told.*

The Janitrix said she couldn't go to Great Sister because she was now part of the case and likely to have to plead in front of the Emperor. The Lawyer said it all depended: the Emperor could incorporate the incomplete court of inquiry into his own court, send the case back to a court of inquiry or just try to resolve the whole thing at one sitting. "The Emperor has a tendency to want Get Things Done." He didn't seem happy at the prospect.

**JARATHIR** You know if he's desperately trying not to give us a medal having us executed is one way to get there.

They spent time speculating about what all this means and then Eshan reached into his copious memory (Alan rolled a critical on his Intrigue skill) to produce the following summary of the relationship between Great Sister and The Emperor.

*You have no loyalty to Great Sister. You have immense loyalty to the Emperor. But you know full well that the Emperor prefers the joys and pleasures of the Court to the sticky details of politics and administration.<sup>12</sup> He is the greatest hedonist of all time, according to some people. And the Great Sister is a serious person who cares deeply about the poor and oppressed. How do you think they interact? But it's still*

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<sup>12</sup> **JARATHIR** So if we make the case boring...he'll execute you

*been a matter that has been ordered upwards, quite rightly from a legal point of view.*

Middle of the Night, they were all (except Sandene) fast asleep and warm when a cat goes:

"Mrrroww-row-row-owwwwww!"

An old man's voice said: "Gettoff you damned beast..."

**JARATHIR** Grandpa's home.

The young lady turned up the wick on the oil lamp.

**SOR-ETTE:** Grandfather?

**MAHEDRES** Ah, my dear. *(Looking at Vostor)* Have we been introduced?

**VOSTOR:** We met a few days before you...went missing.

**MAHEDRES** Ah. I came back to renew my uh.... You got a cat.

**SOR-ETTE:** Yes, Grandfather and a lover.

**MAHEDRES:** Yes?

**VOSTOR:** Yes.

**MAHEDRES:** Did I ask you?

**VOSTOR:** You looked at me.

**MAHEDRES** I was trying *not* to look at you.

**VOSTOR:** I'll just go back to being quiet. *(Loud laughter from the rest of the group.)*

The cat hid underneath the bed and hissed loudly. Vostor leaned over and tried to comfort him. He got scratched.

About him there was an intense family conversation.

**MAHEDRES:** I had to get out of the building because that supervisor kept coming around. I can't let him see me.

**SOR-ETTE:** He was here yesterday. Talking to the soldiers...

**MAHEDRES** That is why.

**SOR-ETTE:** *(Looking at Vostor)* I'm really sorry. But could you go back to your own room now.

After a search for his stuff and putting on his tunic and sandals he did as requested.

The next day, Vishi brought spiced fried rice and chicken legs for breakfast. He apologised for the non-breakfast nature of the meat but was told it was so much better than normal soldier fare he could be forgiven.

Actually, this was another point where Alan's log of days didn't agree with other people's reckoning and the GM had to promise to figure it out.

*ALAN: The Red Goddess is the daughter of Time. Time doesn't have to run smooth in Glamour.*

**VISHI:** There are two lawyers to see you.

One was the harassed fellow who had arrived washed brushed and dressed in his finest. Beside him was another legal type who was Incredibly Smooth and condescending.

"The Senator has employed me to represent your interests in this. With the assistant of my learned colleague of course."

His Learned Colleague chimed in with a faint "Of course"

**VOSTOR:** Please convey to our landlord our thanks.

**SMOOTHY:** He feels he has a debt of honour towards you and this is only partial repayment.

**JARATHIR** Do we have a court date?

**SMOOTHY:** This afternoon.

They blinked at that.

**SMOOTHY:** Both Senators were willing to take the first opportunity to get this All Sorted Out. The Emperor will be presiding.

Even Vostor was a little daunted. Vishi patted him reassuringly on the shoulder and recommenced cleaning and polishing his dress uniform.

**JARATHIR** I know you're first urge when you hear a question is to answer it.

**VOSTOR:** Yes.

**JARATHIR** But please, when we are in front of the Emperor only answer if someone has specifically asked you a question and is looking at you for an answer.

**ESHAN:** Because answering out of turn will probably get you crucified and possibly all of us.

They proceeded to brief their barrister on the Vostor problem.

**SMOOTHY:** I see. Would you like a potion?

**VOSTOR:** I don't know. Which potion are we thinking of?

**SMOOTHY** I was thinking of the Dumb Wife Potion.<sup>13</sup> It paralyses the vocal chords. You can claim you have a terrible cold.

**KEANUS** (*Eagerly*) Where do you get that?

**SMOOTHY:** It's quite expensive but I have contacts.

They explored the various orders that Eshan might give to Vostor but explained that he had a tendency to creative reinterpretation of

orders. "There's a reason he has those rank markings." And indeed, his uniforms showed stich marks indicative of multiple promotion to higher rank and the subsequent demotions.

**SMOOTHY:** I have copies (and my how they cost me) of the report from the Black Tribunal last night. You gave a clear and passionate account of the events which I assume (as you have not been crucified) were accurate.

He told them to be ready to leave with him at noon. Keanus went off to the Humakt temple for Seasonal Holy Day. Vostor went across to his Innamorata's apartment which proved to be deserted except for the kitten who he played with. Jarathir went down to let the Janitrix know what was going on.

She had been summoned and was polishing her dress uniform.

Jarathir asked, addressing her as First Spear, whether she considered herself to have been in charge of them the previous night.

"I was there as a consultant I think."

She sighed put, down her polishing cloth and went to have a word with Eshan.

**JANITRIX:** Sir, what do you think our position was last night? Were you in charge or had you handed it over to me or what?

**ESHAN:** I think I deferred to your greater knowledge.

**JARATHIR** That's what you do with an NCO.

**JANITRIX:** Yes, I was there as a senior NCO: having been requested by a Senator I gave what assistance I could. I don't think I can get you out of the line of fire. Well, just

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<sup>13</sup> This is a real thing. I believe. Can't find the details just now.

have to see how it goes. There are so many issues here

**ESHAN:** It's beyond our pay grade. Beyond most of our understanding.

As a last thought she checked whether they had performed a proskynesis<sup>14</sup> before. Eshan had practiced it (his parents had insisted) and she held a brief rehearsal before declaring herself satisfied.

They arrived at the Court Building on time and were directed to wait on those benches over there. On nearby benches were the Speaker of the Senate and their patron Senator, his daughter and a gaggle of lawyers.

The Masters of the Circuses was not present.

At that point the Herald of the Court announced the approach of Moonson Argentus. "All defer to the Emperor!"

They performed their bow-all-the-way-down-and-bang-their-heads-on-the-floor with adequate grace. Jarathir was the only one who got a special and given his increasingly odd mental state since coming to the capital he was struck with awe as he rose and gazed on the Emperor. and saw the divine beauty and power of the Red Emperor. His Illumination rose to the giddy heights of 12% but he was not pushed over the edge into the arms of Rashoran.

**MOONSON:** Very well, very well. What is this case and why was it brought before Us.

A Black Tribunal lawyer rose and began to brief the Emperor. He read out the summary of events provided by Eshan.

"The case brought by the Speaker of the

Senate, is that his nephew who is both the Master Of Circuses and the High Priest of an Imperial Cult, has been attacked in his own home by these soldiers at the instigation of the other Senator."

At a signal the other Senator rose and said that his daughter had been kidnapped by the nephew of the honourable Chairman. That was within the boundaries of a Dart Contest is also something he was entitled to resist by means "not entirely illegal". He pointed out that the Honourable Gentleman's nephew had apparently been kidnapping persons from the streets of Glamour. "I do not know if this was known to your Majesty." The Emperor looked noncommittally at the magnificently decorated ceiling. "And this is without precedent in the history of the Empire."

Then their own lawyer stood up and said "These ladies and gentlemen acted at the direction of a Senator, assisting the civil power. They took no action until attacked by the absent Senator. And they do have an appointment to take part in your parade at the end of the mourning period. They have valiantly served you and should be rewarded rather than punished."

The Black Tribunal lawyer rose and mentioned the question of whether the troopers had taken part in a Dart Contest, a political action forbidden to military personnel.

The way I resolved this was to make a dice roll to indicate how well the old Senator pleaded his case and then asked them if they would like to speak before one of them rolled for the overall effect of their case. None of them did.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proskynesis>

Their Patron was oratorically Brilliant. Their lawyer merely did a good job. The old Senator did not do so well.

"It would be churlish of me," said Moonson, "to punish those who have been brought here to be honoured. Even if they may have stepped across the line into political matters. I shall look forward to seeing them at the Victory Parade. However, my Master of Circuses is currently... languishing. I will visit him myself and give him my thoughts about his recent religious innovations. I will take him some of my Sister's chicken soup. With barley. This does leave me down a Master of Circuses. I will therefore bestow that office temporarily on the Senator to my left. And in order to give him some assistants I will delegate the soldiers from the Second Furthest Foot to act as staff for him."

**SANDENE** We're going to write all the invitations!

**KEANUS** We're going to be SpAds<sup>15</sup> of the circus!

**JARATHIR** Every circus needs clowns!

Senator Falerius did not faint. He did sway a little.

DISTRACTIONS:

*GM: Graham! You are having difficulty with the Resistance-of-the-Universe idea again.*

\* I now have little idea about what I meant by this.

PUM's New Equipment:

*GM: You've got a bigger one this time.*

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<sup>15</sup> Special Advisors. British term for temporary, politically appointed advisors to Ministers. Not A Real Civil Servant

*PUM: Look at that! Fifteen and a half inches mate! 90 quid off e-bay.*

*GM: My word!*

*GRAHAM: Look, it's my job to take us into the gutter...*

## **COMMENTARIAT ON E&A 9 WILL HAVE TO WAIT TILL NEXT TIME**

### **MY FINAL WORD FOR THIS ISSUE:**

Is in response to a query from Lisa Padol

A **woggle** is a 'kneckerchief slide' a fastener often of leather used to keep a Scout or Guide's neck scarf in place.<sup>16</sup>



**Take good care of yourselves and each other you group of diverse strangers brought together by the reading of the will of a Good Friend of you all.**

<sup>16</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woggle>

# Attacks of Opportunity

Issue 9, Dylan Capel

A bit of politics to start which really shouldn't be politics. Children shouldn't be in prison. Children shouldn't be targeted and killed by military forces. I feel like this is moral position that somehow has been degraded into an opinion. The carelessness of adults feels like a failure of decency.

*The children are always ours, every single one of them, all over the globe; and I am beginning to suspect that whoever is incapable of recognizing this may be incapable of morality.* - **James Baldwin**

## Reading

### History

I've been reading *Proto* the history of the Indo-European family of languages and *The Silk Roads* about the historical civilisations that existed in the area that has been historically described as the Silk Road and *Lakota Nation* which attempts to tell the history of the Lakota in their own terms rather than framed by the emergent American nation.

All are full of fascinating little snippets of information and in some cases interesting speculation such as the idea that one might have your affiliation and permission travel as a sword decoration so that those seeking to impede you can either accept your right to pass or acknowledge your willingness to defend yourself.

The use of the silk bolt as currency I found really interesting. It's an example of a trade good that has inherent utility in the making of clothes but which ends up a currency much more than being used as raw materials. Bolts could be chopped up or get so aged that they would be hard to turn into attractive clothing but their value was retained long after the utility of the material. Its truth as currency comes when a magistrate asks a merchant how much a number of bolts would fetch in the market when trying to decide the size of a fine to impose, a very early mark to market!

I'm always a bit surprised that healing potions (in games that use them) haven't occupied a similar role.

*The Silk Roads* tries to dispell the romantic notions of the caravans across the desert. According to Chinese travel passes although merchants did move spices and silk around the area and did often hire guards and animal handlers, the groups were often very small perhaps 12 to 20 people and it may have been common that the merchant and their retinue were moving sacks of goods with the aid of a few donkeys or camels.

I think this smaller scale is actually more the scale of action we like in fantasy roleplaying rather than capital heavy big expeditions.

### Plague and ruin

One of the things that runs through the various narratives is how many times disease has depopulated areas leaving space for new groups to move in. The Justinian Plague in the Mediterranean, smallpox amongst Native Americans. I often think that the popularity of post-apocalyptic entertainment is our failure of imagination of different futures but looking into the past explorers and scouts have repeatedly encountered the mysterious remnants of their predecessors.

The scale of desolation in the Native American smallpox epidemic is hard to comprehend and the description of unburied skeletons in the woods in *Lakota Nation* was evocative. The

description of people being abducted and being forcibly inducted into the tribe and being renamed to symbolically return the dead to life was at once horrifying and tragic.

And if it isn't disease then changes in climate have often led to famine for farmers and loss of pasture for herders. It is often a cliché that is easier to imagine the end of the world than a different one but I was struck how frequently people might have encountered empty spaces and the echoes of the people who came before them.

The Bronze Dark Age is something that I don't think gets enough attention in the modern mind, perhaps because so little has come down to us from those civilisations.

## **Dragon magazine**

Just before Christmas I bought a few cheap copies of Dragon magazines, primarily because they had great cover art. I still read and find inspiration in my collection of vintage British roleplaying magazines but re-read the Dragons I was struck at how dull they are.

One of the issues (138) has an article about the Black Plague and how something similar might be used to freshen up a campaign world. That is an interesting concept but like a lot of the articles it feels like someone writing a school report making lots of reference to historic theories of the transmission of the disease, estimates of the population loss and economic and social impacts. In many ways it is a pre-internet piece of work, it brings together a lot of information that might not have been easily available at the time.

However the OSR demand for “playable material” rings out, what use is historical information in a world of manifest gods, magical healing and sometimes brutally rational and modern thinking?

By comparison the focus in popular history is not just on bulk facts but the thoughts of the people present (if recorded), the cultural artefacts they leave behind and interpretation of the archaeological record as populations shrink and disappear. This is better inspiration.

## **Tower Dungeon Volume 3**

Fortunately it feels like the creator, Tsutomu Nihei, has a sense of the corner their writing themselves into and springs into action to free themselves. The deserters who had our protagonists at their mercy are dispatched so brutally, once the tables are turned, that it is clear that the protagonists are equally prepared to use force and withhold mercy to achieve their goals.

It turns out that one of the party has been hiding something! The group is out of the magical cure-all panacea! They have to go forward into the dungeon now, risking everything if they want to rescue the princess. Stakes are properly re-established and there is an excellent battle against a monstrous basilisk. Towards the end of the volume Yuva makes dream contact with the Princess because he (yawn) is secretly of royal blood (and probably a chosen one to boot). Sorry for the spoiler but this is a bit of tedious reveal given that Yuva's parentage is mysterious right from the start of the story. What redeems it though is a bit of revelation that the physical form at the top of the tower is unconventional and perhaps unravelling. This is the right kind of storytelling, give us a twist on the cliché.

And while I've mostly been talking about the plot the artwork is excellent over these chapters. Chapter 7 ([link below](#)) really leapt up for me. Be warned that it is quite gory (and perhaps atypically so for most of the comic) but the details of the character's faces is excellent and the composition of the panels and the way our eyes are guided around the scene and the fight is excellent. The final panel is also excellent in terms of composition and in making reference to more classical paintings. If you don't fancy the gore just skip right to this final panel, it has more punch if you appreciate the suffering the characters have gone through to get here but I think it is just a great picture even if you have no context for what is happening in it.

# Playing

*Questworlds* got a more successful outing recently. This time I went with pre-gens and asked players to spend all the points before starting the game. I also went with fixed normal difficulties rather than rising tension. I really appreciated being able to describe all the characters in terms of their main attributes (Irritable Mage with Adorable Dog) but also leaving room for the players to customise the characters how they saw fit.

I was also clear that the game was about defeating opponents not killing them. I also gave a little bit of time for the group to socialise with the people they were planning to rob which meant that they as players also didn't really want to kill people, just steal their money.

I feel the game is starting to fill a distinct niche for me now: narrative games where people want more structure than freeform, character plot armour that feels natural, high fantastic abilities and low grimdark qualities.

It is also trivially easy to port any existing game or setting to and give it that narrative feeling, you simply write the name down as a trait and give it a score.

The rulebook is so dense though that it feels it is a really bad introduction to the system, I really doubt that anyone who doesn't already know the game is going to have the motivation to wade through it to learn.

# City building

I meant to write about this last issue but ran out of time and space. I used to definitely be someone who need to understand how fantasy cities got their water and food, how the city might be defended and why it was originally founded. I've enjoyed reading about urban archaeology and about how ancient cities operated at their heights.

I'm much more relaxed now but when creating my own cities I do like to create the backstory that explains the city. Water supply is still something I find intriguing as access to and control of water can turn out to be a huge element of play in the fiction.

I think it is really useful to use (paraphrasing) Chris McDowall's approach of: why was this built? What did it used to be? What is it now? This allows the bones of the past to project through to the current future and in particular where cities are meant to have underworlds to explore the suggestion of a hidden past is always valuable.

I've also enjoyed adding depth to cities but having general moods that affect the city and its inhabitants. *Sharps of the Knife* has a Madness level where the city starts off more or less like a typical fantasy environment with magic, however as the Madness rises the random encounters and behaviour of key NPCs change. For a city like *Warhammer's Altdorf* this would be a perfect mechanism to reflecting the rising and falling fortunes of a city under the influence of a malign god.

# Meta

I was quite interested to read that so many people had preferences for smaller, varied zines. It feels that despite the actual page limit that perhaps round about three pages of content and two of comments is maybe the preferred ideal.

The point that a few people made it is not just the size of the zines but the number of contributions that matters definitely skews to smaller page counts so people can keep contributing. The breadth of writers is definitely something I appreciate even if I don't always have specific comments and thoughts on every zine.

# Comments

Another super nice cover, chapeau Baran Yenileyen.

## Elf

I was quite interested to read about your desire to catalogue your bundles and your ideas of what data dimensions matter to you. I have generally found the bundle browser to satisfactory for me when I get a new bundle but I am also frequently surprised that I own something.

I think the incredible number of games that have now been part of bundles means that I feel compelled to try something from the backlog despite the compulsion of the hot new game.

## Paul Holman

*Formula De* was my previous favourite racing game but I also really like *Pitch Car* as a dexterity game with an authentic racing feel.

## Gabriel Roark

I liked your idea for having a “temple boost” to spell casting, I think it would definitely add another tactical element to the factional warfare in *Temple of Elemental Evil* if there were more effects based on which element you are aligned with and where in the dungeon you currently are. I was also thinking that maybe being present in a temple could give you access to unique spells, perhaps related to whoever the temple is dedicated to or whatever the temple commemorates.

I **also** misread the name of the game when I first saw it and thought it was a bronze age OSR game. It took a friend to correct my mistake and say that it was worth reading from a game design point of view.

## Avram Grumer

I liked the latest layout for your zine, the header in particular was very swish.

I understand the appeal of making a critical roll “special” but I do prefer the idea of binding the metamorphosis into the narrative of the game.

## Patrick Zoch

The eternal dilemma of the time we have available and all the games in the world! I haven't played *Power Grid* in decades probably, I loved the look of the components but my memory was that it too much a gamer's game and perhaps a bit long for the fun it offered.

I'm with you on letting the river define the city. I've looked at a lot of ancient city plans and it is always water first and natural defenses second.

## Joshua Kronengold

Writing from hospital seems both worrying and reassuring. I hope the results of the investigation are good news.

I think if you have invested in learning the Emacs keybindings then it is hard to get significant additional value out of a lot of editors. I remember when I was learning UNIX suspending a lot of *vi* jobs and obviously not understanding what that meant and how I could stop or resume them.

## Lisa Padol

28 films, *28 Days Later* and *28 Months Later* form a film and a sequel. *28 Years Later* is currently a pair of films shot back to back and released about a year later where the story follows from

one into the other but directors and focus of the story is different in both. Probably if you were now to watch them back to back the thread of the story is totally different to what you thought it was in the first film. I believe the creative team (who didn't work on *28 Months Later*) want to make the "Years" series into a trilogy but will only be able to do it if the funding works out and I think *The Bone Temple* might not have done enough box office to be a straight-forward greenlight.

I've seen every film **except** *28 Months Later* and they are all excellent.

Apologies if I've misunderstood about *Delta Green*, maybe I've fallen for their propaganda.

## Myles Corcoran

Those are the rules I've used from *Kriegsmesser* too and I think that they are pretty sound for the most part, they definitely work quite well for mysteries and conspiracies as the graded failure on the rolls makes it quite fun when the mechanics and the narrative are meshing.

I guess the lighter tone is maybe more appropriate for the historical world given that we haven't as yet activated the warp gates and flooded our world with monsters.

It's interesting to read that you're not really using quite a chunky set of the sub-systems of *Mausritter* I have previously enjoyed *Mouse Guard* and have wondered about trying to fuse the best of both systems.

## Patrick Riley

Just to say that the dice chain isn't my system so I can't say too much about the design theory about it. What I liked was that the basic 'taking 10' mechanic means that you have very predicatable outcomes but if you come across a situation where you can't take the consequences of losing you have to gamble to get a higher number but may still yet fail.

It may be that the randomness needs a bit of tweaking to get the right range of skewed results before you get to the traditional 'swingly' d20.

## Links

- James Baldwin, Notes on the House of Bondage, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/notes-house-bondage/>
- The Silk Road, <https://global.oup.com/ushe/product/the-silk-road-9780190208929>
- Tower Dungeon Chapter 7, <https://w9.tower-dungeon.com/manga/tower-dungeon-chapter-7/>
- Sharps of the Knife, <https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/359884/sharps-of-the-knife>

# Firedrake's Hoard

Number 8: 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>
- Licence: AI0-BY-NC-SA-1.0 <https://www.humanscommons.org/>
- This zine contains no content produced by generative AI tools.



## Look On My Works, Ye Mighty, and Despair

Having written the software for it, I want to run a PDF-APA. I therefore propose to launch *Of Dice and Meeples*, which will broadly follow the *E&A* pattern, but with the overall topic of boardgaming (including cards, dice, etc.) rather than role-playing. I hope some of you may be interested in contributing.

If you're interested, please take a look at the web site [here](https://tekeli.li/of-dice-and-meeples/) (<https://tekeli.li/of-dice-and-meeples/>). I aim to bring out the first issue early in May.

And because I'm not doing enough already, I'm also working on *Drive Relaxation*, a fanzine for the *2300AD* setting, though so far I haven't attracted any offers of articles from anyone else. See [here](https://tekeli.li/drive-relaxation/) (<https://tekeli.li/drive-relaxation/>) for that one..

## Recent Games

**Lions, Tigers & Dragons:** We've been sent to the RAF base at Habbaniyah (Iraq is administratively linked to India as far as the Empire is concerned) following the military coup in that country. There's sabotage going on which may well fall within our magical competence, but also an Iraqi force nearby that seems to be getting ready to attack. That clearly isn't going to go well for anyone. Our expert



via Imperial War Museum, 1943

diplomat goes out to broker a peace that won't involve their calling in the Germans (and, ahistorically, will leave the coup's beneficiaries in charge); meanwhile the other half of the party chases down the saboteur. Unusually in our experience, he's actually wearing his correct uniform and prepared to be taken prisoner. He's not able to talk much, though, thanks to a knife to the kidneys he didn't see coming before he had a chance to surrender.

**2300AD / Bayern:** Group 1 (Whartson Hall) has moved on; the scout ship of the flotilla made a calibration pass through a new star system, not expecting it to be terribly interesting, but picked up a distinctly human-standard emergency locator beacon on a livable-looking planet. Our heroes track this down to a small island on this largely water world, land

the exploration ship (it's designed for it, unlike most ships in this setting), and start looking for the beacon. They check out several sites that showed anomalous radar and IR returns on the way down, and apart from the scorched metal débris there's some sign of habitation. On a very small scale, and judging by what's decayed and what's left it was at least a hundred years ago, in the very early days of FTL travel.

Eventually our heroes piece together the wreckage, the graves, and what little writing has survived, and there's a rather fine handout giving the last survivor's message for the future.

There's not a lot of "adventure" here, beyond some animal attacks, but I think we all very much enjoyed the unexpected and mildly tragic human story; I certainly did.

(This game's now on hold for a bit while we play *Amazing Adventures*. And for reasons of scheduling, Group 2 hasn't had a session between these particular *E&A* deadlines; they'll be going into this segment next.)

**The Day After Ragnarok:** We talk to the local contact in Macau and set up a meeting in the House of Good Fortune, a casino that's generally regarded as neutral ground. That does mean better clothes than we brought with us, but fortunately we're in Macau. (Don is the sort of man who looks as if he's just been poured into a suit for his court appearance, however good it is.) We meet someone who's rather more into the covert play-acting than we are (recognition phrases and so on), but he does appear to have the Jade Scroll to sell.

As we're trying to arrange a private room, another patron hauls out a gun and shoots our contact; we do our best to keep him safe and return fire. That guy takes a lot of shooting (we're more careful about not hitting fellow

customers than he is), and while Don's patching up the contact afterwards a young lady plays concerned to try to get up close and inject him with something. Don's not that great a fighter, but he holds her off long enough for his friends to get involved.<sup>1</sup> She runs outside to her reinforcements, but they don't try to move into the casino in force, just wait for us to leave. That leaves us stuck inside, though Brown, the local agent in place, is coming with a car.

(Among other things, this firefight demonstrates why with *GURPS* guns of this era, much like real ones, a big slow bullet beats a small fast one if you want to damage something tougher than a standard human. That this gives Don an excuse to carry a Webley-Fosbery in .455 is *pure coincidence*, honest, and I am not really a firearms narg,<sup>2</sup> I just play one on the Internet.)

Next session: Danilo, the contact, is happy to take Madame Roulette (casino owner) up on her offer of sanctuary here; he's also not in great shape to be moved. So now it's just a question of getting ourselves (and the item) out. Sewers don't seem promising (this is a *port* city after all). We spend some time thinking about how we can get out of this situation, ideally *without* charging a group of well-prepared and well-armed goons.

"This is starting to sound like the sort of behaviour that gets people medals. Sir." (Don)

Some improvised bulletproofing enchantment helps, and we take down the local talent. The fast-moving Soviet Man-Apes are less expected. Once Don runs out of bullets, he's reduced to

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<sup>1</sup>She gets a jab at him with the syringe, but he toughs it out. He's met Australian spiders, after all.

<sup>2</sup>A piece of slang I stole from Cambridge people; "Not A Real Gentleman", i.e. someone who went to the University to *learn stuff* rather than have fun. Loosely cognate with "geek" or "nerd" but I prefer the sound of it.

punching, but we prevail and make it to the airfield, and the pilot who's on alert for us.

Which would be fine, except for the rocket troopers...<sup>3</sup> Fortunately they want the Scroll, rather than just setting out to destroy the aircraft, so they grapple and board, which makes them much easier to shoot. We limp on...

**Amazing Adventures / The Mask of Yhtill:** We get into a fight in an alley (four zombies, three cultists) and engage them with firearms, hypnosis, and a stout British umbrella.

GM: "I didn't expect you to kill half the combatants in the first round of the fight." Me: "Anyone would think we were war veterans or something."

We keep one of them alive, and interrogate him; it turns out that he's a member of a *different* esoteric order, this one opposed to the return of Alhazred and the Thule Society. They really should have said that before attacking us.

"Good heavens! We actually *are* on the same side! I know I said that just now, but I thought I was fibbing." (Ken)

It looks as though we need to head out into the Empty Quarter towards the Nameless City, which naturally we do by air (I'm an ace pilot, after all).<sup>4</sup> All three parties arrive at the Nameless City at the same time: us, the Nazis (ya gotta have Nazis), and the mad thing that used to be the erring husband we're theoretically

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<sup>3</sup>Don actually knows how to use a flight pack, but that's a normal and sensible mad science flight pack with an Ophiline-enhanced jet engine in it, not one of these rocket things.

<sup>4</sup>Brief discussion over what sort of aircraft might actually be available that'll take all of us and a decent load of supplies; a DC-2 seems like the best bet, since the DC-3 has just been introduced in 1935. We all know that the exact stats aren't going to matter but it's nice to have a reference for the imagination to work on.



via USAF, 1937

looking for. Not clear yet why the Thule Society are opposed to the mad guy, but perhaps they have their own candidate for Alhazred Reborn.

## What else I've been doing

Airecon! Second largest game convention in the UK, in Harrogate. As I've said before, I mostly go to these things for the boardgaming; by request I'd brought along my copy of *Firefly*, always a long game but usually good fun as it was in this case. More on that [in my blog](https://blog.firedrake.org/archive/2026/03/Airecon_in_2026.html) ([https://blog.firedrake.org/archive/2026/03/Airecon\\_in\\_2026.html](https://blog.firedrake.org/archive/2026/03/Airecon_in_2026.html)).

## On the Undead

I have a general theory of the undead which I find useful in describing how they work in various games.

A living body with a spirit in it is a metastable system: the spirit generates air-energy and gives the excess to the body to animate it, while the body generates earth-energy to anchor the spirit to Cartesian space.

In an undead creature this association is broken because no living body is involved. Something else must provide earth-energy and drain the excess of air. This varies by type of undead.

In skeletons and servitor zombies, that's the animating enchantment (which therefore needs some sort of energy input itself, whether that's ambient magic or occasional refreshing of the spell).

For feral (i.e. uncontrolled) zombies and ghouls it's the consumption of body parts, particularly highly ordered ones such as nervous tissue.

For vampires it's the consumption of blood.

For mummies it's the strict order of a properly-constructed pyramid.

For ghosts it's the terror and life energy of victims. (And the air-energy produces secondary apparitions, because there's no physical body at all.) For some ghosts it's the obsession that keeps them anchored to this reality, the thing that they *need to do* before they can move on.

For liches it's the magical obsession that led them to lichdom in the first place.<sup>5</sup>

The key is that this is an essentially unbalanced process: they have to get earth-energy from somewhere, perhaps in addition to whatever their native mode of unliving is, and this is why they're associated with cold and soul-draining. A sufficiently advanced enchantment might be able to take the place of a physical body and convert surplus air-energy into usable earth-energy, at which point one might well have something functionally immortal...

## On Programming the Undead

"ZombOS puts the power to raise an undead horde in the hands of *everyone!*"

The core premise: unintelligent undead work like computers. You have to give them commands, like "stand outside this door, slay

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<sup>5</sup>I've always had a soft spot for the magician so absorbed in esoteric study that they gradually forgot to eat, drink, breathe, etc.

anyone who does not present the correct authentication token, if any of you is damaged beyond intrinsic recovery press the emergency button". Those commands hook into their senses and bodies, and operate on multiple levels: even the simple example above requires them to recognise the authentication token, work out where they are, fight, and determine their state of damage. Those are multiple separate processes, and something needs to coordinate them and manage the communications between them. This starts to look a lot like an operating system.

So let's say it is. What does that give us?

Well, necromancy develops a new subskill. Some necromancers just use the simple approach ("skeleton army, smite the forces of light"), but it's much more efficient if you get down into the fiddly details and write a full decision tree. Do you actually find necromancy *interesting*, or is it just a means to an end for you?

But also how do the programs go wrong? Can they exhaust the quite limited available computing resources, leaving a zombie locked up in an endless loop? How do you do a factory reset?

## The best/worst/funniest monster combat tactics

I don't tend to have a lot of big fights in my games. I have often said that the ideal *GURPS* or indeed real-world combat goes something like:

"Hey, Fritz, did you hear something?"

*gurgle*

*thud*

and my games tend to follow that pattern. But I have always been a fan of fighting smart: if I'm running a band of low-powered monsters, they don't have to be too bright to realise that there are lots of things tougher than them out there, and like guerrilla fighters in the face of a well-equipped army, they have to use what advantages they can garner. That often takes the form of harassing attacks, things that will wear down the party's resources whether they defend against them or ignore them. Try for mobility kills (traps that affect someone's ability to walk, thrown nets) to break up the party; use cover, make cover (smoke is good, noise-makers and fireworks are better); the fight you want to have is, like my example above, the one where the bold adventurer doesn't know you're there until you and six of your friends are perforating his spleen from behind.

It's not always going to work of course. But consider: the kobold of today is the product of many generations of kobolds who *weren't* killed before reproducing. Think of it as evolution in action.

In my magical WWII game *Irresponsible & Right*, there was a very firm selection pressure applied by the PCs to the Nazi occult establishment: those who came into the forward areas and weren't *very sneaky* tended to get killed or captured. So those sneaky guys were the ones who went home and told their fellow magicians how they'd survived, and over the course of the war this style tended (with some exceptions) to become dominant. (This is slightly derived from Uli Steinhilper's autobiography *Spitfire On My Tail*: the German pilots who'd fought in the Spanish Civil War were the Big Heroes of the Luftwaffe, so the recommendations they made about procedure tended to be followed, right or wrong.)

## We Also Heard From

*Comments on E&A number 9*

**Brian Rogers:** I still have a soft spot for *Chill*.

What does the scripture of Kor have to say about paralysing and eating anything smaller than yourself?

Nifty story with the stone medusa (though I still prefer the term "gorgon").



Caravaggio, 1596

The 1970s Lady Satan might simply feel that she's inevitably slowing down and sooner or later that's going to cause trouble, so better to get out of the action game *now*. (Always with the possibility of coming back for One Last Op of course.)

RYCTM/7 on *Mission Impossible*: I like that as an approach to planning! I know many players who don't like extended planning sessions, but I find I don't mind them.

On "player skill" however defined, I don't have a quote to hand, but I care much more about knowing what your character would do in this

situation (*in* character) than about knowing exactly how many dice to roll and how to interlock three separate minor abilities to produce something overwhelming.

On *Star Wars*, I think the WEG version did a great deal to extend the background into one in which other important things can happen, but I don't get that feeling from the films alone.

RYCT Miles Corcoran/7: at the core of it all, we're each a collection of leaky sacks of disgusting fluids inside a bigger sack.

RYCT Lisa Padol/7, I'd be very tempted to have the extra weight of treasure make the difference...

RYCTM/8 I agree, the *Doctor Who* initiative system is great for encouraging people not to go fighty. Not seen *Stargirl* but yes, that kind of thing.

**ChrysalisM & Felicity:** Welcome!

**John Redden:** RYCTM, my name is "Roger Bell\_West"; "Roger BW" is also fine..

RYCT Paul Holman, these days there are a lot of different magic systems for *GURPS*. It's not just the one that was clearly inspired by dungeon delving games any more.

**Clark B. Timmins:** Just a hostile undead? The Glass Sarcophagus seems as though it ight do so much more: for example, the possibility of recovering its victim (probably via healing, resurrection, then lots more healing).

**Lisa Padol:** RYCT Brian Misiaszek, I've run a game (of solar system exploration about 150 years in the future) in which whole swathes of the system were irrelevant to gameplay: you're on the mission to Mars, it doesn't really make a mechanical difference whether you were rich or poor back on Earth. So that was all left entirely

within the players' choice and used purely for characterisation.

RYCTM, *The Mask of Yhtill* is the adventure in the *Amazing Adventures* core book. And I'm not running this game, so I haven't read it.

The guard in my example has been aged by time-distorting magic. (Technically he'd probably suffocate first. But I think it's more interesting if he's written out a very lengthy description of what's happened to him, most of which has then crumbled to dust...)

Regarding the progressive encounters, yes, one might fudge things a bit so that there aren't too many plots going on at the same time, but I'm thinking mostly of the sort of exploration game that sees the PCs spending a long time in the same area.

RYCT Michael Cule, I've written a program which (given date and location) will give sun and moon rise/set times, and moon phases. This is nice to have ("we're doing the op tonight, where's the moon") but I try not to be bound by it.

RYCT Avram Grumer, given that I'm running table games rather than LARP, I aim to produce pregens that can be at the very least male or female; I should probably branch out a bit more. (Easy enough to change the name and pronouns fields on my character sheet generator, and in a sufficiently modern or fantastic setting it doesn't need to have *hugely* changed their life story.)

**Matt Stevens:** well, as you found, there's pulp and pulp. Chandler is pulp with the man "who is not himself mean [...] a man of honor [...] the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world". Doc Savage is pulp which is effectively four-colour superheroes

except superheroes haven't been invented yet, where there are Good Guys and Bad Guys and a delicate brain operation can make every criminal into a productive member of society.

Regarding politics, one of my concerns is that "we don't talk about politics" can very easily become "we don't question the status quo" — because questioning or objecting to what the government is doing is, innately, political. And of course politics is a ripe subject for RPG material, whether it's a disguised version of the modern day or something entirely disconnected.

RYCT Michael Cule: Doug McNaught of the Scary Devil Monastery said back in the day: "The US is so big, and throws its weight about so much, that other countries are forced to keep aware of our blunderings in self-defense, sort of like sharing the machine room with a water buffalo."

**Erica Frank:** That looks like a three-valued setup for GM status. I think the easiest to query would be two booleans: "can this be played without a GM" and "can this be played with a GM". (Nothing, presumably, would have false/false. Though I suppose an RPG as pure art, designed to be appreciated by being read, might qualify.)

**Attronarch:** What was Rorik's cause of death in 101? Progressive blood loss from the wounds, or something else?

**Myles Corcoran:** RYCT Avram Grumer: heh, I know Sandra via Mastodon. There are clearly lots of things we'd dislike about each other's gaming styles if we sat at a table together, but we have interesting conversations even so.

**Pum:** RYCT Dylan Capel: *Rallyman* players represent! Also a big fan of *Steampunk Rally* and *Lemminge*.



Roger BW, 2026

RYCTM: indeed, I wrote [a basic JavaScript dice roller](https://tekeli.li/js/dice.html) (https://tekeli.li/js/dice.html) specifically designed to be downloaded and run locally if you want to. (I don't need to see your rolls.)

**Patrick Riley:** if someone came up with the perfect system that needed no supplements, they'd vanish under the wave of new Kickstarter announcements anyway...

Regarding just buying the best weapons and armour, I've read of a system (D&D-related?) in which you start with your father's sword or whatever, and that is The Sword that you will keep as part of your legend, so as you develop as a character you will unlock cool new powers that you can do... *with that sword in particular*.

*St Faustina* looks interesting... how long would you expect to run it for, in real time?

RYCTM sorry, I am entirely unable to keep track of who knows about which of the things I do.

RYCT Miles RHCTM, one of the things I liked in *Outgunned* character generation is that, separately from your archetype with the skills

and such, you can opt to be Young or Old. Young heroes have fewer Feats but are harder to kill; Old heroes have an extra one, but are one step closer to death.

RYCT Avram Grumer, I have certainly met (male) players who get very creepy about their female characters.

RYCT John Redden, I know some people who feel that *Traveller* is any game that uses the Third Imperium setting, some who feel that it's any game that uses a recognisably *Traveller* set of rules (e.g. not **GURPS** or Hero or d20), and some who insist on both.

**Michael Cule:** Have you read Ted Stein's *Acts of God?* It's a history of "natural disaster" in America, and how public policy before and after always has a very significant impact on what happens and to whom. (I read the version published just before Katrina hit New Orleans, and it's pretty much a what-will-happen.)

Re the city in mourning: the mimes aren't working. "Oh, I'll always remember the days after Dragonrise. It was as if a great curse had been lifted from the city."

"You'd *have* to be mad to volunteer to be part of the Cult Of the Crimson Bat." — but it doesn't help.

Using Herd to organise troops: I have heard of one PC who ended up developing the skill of Animal Handling (Peasants).

RYCT Myles Corcoran: *Transhuman Space* canonically has idolons, AIs who think as much like a specific individual as can be managed from analysing their public records. Nobody seems to have come up with a reason why this is worthwhile.

RYCTM I think the problem... one of the many problems... with *Space: 1999* is that they

had this lovely if unworkable concept, and then half the time just used it to tell planet of the week stories like *Star Trek*. Also, congratulations, you've just reinvented *Stargate: Universe*.

**Avram Grumer:** *Zen and the Art of Tentacle Maintenance?*

Re Hot & Cool subtype McLuhan: I think also that a new career or ship design for *Traveller* won't tickle the inner munchkin the way a new class for *D&D* can. Not the only thing it does of course, but not to be ignored when judging popularity.

Re Hot & Cool subtype *Monsterhearts*: I want to oppose Sharp with Blunt. I offer no claims of practicality or usefulness.

Re Too Many Lightning-Bugs: I think the framing vocabulary is important too. "Stress" sounds like a measure that goes *up* as you get more stressed. So if you did instead want to implement it as a number that went down and did bad things at zero, it would be better to call it something positive like "willpower" or "mental resilience".

RYCT Elf: (and you may well know this but just in case) a lot of name generators use tables of word fragments and connections between them. E.g. if you fed one both "Ro-ger" and "Ro-ber" its internal data structure would say "after 'Ro', 50% 'ger', 50% 'ber'". An essentially similar process with much larger data sets is how modern genAI works; all the rest is sharp salesmanship and the ELIZA Effect.

RYCT Matt Stevens: I don't have the details, but as I understand it during bomb cleanup in England in 1940 one of the soldiers clearing rubble, an amateur typographer, realised that they'd stumbled on the vault of the closed-down

British office of the main German type foundry. So they had masters for all the fiddly little variants of Fraktur used by specific Nazi agencies for paperwork, on permits, and so on. They, and he, were quickly disappeared into the intelligence community...

**Dylan Capel:** I've played only a little *Twilight: 2000*; it's always seemed to me to appeal to the military fantasy that the individual troops are so great that they don't need special forces, they don't need officers, just throw a random assortment of them together and they'll improvise and overcome obstacles. (And it was certainly very popular among US military personnel when it came out.) Of course it suffers from its age, one in which an RPG could be presented as mostly combat and people would happily buy and play it; my taste in post-apocalypse runs more towards building a new society than towards shooting mutants, bandits, or whatever.



CC-BY-SA 3.0 Andrzej Otrębski, 2011

RYCT Lisa Padol: I think the trick with making a Lovecraftian scenario work as an RPG is to give it multiple interesting possible conclusions, including but not limited to “we all die” and “we solve everything”. So all the endings are satisfying to the players even if they aren't “good” as far as the characters are concerned.

**Patrick Zoch:** Yes, it's good to be able to say “this establishment will be the first (whatever) the PCs encounter, wherever they do it, and if they go to a different one I've got the other less detailed one”.

Re doubling up Saltmarsh: the *Bayern* campaign that I'm running for two separate groups is largely on rails so doesn't diverge as much as your sandbox ones can, but I've found my biggest problem is remembering which group a particular thing happened to. But I definitely think I'm doing a better job of remembering key scenario elements on the second run. If these games finish well, I find myself strangely drawn to the idea of running it again for yet a third group.

Re overwriting the Master Campaign file: this is one reason I like to do stuff with local files wherever I can. Not only does it fall into my backup scheme without any effort on my part, not only can I see a directory name at the command line, but I can keep it in version control with git and never lose any version again. (I can see how your setup of diverging campaigns with a common base could work with git branches.) Mind you, I'm not recommending you learn version control *only* for role-playing...

Good luck!

Juan is starting to feel like somebody's nephew who's terribly keen on this adventuring lark, and his rich uncle is funding the expedition but only on the condition the party keeps him alive...

RYCTM regarding gunpowder, this links to Pum's comment in #8 about always using the best equipment on the list. If you have all the money and the thing is available for sale, why wouldn't you? For me it's not a matter of game balance, it's a matter of plausibility; and we still

want sword-wielding fantasy in this game, not to have swords utterly displaced by firearms as happened historically. Not to mention, if my guys can have them, so can the opposition.

**Joshua Kronengold:** Hope you are better soon.

RYCT Scribble M. Horror: I will have no art rather than AI art in things I produce. For others, that's up to them. (And I'm not trying to compete with the modern *D&D* style of lavish full-colour illustrations on most pages.)

RYCT Matt Stevens: the thing I see in a lot of modern designs is that they may have just as much mechanical complexity as an older "hard" game like *Traveller* or *RuneQuest*, but that mechanical complexity goes into abstract things. So instead of caring about how heavy a vest that'll stop a bullet is, we need to care how many Fellowship points we can spend to get back some Hope. You can't reality-check that, and for some people that's "simpler". But I find it much harder to play, because I can't rest on my mental picture of the game world; I always want to visualise what's actually *happening* in that world that the game is abstracting away.

RYCT Lisa Padol: I like players to be able to play characters who can do things they can't do, which is sometimes "be sociable and persuasive". But at the same time I want to encourage clever talk at the table. And of course not let a character be persuasive just because their player is. All of which adds up to why I'm not worried about a genAI GM any time soon for the sorts of game I enjoy, as opposed to mechanistic dungeon bashes (for which there was already *Neverwinter Nights*).

Re rules errors, I always try to let the GM know quietly rather than make a fuss at the table.

Then it's their decision where to take it from there.

RYCT Dylan Capel, when I started working at an ISP in 1998 some flavour of vi was on everything we had to log into and tweak, so that was what I learned (it even worked when the cursor keys didn't). emacs came into my life much later, and it was org-mode that sucked me in...

RYCTM on *7th Sea*: and if you took the points you would have put into a Sword School and just spent them on *fighty skills* you could often out-fight the Sword School guy.

**Brian Christopher Misiaszek:** Loving the atmosphere as always. I feel inspired by that apparition of Gil to do something related in a different context; "His skin appears spotted, or mottled, and the spots are shining in the moonlight. Hang on a moment. The moon's behind him. They're glowing by themselves..."

Did I miss footnotes for "Llerena dead\*" and "heart or liver\*" on your last page, or is this a shorthand for "needs a SAN roll" or similar?

**Vassilakos, Collinson and Rader:** having a Vargr nightclub called "Doggy Style"... *sigh*... actually seems *entirely* in keeping with my picture of them.

**Jim Vassilakos:** RYCT Elf: a character-focussed dungeon suggests to me that one considers how someone gets so desperate that they will risk likely death for the promise of huge reward. In your actual mediaeval world, a competent fighter can get a place in someone's army, or as a mercenary, or turn bandit, all of which would seem to be safer than this if not as well-paid. So what's their reason for doing *this*? I'd love to explore that.

RYCT Avram Grumer and Threefold/GNS: even before that was invented, I remember endless circular arguments along the lines of “this model of injury isn’t realistic” “but we’ve got wizards and dragons, how can it be realistic” (and of course “realism” was one of the things games of the late 1980s tried very hard to offer). The **GURPS** style suits me well: humans by default work like humans, injury hurts and it takes time to recover from, etc., but you can then lay miracles on top if you want them. Having them or not having them won’t break the game, it’ll just give you a different style of play.



George Cruikshank, 1839

I find myself close to your position, but I’m interested in the character as a fully-rounded thinking being more than as an agent of genre even when the setting is a pulpy genre one. Which, now that I think of it, is probably another thing making me a bad fit for *PbtA*, *Blades in the Dark* and allied trades.

RYCT Patrick Zoch, a thing I did first for **GURPS** and now do for every game I run with electronic character sheets is to produce a GM’s cheat sheet off the character files (as I mentioned in passing in *E&A* #3). Things I might want to roll against for them go down the side (stats, skills, etc.), characters across the top, and in games that support it the order of character columns is their action order. (E.g. where the rule is something like “descending dexterity, break ties at random” rather than “roll at the start of each combat”.) Then at the start of each fight I mentally put each group of similar NPCs (often there is only one such group, e.g. “the guards”) at a particular spot in that order and read across as the combat round progresses. Since I’m not running combat-heavy games it’s probably not all that important to have a consistent order overall, but it’s nice for the speedy guy to get some benefit from having made that choice for their character.

**Timothy Collinson:** RYCTM “That flashy guy with Leadership? He charged off to be heroic, and all the people who followed him are as dead as he is. Now here’s how we’re all going to get out of this alive: by following the Company Procedures Manual!”

## **BUGBEARS & BALLYHOO #48**

March 21, 2026, for Ever & Anon #10

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### **In this Issue**

I am disappointed with myself this month. Whirlwind work travel to two Indian reservations in southeastern California March 16–19 sure did not help. I let time get away from me & consequently have no comments this month. For those who look forward to comments on their zines or reading the interchange between others, I apologize for not contributing in that way this month. What is on offer is the second installment of a reading review of Arduin's Portal to Adventure.

### **ANOTHER LOOK AT ARDUIN'S PORTAL TO ADVENTURE**

Bugbears & Ballyhoo #47 (E&A #9) summarized the contents of Arduin's Portal to Adventure, by Emperors Choice Games (Empcho). The Portal consists of materials from the *Arduin Grimoire*, *Barrows & Borderlands*, & *Lost Dungeons of Tonisborg* games. I am slowly reading through the contents & will describe each constituent item in the boxed set. The box itself is magnificent; go look at B&B #47 for pictures. It is made of heavy cardboard with a folded back hinge & two front-closing tabs. Every face of the box exhibits original artwork or descriptive text. In "Another Look...", we continue by examining the *Barrows & Borderlands Box Set, Limited Edition*, written by Matthew Tapp. The Limited Edition comes in a cardboard, faux-woodgrain box with a pasted pen-and-ink illustration entitled, "DarkStorm," credited to "LC" & dated to 1980 or 1988. None of the six B&B volumes identify who "LC" is. I believe that it is Len Kane, whose illustrations appear in some Arduin Grimoire materials from the late 1980s; Kane signed his drawings with a stylized "LC". The bottom of the box has a pasted sheet of faux aged paper with flavor text, starting with B&B's tag line, "A weird science fantasy old-school style role playing game set in a dark radioactive wasteland of magic, black-powder (sic), and dragons."

Inside the box, one finds six digest-sized books & four B&B Character Sheets. The books comprise the original four volumes of the game, a book of supplemental rules, & an adventure. The books are saddle-stitched with two staples & covers of durable, parchment-colored cardstock. The interior pages are high quality, light-toothed paper in what I call a linen color. The interior typeface is clear albeit on the small side, perhaps 8 points. The book covers are printed in two colors, whereas the interior text & illustrations are in black & white. It is an attractive presentation that immediately calls to mind Original D&D or the Arduin Grimoire. I favor digest-sized books at the gaming table &

for convenient reading on the go. These books tick a lot of boxes for me. Here are the titles of each volume:

- *Men & Mutants* (Vol. 1)
- *Psychics & Sorcerers* (Vol. 2)
- *Horrors & Treasure* (Vol. 3)
- *Underworld & Borderlands Adventures* (Vol. 4)
- *Radioactive Boogaloo: Additional Rules*
- *Barrows & Borderlands Dungeon #1: Dracula in Space*

Volumes 1–4 present the core rules of *Barrows & Borderlands*. Combined with the physical characteristics of the books, the alliterative & two-part volume titles hearken back to the OD&D volumes of 1974. Volumes 1–2 are functionally analogous to OD&D's first booklet, *Men & Magic*, plus OD&D Supplement III's (*Eldritch Wizardry*) addition of rules for psionics.

*Men & Mutants* is a 61-page booklet with illustrated front-outside & back-inside covers. The book is copyrighted to Matthew Tapp in 2025 & credits the following illustrators: Matthew Tapp, Adlay Tapp, Castle Grief, Jacob Smith, KirboMC, Randomguy0400, Public Domain, & Dead People. Most of the illustrations are not individually credited. The art is thematically appropriate & attractive, especially the public domain pieces. The back inside cover art looks like Greg Espinoza's work (see various illustrations in *The Arduin Grimoire*, Vols. 1–III), depicting five warriors in comic book-dramatic poses: a male centaur, female & male (demi)humans, a male halfling, & male deodanth (see Arduin for details on this race). The last thing that I will write about production values of *Barrows & Borderlands* is that the books would benefit from the eyes of a competent editor. The text is marred by misspellings, conflation of possessives & contractions, sentence fragments, & copious comma splices. If you are not, like me, an honorary member of the Grammar Police, you might not be bothered at all by these errors of English usage. The books still look terrific & I am happy to report that the content itself is very cool—but the game mechanics & setting are a tale for the next installment. Ta for now!

## An Unlooked For Zine #9

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### NATTER

#### At Intercon X, I was:

- **Thursday Evening:** The MI part of MIMO (Move In, Move Out), aka room divider construction. (This nicely mirrored us doing the MO part at Arisia, where we helped disassemble frames for hanging art on at the art show.) We were rewarded with a pick from a bucket of small toys. I took a dragon egg with 3-D printed dragon, while Josh took a spiky massage roller.
- **Friday Morning:** Stretching! One of our fellow larpers set this up for Friday and Saturday, basically just making sure a room would be available for an hour or so. He and I were the only ones there on Friday, and I ran through as many of the stretches I've been doing regularly as I could recall.
- **Friday Afternoon:** GMing Ghost Fu. I was the GM who had to be told to slow down (as I talked at NYC speed) and to stand in that amazing echo spot in the center of the room! Also the one who played a couple of minor spirits and living relatives.
- **Friday Evening:** Ivy in Dissipation Cove, which I am REALLY glad came AFTER the game I was one of the GMs for. (Great game, just one needs to catch one's breath after, and one of the rare times I did join in the de-role-ing. To put it another way, this is a "fuck with me and fuck me up" game from a gming team I trust.)
- **Saturday Morning:** Kitty Lickwell in Asylum of Malice. (The characters were 00-agents, their trainees, mastermind villains, and their henchlings. All of the names were chosen with this in mind.)
- **Saturday Afternoon:** Coda Bilmred in Light the Sky on Fire, a larp set in the Star Wars universe. Coda died as messily as he'd lived (but not before getting to click credit chips together as a musical instrument during karaoke).
- **Saturday Evening:** [REDACTED] in Third Contact, a science fiction larp where various factions, many of which are quite alien to the other factions, are trying to do diplomacy and other things. As one player put it, it was a 5 1/2 hour larp that felt like it was 3 hours. Josh tells me I played "alien" quite well, and not just because of the costuming (which wasn't exotic so much as just a bit Off). Among other things, I wore a bright

pink cloak, and on the way to the larp, realized that the hat someone put on the "free costuming bits" table was exactly the correct shade of pink to match, so I added that to my attire. Also, I clipped my name badge to my hair.

- **Saturday Late Evening:** While the smores campfire gathering didn't happen or ended quickly, there were, as promised, smores stuffies. I claimed a few, as well as a stuffy of a campfire.
- **Sunday Morning:** Crina in Rebirth in the Valley of Lilies, where some of the characters are people from our world who found themselves isakai'd into their favorite anime as some of the canonical characters. A player of one such character noted that this was actually perfect for Sunday morning, because if one gets a bit tired of being in character, this kind of role gives explicit permission to break character. I brought some leis, the dragon, the smores and campfire stuffies. The GMs found these adorable and said that the smiling smores could cosplay as slimes.

This was a nicely medically boring convention. We hope to be able to do DexLite and Summer Larpin', both medically boringly as well. The plan for DexLite is to try to run what we'd planned to run at Dreamation.

As for Intercon Y next year, I want a break from larp running. Playing is fine. It's just that Ghost Fu, the supposed "Lisa doesn't need to do one iota of work on it that she doesn't want to do" larp, really did demand a fair amount of work from me. Add to that the stress of surprise hospital trip and the dash to get home ahead of the bulk of the storm and the rolling waves of players dropping from and signing up for our larp over the days and hours before it ran, and the fact that the last couple of years I wanted a break I didn't get one, and it sums to I Really Need A Break.

#### Recent Reading

**The Count of Monte Cristo:** I've reached the end of chapter 72 as I type this. Highlights include, but are not limited to

- One character telling another: Hey, I don't generally boot you out of my wife's boudoir to talk to her, so don't push back on my doing so today."
- The count being regularly asked about stuff where we know he set everything up to the last detail

and saying: How should I know? I don't worry my head about such things. My servants do it all.

- Someone trying to find out everything about the count and learning there are two people in town who know stuff about the man—both of whom, the reader knows, are also the count himself.
- One character saying to another: So, here's everything I've just learned about the count [not realizing none of it's true]. Please spread this in bits, leaving my name out of it. Why? Oh, because this comes from my husband's office, and so I'm not supposed to know any of it.

## Recent Watching

**7 Women, 1 Murder:** Italian movie about, well, 7 women and 1 murder.

**Wake Up, Dead Man:** 3rd time. Still good.

**Jack of All Trades, Party of None:** Anime about a world where adventurers go into dungeons and fight monsters, and our protagonist has just been kicked out of his party because they think he's holding them back, not realizing how much he's been carrying them. This is not an uncommon trope. It's an interesting world, thus far, though the fact that our protagonist can basically solo any winnable fight annoys me.

**Iron Monkey:** The 1970s Shaw Brothers movie, with bad dubbing and an abrupt but logical ending.

**Iron Monkey Strikes Back:** Theoretically, a sequel to the same. It does have the same lead actor—in an entirely different role, and the setting is different as well. Also known as *Duel at the Tiger Village*. Fun despite its flaws, like the previous one, but I think the previous one is better.

**Unveil Jadewind:** Feels a bit Judge Dee-ish, although our detective is a woman. She's a princess and the Emperor likes her (and possibly feels guilty because her parents died when she was a child), which is why she gets to be a detective, and a good fighter. She has a woman assistant, who is also a good fighter, and worries about her, as she is constantly recklessly throwing herself into danger, a boss (who's thus far demanded her badge once (not unreasonably, though he soon, between scenes, reinstated her), and a handsome astronomer who is as smart as she is but can't really fight (we think) and also is somehow tangled up in the tragedy of her parents' death, though she may or may not remember the details.

**Freiren:** Anime about an elf who was part of a heroic party. In the first episode, she bids the rest of the party farewell after a successful end to their quests, and returns 50 years later, shocked to see how old they now are and how much things have changed, as well as how much she's affected emotionally by this.

After all, she only traveled with them for ten years, hardly any time at all!

**Jujutsu Kaisen:** A student swallows a demon's finger, for Reasons, and winds up a) hosting the demon in his body and b) agreeing to help an organization of demon hunters deal with this demon, and any others along the way. This description does not do justice to the anime.

**What is up with episode order?** *Detective Anna* (live action) and *Casebook of Lord Arne* (anime) seem to have released episodes out of order. I'm unsure what's up with that.

## Awards

I bumped into this online:

<https://www.explorersdesign.com/bloggies-breakdown-round-4/> and if you look at it, you'll know as much as I do about the Bloggies.

## What Have You Done For Me Lately? Or, New Call of Cthulhu

I was curious, so did cursory research. Below is a partial list of new releases for Call of Cthulhu from Chaosium:

- Doors to Darkness (2015)
- Nameless Horrors (2015)
- Pulp Cthulhu (2016)
- Down Darker Trails (2017)
- Reign of Terror (2017)
- Two-Headed Serpent (2017)
- Berlin: The Wicked City (2019)
- A Cold Fire Within (2019)
- Gateways to Terror (2019)
- Shadows Over Stillwater (2019)
- Children of Fear (2020)
- Does Love Forgive? (2020)
- Time to Harvest (2021)
- Cults of Cthulhu (2022)
- Regency Cthulhu (2022)
- No Time to Scream (2024)
- Order of the Stone (2024)
- Sutra of Pale Leaves (2 books: *Twin Suns Rising* and *Carcosa Manifest*) (2025)

I got the publication years from

<https://rpggeek.com/rpg/23113/call-of-cthulhu-7th-edition>. Not on this list are:

- Anything from any company other than Chaosium (There's a lot of material, some of which I edited.)
- Anything published as Miskatonic Repository (There's a LOT of material!)
- Anything that is afai, reprinting/updating old material
- The books I consider core rule books

- Solo books (e.g., Alone Against the Frost/the Static/the Tide/the Dark)
- Free RPG offerings
- And, obviously, anything I've forgotten (which includes some of the thinner books released (not because they don't count, but because there's only so much time I want to spend on this))

## COMMENTS ON EVER AND ANON ISSUE #9

**COVER:** Nice!

**BRIAN ROGERS:** Wait, the elder kid is going to Maine, for an archaeological dig? I've read that Call of Cthulhu scenario! re *Mystery of Edwin Drood*: I saw it years ago on Broadway. I'm not convinced the window tops need to be a huge deal, but while I did do set building and deconstruction one year at a drama camp, I never did actual set design. (I helped build a caravan for *Pippin* and after, helped take it apart. I did a lot of painting, and got a lot of paint on myself and my clothing.)

I'd not mind more details on the *Swords of the Serpentine* game, but in any case, it sounds like folks are having fun. I hope the *Star Wars* game runs well. It sounds like the *Knave* group is on track. re player picking option 3: I presume that if you didn't want that as a possibility, you wouldn't have suggested it. re Paladin getting a pet spider: Despite my arachnophobia, I agree that's great. It is sweet that the Paladin is looking out for his henchspider.

re hazing the Paladin: I could actually see that happening, regardless of who's playing the PCs. I'm reminded of the first chronological episode of *Firefly* (although I still maintain that "The Train Job" is a better first episode, admitting to bias as it's the one I saw first). re summoning the Medusa: I wondered why the heck anyone would choose to do that, why they even had that lever, er, spell, and then read "this is classic Grey Mouser nonsense", and all my questions were answered. re letting them have the Medusa subject to her own gaze attack reflected back at her: Yes, I'd have done that as well, I hope.

re V&V re avuncular Batman: The first thing that came to mind when I read that phrase was his advice to the Flash in the Justice League movie. The second was the scene in the animated *Young Justice* where he's giving Superman parenting advice. re Lady Satan: Amazing. Did the comic give the explanation you did (or, indeed, any explanation whatsoever) about how and why she became a sorceress? I gather that the "suicide daggers" were a means to fake her death?

re Patrick Riley: I am having trouble wrapping my brain around "clubs don't work". I shouldn't—I allowed a player to have a version of Dorian Gray that couldn't be

physically injured. This isn't much different. re Credit Rating: I need to read *Cthulhu Eternal*. For *Call of Cthulhu*, it's both how much money you have \*and how respectable you seem, and gradually slid to the latter. And in some cases, having a high credit rating can hurt a PC. Cthulhu Invictus uses Status and Infamy, and layers in the overload, but as a licensee of Chaosium, Golden Goblin tries to stick close to what *Call of Cthulhu* does. 2nd edition Trail of Cthulhu makes it its own thing, i.e., not an Investigative Skill bought with Investigative points, which is good. It is tied to income. Etiquette of any kind would still be an Investigative ability, although there's an optional rule which also allows Credit Rating to be used as one, though there are penalties if you use it on those with significantly higher or lower Credit Rating. IIRC, *Night's Black Agents* Victorian Age setting has several social hierarchy/class-based etiquette skills (including Below Stairs, I think), as does *Swords of the Serpentine* (Nobility, Servility).

re Myles Corcoran re *Everway* 2nd: As you've now seen, the print is very large, and there are a lot of pictures. The second volume has 4 scenarios, and that's at least 200 of those 780+ pages. They're coffee table books, very pretty. I'm glad I have the new edition, and I may change my mind about how useful it is after I read the whole thing. Currently, my take is: If you have the original edition, you don't need the new one. It's very much an anniversary edition for folks who want it.

re your experience at Metatopia: I'm not surprised it still sticks. You went in with reasonable expectations, and these were not met. IIRC, you didn't talk to Metatopia staff about that, which means they had no chance to try to do anything to make it up to you or compensate you or something—I don't know if they could or would have; it's just that the result is an unsatisfactory, unresolved situation. Would it go better today? I *think* so, but I don't know for sure, and I don't blame you for not giving it another go.

re no story you're trying to tell: Nod. I've run with a particular story, or at least, story-structure, both one-shots and campaigns. I'm not sure if I've done "no story", but I've done "the players' decisions + my reactions to those will create the story", which is not, IMO, quite the same. It's less sandboxy, I think, as I'm focused on taking what I get and weaving it back in. Does that make sense?

Plot armor's a separate issue, as I'm running very different games—GUMSHOE, Powered by the Apocalypse, Fate, Penned to Good Society. It's not that PC death can't happen; rather, it's often tricky enough to arrange that it's likely to be player choice. I've run *Call of Cthulhu* with no plot armor, and in two cases,

came close to killing a PC. It was luck of the dice that saved them in both cases.

re my third option in a *Star Wars* game: I don't disagree with you, quite the contrary. Yet, I've seen World of Darkness and Tribe 8 scenarios that pull that crap. (To be fair, we're talking material published in the 1990s and maybe the early 2000s; I've not read a lot of the more recent WoD/CoD stuff.) And yes, if I decided to have my Star Wars PC go from Hoth to Endor looking for a second Death Star, you should indeed tell me to stop premise rejecting.

(This reminds me of some annoying moments when I ran *Eternal Lies*, a *Trail of Cthulhu* campaign. I've vented about those before. In one case, I wish the player had waited one gosh-darned minute before googling a location their PC had no reason to know about and about which I was about to reveal what they learned from googling. In a couple of others, I said no until "no" sunk in. (No, I don't care what the rulebook says; I am flat out not allowing time travel, as that would negate the entire campaign. No one gets to learn that mythos spell.) In a third, the player actually out-clevered themselves, despite my attempt to point out that they were overlooking a key piece of evidence.)

re *BESMs* assumption: Nod. I'm with the *Pendragon* players, to no one's surprise. re romance: Oh, I've read a trilogy or two like that. Unsurprisingly, I prefer the one that involves an overarching murder mystery. I think you could do the structure you describe with *Good Society*, possibly using the *Emma, Forget Me Not* expansion, with a *short* interval of time passing. Alternatively, you could use one of the tricks from the *Downstairs at the Abbey* expansion, playing the same novel chapter over again, from a different point of view. But probably, what would happen would be a (relatively) ordinary game of *Good Society* with, let's say, 4 or 5 players, 3 or more of whom have main characters looking for romance. Possibly they pair off with each other, possibly with connections. Maybe there's a non-romance main character, perhaps the Dowager or a Meddler, perhaps played by a facilitator, if there is one. And all the romances get set up in turn or simultaneously.

re Erica Frank re "stopping the end of the world with loose ends is a failure": I empathize all too much with this. re me re people wanting the engineer mini-game: As long as I don't have to play it and can be over here chewing scenery, I'm fine with that. Come to think of it, that... describes my experience in the larp Third Contact.

Josh's PC: Give me *something* so that when [REDACTED], we can [REDACTED]!

My PC: Um... I think I can tell you how to [REDACTED]. Would that help?

Josh's PC: YES!

Me: *\*shows Josh the relevant bit on my sheet\** Maybe take a photo and show the GMs? *\*goes back to scenery chewing\**

Josh: *\*does something with the science system in and around his own scenery chewing\**

re *Last Crusade*: Interesting. Thank you. re Roger Bell\_West re granularity of Unisystem combat: Is there an easy and elegant way to fix that? re that villain's laudable plan with only a 20% fatality rate: In one of Lee Gold's novels, the love interest tells the heroine that his plan only has a 1% fatality rate. She is horrified because she calculates just how many people would die.

#### **PEDRO PANHOCA DA SILVA AND CAMILA**

**LOURENCO PANHOCA:** re *Cinderella's Eight Pairs of Shoes*: What makes it a good example of how to construct this type of book?

**CHRYSALISM AND FELICITY:** Welcome / Welcome back! re city building: This reminds me of *Night's Black Agents* "quick and dirty" city creation, which involves picking a real city and not spending too much time on research—just finding enough to use it in an *NBA* game. I'm guessing you do more work than that, for a couple of reasons (creating a fictional city, not focusing on the procedural / iconic as much). re Phyrenia: Interesting setting.

**JOHN REDDEN:** re Rosie the robot: We've seen some drinks-serving robots ourselves. re Erica Frank: Ah yes, the Morgan tarot, which some folks have dubbed "the hippie tarot". re Dylan Capel: I can keep track of a large number of characters if a) as you say, I'm in it from start to finish and b) if the writers/actors/et cetera are solidly good.

**CLARK TIMMINS:** These are nicely flavored. The Ashbinder Charm would be useful in our world.

**ME:** re Avram Grumer re Powered by a Pack of Cards: I got to talk to Meguey Baker about this. Her advice was to math it all out and/or test it in play, as there are some PbtA games it will work well for and some it really won't. re igtheme essay re Chelsea hub link: I'm unsure what happened here. In theory, this link should work: <https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=1PG9f2Kqd7pH-jl2tyJiU3c3BvbPESMq&usp=sharing>

**MATT STEVENS:** re nostalgic pulp gaming: Look at what it is in opposition to. Compared to 1990s's idea of

"dark and gritty", it may seem a lot gentler, although I concede "seem" is doing a lot of heavy lifting. I'm also reminded of Veidt's comment in the post-main story section of the comic book in *Watchmen*, where he sends a memo to his ad people talking about what the concept of "nostalgia" means and implies, not by standard definitions so much as by consumer psychology.

re deciding not to have Heartland City be an isolated city in a fog: Oddly, it is the isolated city in a fog that is currently old hat. (*Cthulhu City*, *City of Mist*, and *Edge of Midnight* come immediately to my mind; I'm sure there are more.) Your not doing that was more original for an rpg (and, I am certain, more satisfying than at least one of the games I've listed).

re origin of clerics in *D&D*: Fascinating. As for other ways of doing it:

- *Legend of the Five Rings* (at least, the first 2 editions, aka the ones I'm familiar with) noted that the mages and the clerics in the setting were basically the same. PCs were, thus, either warriors (bushido, iirc) or mage-priest types (shugenja).
- True 20 had 3 classes. These focused on Combat (Warrior), Magic (Adept), or Skills (Expert). I gather that Adept could be subdivided into various mage and cleric types.
- *RuneQuest/HeroQuest* did its own thing, of course.
- *Fate*, *Over the Edge*, and so on don't have character classes, so handle this sort of thing differently.
- *Belonging Outside Belonging* would have lists of things your character can do to get tokens and things they have to pay tokens to do, as well as stuff that doesn't require either. This may have more to do with social norms than theoretical effectiveness. E.g., a werewolf gets a token for being very effective with violence in a way that causes problems, and a priest might get a token for submitting to the toxic norms of their religion.

re me re why one needs an entire system for a whale whores game: Ah, spoken like someone less familiar with game jams! A couple of things to be aware of:

- You're assuming we're talking well-constructed games. This may or may not be the case. Some games in the jam might be half-baked. Quarter-baked, even.
- You're assuming that any of these games invents an entire system. Nope. You'll get games using systems and bits of systems, everything from *Forged in the Dark* to *Honey Heist*.

But ultimately, as to the why of it, because art? Some folks enjoy the challenge, some are doing it for the humor/satire, some get inspired. re mystery and

heist/mission plot games: I'm tempted to give you a reading list so you'll see how recent(ish) rpgs have dealt with these areas. If you're looking for just one title, it'd probably be *Blades in the Dark* for very, very mission/heist-centric games.

re repair mechanics: I have no problem with that, because it's clear that you're putting actual thought into what you're doing with these rules and why. It's not just "well, there are ships / planes / cars, and obviously that means I need All the Rules for repairing them", but rather "This is what people want to do with the game, so I will give them tools to do it".

re Myles Corcoran: That's an extreme case, of course. OTOH, remember the time in the *Ars Mystica* game when the GM decided that one of his villain (or at least, opposition) NPCs could Never Be Taken Seriously Again because the PCs talked back to him? Those of us with PCs there didn't perceive the scene the same way. It's a question of assumptions.

That said, yes, one generally need not add humor. Or as Josh noted, while our larp *Ghost Fu* is a Serious larp in that we wrote everything straight, the situation is inherently absurd, and there will definitely be humor.

re Roger Bell-West re *7th Sea* Map: Ye ghods, you're right! I'd forgotten that annoyance. re Joshua Kronengold re page count of *Land of the Rising Sun* vs *Blades in the Dark*: The question is: What is word count? Guy Gavriel Kay once explained that there was a hundred page difference between the USA and Canadian versions of one of his books, but that the word count was exactly the same. And for all that the anniversary edition of *Everway* is physically huge, I'm not sure the word count is similarly oversized.

**ERICA FRANK:** I use a spreadsheet. I have Game Name, Subtitle (which generally means edition, but not always), System, Company, Source (e.g., itch.io), Folder (on my hard drive), Notes (i.e., date; i.e., last updated), Did Josh read it, Did I read it. I'm not currently up to date, and I very much haven't indexed the itch bundles in toto. I should probably figure out what I can do to get the relevant bits of metadata or even just plain data from Bundle Browser into my spreadsheet.

re Cage of Sand: Yup, we've gotten to the gruesome and horrific. re the long set up time: Would taking photographs when you end the session help? re me re playthroughs being less GMless than you'd hoped: I wonder if that's precisely because it's a playthrough. But it's still disappointing.

**ATTRONARCH:** How long did it take to play out that conversation with Old Crus? re me re *Raise Dead* scrolls: Thanks for the clarification. And thanks for the

list of stuff you do to keep things moving. I've found it's hard to divide the group into teams, at least for some of us. One GM tried this and tried to time how long they spent with each group. The timer didn't help.

re no breaks: Interesting. Aviatrix does the opposite, making sure there's a break every hour or two. Of course, she runs things on a weekend, and it's a game for 3-6 people, and it's not D&D, but Gumshoe, PbtA, something she's cobbled together, something in that vein. I'm lucky if I remember to put one semi-formal break in for a home game, though most of the games on the Storyteller Discord server do a break halfway to 2/3 of the way through a three-hour session. For convention games, whether online or in person, there's usually at least one break, sometimes more. (If more, it's usually after character/rules summary, another at about the halfway point, and maybe one more before the big fight at the end.) And of course, folks can always go off camera/out of the room, no formal break needed.

**MYLES CORCORAN:** Sympathy on the boiler woes! And I'm sorry Rowan didn't get to go to Finland. re *Mythic Bastionland*: What makes it "a lovely piece of game design"? I look at it and clearly don't get it. I really should read my Vaesen stuff, though. re Heath Row re the photo of the Long Room: I think we saw it either when Eurocon was in Dublin or when Worldcon was. It's beautiful.

re Joshua Kronengold re 3rd edition *Over the Edge*: It's, IMO, something of a different game. I played it once, at the 2019 Gen Con, and I had a great time! That said, if you enjoy earlier editions, you don't *need* a new system. re 3rd edition *Unknown Armies*: I read the first book, and I'm not actually sure how to answer the question of how substantial the changes are. I did a liveblog thread on a Discord server and will see if it's comprehensible enough to be useful to you. Meanwhile, in brief:

- There are a number of changes, both mechanical and setting-wise.
- Several of the mechanical changes are, IMO, good. They don't change the basic structure (I think?) but make the game more itself, and maybe a bit easier to run/to understand what the PCs do.
- That said, in the middle of my liveblogging, I read a review of it that basically liked the game despite itself, and made some valid points that I can't unsee (and, honestly, don't want to): <https://mythcreants.com/blog/unknown-armies-third-edition-is-fun-despite-itself/>
- IIRC, for all of the good, character creation isn't covered in the first book, which seems an odd choice. (The review I linked to says that the material is sufficiently divided one needs to flip

back and forth between the first two books to create one's character.)

- There are technically 5 books, of which no more than the first 3 are necessary to run the game, possibly even just the first 2, but I'm not certain. The 4th and 5th were electronic releases only.
- My only play experience was at Metatopia, where we did some of the broader character creation, or rather, "okay, what is your group's deal/goal?" I recall this being fun, and useful for Cam Banks (who ran it), but I'm vague on the details apart from a large sheet of paper with an r-map we drew, and I've no idea how much of the concepts are in the books.
- Setting changes (due to the Invisible Clergy filling up on 03/03/03) mean those of us familiar with earlier editions get a bit "where did you move my cheese?" and some "you didn't just move the cheese; you changed it!"

re me: Thanks for the clarification of the write ups. re "meatwear developers" and "staff wranglers": This reminds me of a Doonesbury comic strip:

Friend of customer, trying to help: Do you have any user-friendly sales reps?

Computer store staff: You mean consumer-compatible liveware? He's on break.

I'm glad you liked my list of gming tips.

**PAUL HOLMAN:** At some point, in theory, I'd not mind seeing Venice, Florence, and so in. In practice, I'm not great with heat and don't speak Italian, so we'll see.

re *Night's Black Agents*: You'll have to work harder to offend or achieve Heretic status on that front. Josh and I created Agents of the Night. Aviatrix created Catshoe/Trenchcoat. All of us, as well as Brian Rogers, have written about how to tweak Gumshoe to be more traditionalist (whatever "traditionalist" may mean this Tuesday). re me: Josh reminds me that the en-dash is for ranges, so you'd also use it between, fr'ex, Monday and Friday.

re Myles Corcoran: Oddly, I think I prefer "Human Resources". Somehow, "People and Culture" rings false to me. Maybe "Safety and Recruitment"? "Recruitment and Retention"? I don't know. re Jim Vassilakos re pushing the simulation limit on describing what healing hit points is: *Monsterhearts* lets one heal an extra point if someone else bandages one's wounds tenderly, with erotic subtext. So I'm guessing fussing over someone while they're resting or feeding them chicken soup could work similarly. But I agree it's a bit too strained to focus on.

**PATRICK RILEY:** re cities re "I only need the thin veneer that the PCs will interact with plus just enough backing that I can make stuff up as they're needed": I find that's generally true for myself as well. re Narration vs Roleplaying re the issue with definitions: In that context, the whole Gamist-Simulationist-Narrativist thing muddies the waters even more, as Narrativist there refers neither to dialogue nor to narrating to scenes, but to wanting to get something that I'd argue is at least adjacent to what you want out of rpgs.

For me, I very much like dialogue, yes, and being in character. And yes, shifting gears can be jarring. But sometimes, narration in the sense you mean can be useful, and sometimes, it seems necessary. Fr'ex, one person I've gamed with (who'd likely annoy you) has occasionally gone into narration describing what their character looks like, thinks, and feels, and while I've wished they'd get to the point—the action, the dialogue—it's also been clear to me that this was part of the player's process, that they needed, in that moment, to work their way through it all.

Similarly, sometimes I'm deliberately setting things up, and that means I have to "shift stance" (or whatever jargon you want to use). Being put on the spot is annoying in any case, and yeah, it always comes across better on the page or otherwise being retold. re as if the director's called "Action!": There's a degree to which I'm used to that in larps (as well as tabletop); shifting back and forth can be harder. I know it's thrown some folks out of *Dogs in the Vineyard*, and it's something I struggle with in the various Forged in the Dark games I've played in. It doesn't surprise me that you can drive a stick shift.

re D&D Rambling: The whole roll-with-(Dis)Advantage thing doesn't bug me, whatever the system is. Drop the highest/lowest? That's transparent; it gets the heck out of my way. I get why your heartbreaker needs to be d20. It's just too ingrained. Ditching scores in favor of modifiers is something I've pretty much been in favor of since I saw it done in True20. Alignment feels like Circle (as opposed to Faction) in *Urban Shadows* to me, which is to say that, while in many ways, I dislike it, I see ways in which it's useful (and, in the case of *Urban Shadows*, why Circle needs to be there). But yeah, you can ditch it without tears.

re DunDraCon re Nazi dinosaurs: Ah, where is Dr. Dinosaur when one needs him? (One never needs him, to be clear.) re *Welcome to Night Vale*: Thanks for the overview. I need to get a bit more of the lore into me. (I listened to the first 3-5 eps.) I had no problem following a one-shot live streamed game, but I'm not currently up for running it. I don't know the system, but based on the name, it doesn't sound too tricky, though I suspect it wouldn't be my first choice either.

re Derailment at Faustina Station: *The Good Place* is the only one of the listed sources I'm familiar with, though I've a vague idea of what *Squid Game* and *Cube* are about. I can see why reading the boxed text is important here. re "How do others perceive you?" and "How do you perceive yourself?": Some Belonging Outside Belonging games ask these or similar questions, and supply a brief list of options. E.g.:

- For The Matchmaker in Dream Apart: Choose what they call you behind your back: a humorless prude, an indulgent fool, a sucker for any pretty face, vulgar and unrefined, miserly and cruel.
- For The Scholar in Grand Guignol: Choose two ways others see you and two ways you see yourself: A woman, pretentious, brilliant, upstart, focused, Romantic, analytical, blasphemous, a man.

re characters: I think the sex worker's question would be the hardest for me to answer on the fly, though I could probably come up with something. The question that occurs to me at this point (haven't read past this part of the notes) is whether it's permissible or even a good idea to concoct something like "it wasn't actually my fault; I didn't realize what was going on". I don't think that's what you're aiming for, though.

You say that the PCs have one, maybe two tokens? What determines how many and where do they get them? You also talk about a "piece" of a token. Can they break a token into N parts and have N people use one part each? And what happens if they give the token to the vendor or the psychomp? I guess we'll find out next issue.

re Roger re *7th Sea*: "if you're avoiding a historical setting so that historical events do not limit player agency, don't then create a metaplot that limits player agency to shape history.": Amen. And if you must have that metaplot, write a novel, not a game. re Dylan Capel re the risk of my zine being 32 pages long: Yes. I am all for a zine page limit. re *Mektor*: There was no rule to the effect of "Once the Rookie gains X number of points, they are no longer a Rookie"? re me re the oasis: Ah, I see! Thanks.

re me re "narrowly-focused games that "allow for roleplay in ways D&D doesn't"": Yes, they do present characters and dynamics D&D *typically* doesn't (but see, say, Strixhaven). And yes, there are ways in which they encourage roleplaying that *D&D* doesn't. And yes, almost certainly other reasons as well. Looking at the list in my zine:

- *Bluebeard's Bride*: This game explores powerlessness in ways *D&D* really doesn't—and, IMO, probably *D&D* shouldn't. It's a different

game. Heck, players aren't even playing a full character, but rather, aspects of the Bride. But this scratches an itch for me that no other game does, even if I'm not sure why I have this particular itch.

- This is also true of *Montsegeur 1244*, *Red Carnations on a Black Grave*, *Mars 244*, and *Witch: The Road to Lindisfarne*. There are no dice, and these games are on rails. Almost all you can do is, well, roleplay. And again, there's a certain lack of agency that isn't, and shouldn't, generally be present in *D&D*, and that, within the context of these one-shot games, does work for me.
- *The Mountain Witch* I know less well, but again, it models a specific genre, possibly even a micro-genre. Everyone has a secret, everyone is a ronin, everyone is theoretically going to try to kill the Mountain Witch. The game is divided into acts, and there's no detailed map or monsters assigned to specific locations or anything, though there's some broad consideration of obstacles. That said, this is probably closer to something I could see *D&D* modeling.
- *The World's Problems* very specifically models *Sandbaggers* \*and\* has players taking multiple characters, each operating in different spheres, but to a far lesser degree than something like *REIGN*. *D&D* isn't built for this. I'm not saying you couldn't shoehorn what this game does into *D&D*, but why the heck would you want to?

Basically, I see *D&D* as pushing characters into action, primarily combat, like *Feng Shui* does. Both games certainly allow roleplay, maybe even encourage it in what I consider small ways, so long as, you know, roleplay doesn't get in the way of the combat. (I may be doing *D&D* an injustice here, but not *Feng Shui*, which pretty much states this outright.) I also don't see *D&D* as particularly interested in focusing on social, moral, ethical, or philosophical issues. It can do so, to at least some degree, but it's not the game I'd turn towards if I wanted to focus on that.

*D&D* could, I think, absolutely do a lot of what *Pendragon* does. But for me? Wrong tool for the job. *Pendragon* has tools for everything from balancing complicated codes of behavior to getting lost in Arthur's castle to running mad through the woods like Sir Lancelot to falling into obsessive love (or hate or rivalry!) to being able to unhorse the greatest knight if God (and the dice) are on your knight's side. It is an exquisitely tooled engine. Was it Eugene Reynolds who once wrote in *A&E* about a knight PC monologuing in character over a literal Point of Honour?

*Good Society*, *Belonging Outside of Belonging*, games like those? Again, *D&D* cannot and should not model these. They're not incomplete, but they are definitely specialized. *Phoenix Dawn Command*? A war story with

little tolerance for breaking out of that genre. *D&D* could model it, but I don't think it should.

re Jim Vassilakos re taking over an absent player's PC: When I ran *Eternal Lies*, one player took over an NPC that another player's PC decided to romance. I definitely preferred that, as I had enough on my plate, and as a GM, any decision I made would've felt a bit off to me. Possibly reading *How to GM Romance* would help; possibly the amount of *Good Society* and other gaming I've done between then and now would help.

**GABRIEL ROARK:** re Clark Timmins re thread-tracker: That's what I call my gming notes. That said, when I ran *Dracula Dossier*, the players at least tried for a time to do something like that, and when our friend Gareth ran *Brindlewood Bay*, he used a character keeper spreadsheet that also had a tab for keeping track of mystery threads. re Arduin box set: While not my cup of tea, dang, that looks lovely. re ice skating: I'm glad the hobby is helping. Have you seen the anime *Yuri on Ice*?

**ROGER BELL\_WEST:** Does Heart of Yhtill have anything to do with the King in Yellow stuff? re *Pendragon*: I confess this line of thought never occurred to me. I should see what 6th edition does, though I expect the numbers won't have changed. It's never come up in the convention one-shots I've played, unsurprisingly. I know there are also small pdfs like *Book of the Estate*, which may or may not have alternative rules.

What I'd probably do is rule that any married PC knight whose player wants them to have a child or more can just work with me to create heirs and spares and other kids. For the wealth mini-game, I'd need to figure out which players, if any, including myself, want to play it. One can do heroics + accounting, to some degree—see some of Dumas's novels—but it's a tricky balancing act (and Dumas is happy to err on the side of "money comes in when the plot needs it to").

re cities re *Night City Sourcebook*: Nod. I remember being underwhelmed by it, and I did like several of the Cyberpunk books in that line in that era. Unless it's a city I know well, I'm not likely to want to go into exhaustive street level detail. However, in a scenario like "In For A Penny", it is important that the authors included a map of the three streets or so that is the world of the street urchin PCs. It's basically of a tiny area of London, I think taken from a public domain old map? It doesn't show locations, which I found less of an issue for me than a lack of a complete pre-game timeline. (I figured it out well enough to make myself a cheatsheet for when I ran it for the publisher at conventions.)

For *Swords of the Serpentine*, I generally don't worry about precise details. If I set a game in the home town of the heroine of the anime *Cardcaptor Sakura*, I would want a street level detailed map, showing just about everywhere in the series. The show was very much about the town and the people in it, and I got in the habit of yelling "King Penguin!" whenever the scene was Penguin Park.

re Erica Frank: Agree re accreted RWC tarot imagery. re me re disguises: Yes, exactly. re handing off the space accountancy to the one player that likes it (presuming there is one): So long as we can all play the parts of the game we like and mostly avoid the ones we don't, that works well. re passed/failed by X: That's useful, yes.

re telling the players "This scenario starts off with the PCs captured and without their equipment": Yes. Many players will work with you if they know what to expect. re Myles Corcoran re scale rules: *Call of Cthulhu* has some quick-n-dirty rules in that area that, IMO, work well for its purposes. Fate has some variant rules to deal with scale (I'm more familiar with its Aunt May vs Superman application, but pretty sure there's something for physical size as well). re Patrick Riley: I read and enjoyed *Murder By Memory*.

re Clark Timmins re it not being the GM's place to say "no, that's a bad thing, be interested in this instead": To a degree, that's correct. However, if I'm running a mystery plot, and the players are fixating on something completely and utterly wrong, and IMO, their characters would likely realize this (because it is so easy for players to get lost in a mystery, especially when we're talking theatre of the mind), I'm likely to let them know they're off base. If they've decided an innocent is the Villain, I may not choose to decide that they're correct.

re Avram Grumer: I like the R-map. re Patrick Zoch re the importance of positive framing: Yes. I remember discussing this with Walter Ciechanowski in the context of whatever system *Victoriana* was using at the time. re Joshua Kronengold re IRL vs "dungeon tradition makes every fight a fight to the death": Yes. I've seen this in some *Call of Cthulhu* scenarios as well, and it annoys me.

re Jim Vassilakos re using a dry erase board to keep track of the whole declare up, act down: Even with slightly less complicated systems, I've resorted to using a scrap of paper to keep track of initiative and this sort of thing, and I've seen other GMs do so as well.

**MICHAEL CULE:** re Burned-Over District: So, the "masterpiece of urban planning" was never implemented, correct? My brain is wondering if there's a version of Robert Moses and/or Jane Jacobs in the

city's history. re The Way of the World: I sent you an email about my experiences. (Short version: Seems to be working, and I'm fine with it doing so slowly.)

re Glamour write up: Kudos to Pum for throwing himself in to Keanus's kidnapping incident so enthusiastically! \*grin\* at Eshan's unit hoping he'd chip in already and at why the heck a playboy senator would ever become a bat-costumed vigilante, especially as it became clear that this seems to be exactly what's going on. I assume it was Senator Jaxarte Whyded who Senator Longvale introduced the group to. re suddenly empty parade ground: Is that where they rescued Keanus from?

re what to call the Janitrix during exercises: Surely, she could tell them to call her something other than "First Spear"? Or am I being naive / uninformed? For some reason, I'm picturing Bruce Wayne going through the list of kids at orphanages, deciding which to sacrifice to his bat god. Who was Longvale asking Keanus about? Why does he think Senator Aggarius and/or his daughter are traitors?

re city igttheme re maps: Maps are useful It's a question of what scale is most useful, whether to the GM, to the other players, or both. In "In For A Penny", a full map of London would be pointless. For where we are in the *Fearful Symmetries* campaign, I need such a map. (Fortunately, this was easy to acquire.) For *Swords of the Serpentine*, I only have a broad map of neighborhoods and landmarks, from the book, and that's usually good enough. For the playtest of the SotS campaign *Pillars of Sand*, I needed more, and was grateful when the author sent me his sketches.

For a *Call of Cthulhu* scenario set aboard the *Titanic*, the GM had large maps of the *Titanic's* decks, and while we didn't necessarily need that much detail, she needed to know where we were and where we were going, so that she could keep track of what time it was. While, technically, we didn't need to do the same, it was useful to know what time it was in game both because our characters would know and because it kept the tension high as we all wondered, OOC, how close we were to the ship sinking.

re me re variant spelling: You were not getting it wrong. The correct spelling is Hebrew, which means any English spelling is definitionally variant. I see no reason to consider your chosen variant in that context any less respectable than the ones I'm used to seeing. re Myles Corcoran: What can the abandoned clones/robots of the film stars do once they've figured out their situation? What are their options?

re Patrick Riley: In this future with holographic data where you can't remember to put on pants, maybe we'll also have holographic clothing. re Roger Bell\_West

re the *Doctor Who* episode where the Moon is an egg: Which episode was that?

re Avram Grumer re Powered by a Pack of Cards re players never wanting to roll low: Here's the thing: They have a hand of cards and cannot replenish it freely. At some point, they will *have* to "roll low" or otherwise use their low cards.

Also, there are times a player decides they want their character to fail, but also, the player uses the same ever-decreasing hand of cards when another player has their PC try to mess with the first player's PC. So, sure, the player who's "rolling" may well choose as high a card as possible, but the player they're "rolling against" (which could be the GM) picks the second card. Some players will choose a low card whenever possible for this. Others may decide they want their PC to be messed with.

Sure, this hack won't work for all groups, or, as Meguey Baker noted, all varieties of PbtA. But then, if you're a player who always wants their PC to succeed on rolls, no matter what, many, if not all, PbtA games may not be for you to begin with. (And all of this is before the question of what success and failure mean, but that's going too far into the weeds here, I think).

re Joshua Kronengold re isekai writers wanting to keep from explaining how the world works until they have no choice and how you "often think they have no real idea about what's behind it all": I've seen several cases where the first part is true, but the second doesn't seem to be. This can still be frustrating, of course. *Log Horizon*, fr'ex, while fascinating, gives me a huge sense of the author being on the main character's side in that this character is *always* right in his guesses, and these guesses are often rather idiosyncratic. I've more patience in that regard with something like *Rise of the Shield Hero*, where the protagonist doesn't know how things work and finds out as he crashes into them, although that particular show has other issues.

**MARK WILSON:** Small updates are fine. Busy can be good, but too busy is a strain you don't want for long. re Skullduggin' in the Deep: I get the feeling you should be able to avoid prepping missions that don't get run, but I don't have your view of the campaign.

re *Baron Munchausen*: While Josh thinks you're not correct about *Once Upon a Time* (which he can explain in his own zine), I can attest that it works best when a) folks are good storytellers to begin with and b) folks are more interested in creating a good story than in winning. In theory, the "nah, that's silly" rule should help, but in practice, it's only used when someone is, as I think Josh put it, "not even trying". In any case, good luck with the publishers!

**AVRAM GRUMER:** re Improv: Yay reincorporation! I try to do that in rpgs and larps. re Recent Reading: I didn't get far in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. While I don't think I've read *Games People Play*, I read a couple of books on the whole Parent-Adult-Child thing. I think these were *TA for Tots (and Other Prinzes)* and *TA for Kids and Grown-Ups Too*, both by Alvyn Freed. This was, of course, decades ago.

re pool vs row of boxes: Oh yes. The mental load is different. I remember Vincent Baker noting that, iirc, it's 5 experience points to get an Advance in *Apocalypse World*. As soon as you get that 5th point, the experience track clears, and you can take the Advance as soon as you decide which one you want. This means, he said, that, in theory, the character sheet should be fine with only four boxes (or circles or whatever), because *as soon as you get the fifth*, you don't even mark it. You clear the track. Nevertheless, this confused players, so he made the track 5 boxes (or circles or whatever). And I know a 4-box/circle/whatever track would confuse the heck out of me as well. I've seen a version of a 5-exp track with 4 boxes/circles/whatever to fill out *and* a 5th that's not a box/circle/whatever, but something like ">> take an advance", and that should work because there's 5 *things* in front of my eyes.

re Monsterhearts write up: Setting goals is good so long as you don't insist on sticking to them when it doesn't make sense. Figuring out when that is can be tricky. re Graveyard of Vampires: I had to click on the link to see what you meant. When Taliesin Jaffe ran a one-shot *Call of Cthulhu* game for Critical Role, one of the pre-gens "was a classical John Watson jack-of-all-trades Afghan War vet (because I always like to quietly point out how insane it is that I can make an Afghan War vet in nearly any time since the fucking industrial revolution)." (<https://critrole.com/shadow-of-the-crystal-palace-the-investigators/>)

I like the canary / cannery pun and very much like Blue's walkout. re trying to establish how trapped Drake is not quite clicking and raising the question of "Why do some things convince the table, and others don't?": It is an interesting question, and possibly a good igtheme. Did this one convince you? Why or why not?

re Briar not calling for a roll: Yup. If failure isn't interesting, don't roll. re Drake "uncomfortable with how smart Steffan's being": I hope that is indeed Drake and not Mike. That is, I could see someone saying, "Okay, is Steffan that smart?" as a check-in, and I'd be fine with that. I cringe at the notion of someone saying, as a player, "I'm not comfortable with how smart you're playing your character."

re Blue coming out of Darkest Self being a relief to all: I bet. Some playbooks have a \*much\* harder time leaving Darkest Self than others. The restroom sequence was horrific / hilarious.

re Erica Frank re naming missteps in gaming: Some of the names in earlier editions of *Masks of Nyarlathotep* were unfortunate, and I gather one or two may still be. NightLife's use of words like "Inuit" was similarly, ah, questionable, and there's *Vampire: the Masquerade's* clan "Brujah".

re how "mechanics influence the amount of role-playing that goes on, the actual result comes from a complex alchemy of player engagement, GM prompting, and setting grabbiness": This is a "Yes, But" for me. I've played enough odd indie games with enough good roleplayers in situations where, while we do find the setting grabby, we get very confused as we try to figure out where the *roleplaying* comes in to conclude that sometimes, even with players and GM (if any) and setting pushing towards good roleplay, the mechanics may overwhelm them, not merely influence them.

re resource tracking in *Fate*: I've a vague recollection that maybe *DresdenFiles* does this, but would have to actually check. I know that I created a Project track, but that's probably a bit different, and very much improvised. Come to think of it, it was sort of like a long, linear countdown clock. It was 25 stress boxes long, representing Society's resistance to the notion of a minor aristocratic woman wedding a middle class consulting detective. With every 5 stress boxes that got ticked off in social combat between the PCs and Society, the players created an Aspect the PCs could use in the next session (I only allowed one roll per session, as this was something that happened over time). It didn't hurt that the detective was eventually ennobled by Queen Victoria. (I think the Aspects created over time included: At Least He's Trying, And We Know He's Discreet, Mr. Knight Has Friends in High Places, and The Queen Trusts Him.)

re me re save vs poison for exhaustion: Ah, gotcha. re *Monsterhearts* game: Ah yes, I had forgotten this was originally intended as a 2-session game. re Briar being bemused, not offended: Even so, it's worth looking at what the players are perceiving. Fr'ex, one year, when Josh and I were at a filking convention during Intercon, we came back to ask our fellow authors/GMs how one of the larps we'd all worked on (and previously run together) went in our absence.

Fellow Author/GM: *\*various details\** and every game, these two characters decide to kill everyone.

Josh and Lisa: Huh. That's odd. Okay, exactly what happened?

GM: So, as their NPC forces, I asked them who they wanted to kill—

J&L: That. That, right there. That puts into their head the idea that they should be killing people. Don't ask them that question. Ask them, "What do you want us to do?"

IIRC, part of what happened was that the GM was thinking a little too much in character as the NPC soldiers. We reminded him of where the two PCs were coming from, and he said that he could do something like "Okay, we're here, and we can kill all your enemies! But you probably want to make a treaty. *\*sigh\**"

I'm not sure if the GMs should be nudging the players, but if nudging in that game is to be done, that's the way to do it.

re Season Advances in *Monsterhearts*: I know it says you're supposed to go for just one more session after those are unlocked, but I think we went until we reached a reasonable wrap point, which may have been 2-3 more sessions? JOSHUA KRONENGOLD, do you recall?

re Joshua Kronengold re what keeps an Amber GM from using Drama resolution: Er, the rulebook? We're told to go by the relevant numbers of points and such, and maybe the cleverness of the planning (aka can the player successfully roll their Convince the GM skill?), and the amount of Good Stuff or Bad Stuff the character has (this being more Karma than Drama). Nowhere that I recall is there anything about how the GM should make the Dramatically Appropriate Choice. Please do let me know if I'm overlooking anything (especially as how Wujcik actually ran the game may well have deviated from the principles I just typed).

re Sackbook: I'd have just handed over, you know, the bag of holding. Kudos to the GM for going along with the whole spiel, though.

**JIM ECKMAN:** re me: Wikipedia defines OSR thus: "The Old School Renaissance, Old School Revival, or OSR is a play style movement in tabletop role-playing games which draws inspiration from the earliest days of tabletop RPGs in the 1970s, especially *Dungeons & Dragons*." Key points:

- It's a movement, not a game per se.
- It "draws inspiration" from 1970s rpgs, but isn't a 1970s (or 1980s) rpg.

Wikipedia then adds: "It consists of a loose network or community of gamers and game designers who share an interest in a certain style of play and set of game

design principles." In other words, this is a movement, and a community. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old\\_School\\_Renaissance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_School_Renaissance) for further details and/or ask google or other gamers. This isn't my area of expertise; I'm primarily aware that the older games are not themselves OSR games.

**DYLAN CAPEL:** *Crawling Chaos* sounds intriguing. Ah, so many games, too little time. re *Twilight 2000s* hesitation mechanic: This sounds like it borrowed a bit from the dueling system in *Castle Falkenstein*. There, for each exchange, players put down 2 cards each. Any given card may be Attack, Defend, or Rest. For every three exchanges, a player must play a certain number of Rests. The higher a character's skill, the fewer rests a player must play.

re *Swords Without Master*: I should give it a try, or possibly another try, as I think the newest edition of *With Great Power* may use SWM mechanics? re *Call of Cthulhu* scenarios as replays or game writeups or stories: A few thoughts here.

- I know that a number of scenarios for some games (*Delta Green*, fr'ex) map (in whole, part, or backstory) onto some of the fiction.
- Similarly, something a small company has played with a home group (again, see *Delta Green*) may then be written up as a scenario, and one can sometimes hear the original on a podcast.
- The fact that the folks at Yog-Sothoth.com played through *Horror on the Orient Express* and released their playthrough as a podcast ultimately led to Chaosium's kickstarter for a new edition of the campaign (with all the pluses and minuses, which included the shake-up at Chaosium).
- That said, one doesn't always want to be playing in some company's exact timeline.
- Also, while good fiction-writing skills and good scenario-writing skills have some overlap, they are not identical.

re letting go of cherished memories so as to be able to have memories of newer experiences: In theory, one can keep a diary, of course. In practice, Josh created a PC like that, one who did keep a diary. The earliest volume of the diary that the PC had access to began, "Damn. I lost my diary again." Finding an old volume of his diary became a great hook for the character.

**PATRICK ZOCH:** re city igtme: I confess that's a lot more thought than I put into this. It doesn't seem too taxing, so I wonder whether it's just that I run commercial scenarios and campaigns, or use the real world as a starting point, or work fairly small scale (e.g., a neighborhood, or a *Monsterhearts* town). re poor and wealthy sections of town: K. D. Edwards's fictional New Atlantis, from the Tarot sequence (the first of which is *The Last Sun*) is unusual in that, as the

narrator / protagonist of the first book says, the rich and poor neighborhoods didn't just coalesce over time; they were planned by the powerful among the Atlanteans, intended to be permanent. (There's a draft of the map here: <https://kd-edwards.com/map-of-new-atlantis/> though it won't mean much if you've not read the books.)

re Saltmarsh Times Two: This nicely illustrates why I'm not trying to use a virtual tabletop. Heck, I can barely handle a character keeper! I wish you luck. re write ups: What are Goblin command words? Is this magic or simply things goblin leaders shout to those under them?

re me: Thanks for the detail on the fish. re the earlier and earlier assembly times: Wow. re Roger Bell\_West re gunpowder: Chaosium's take on the Lovecraftian Dreamlands has kind of the opposite problem (at least thus far; I don't know what a new edition might say). We're told that there aren't guns in the Dreamlands because there's no technology more recent than 500 years old, IIRC. Now, let's assume we're talking Classic Era, aka the 1920s, and that it's 1920. While, as you say, the development of gunpowder weaponry did not happen all at once, I think that by 1420, there were at least large scale gunpowder weapons.

I resolved this to my own satisfaction by saying that the 500-year rule applied broadly, though perhaps not universally, but the no gunpowder rule applied specifically to that part of the Dreamlands that King Kuranos ruled. Why? Because Kuranos, a former denizen of Earth, didn't want gunpowder in his realm and was a powerful enough Dreamer to enforce that.

One of the PCs did convince him to allow newspapers, playing on Kuranos's nostalgia for them. Kuranos didn't actually know a lot about how one made newspapers, and the game was set in the 1990s, so when the PC mentioned fonts, the king assumed that these were trees of some kind and okayed them. And so, the Dreamlands Times grows its fonts on trees.

re dancing: When I started doing Regency dancing at science fiction conventions (without worrying about just how historically accurate the dances we did actually are), John Hertz, who ran the dances, gave some excellent advice:

- It is always better to look than to crash.
- If you make a mistake, you meant to do that. Remember, you are a wealthy aristocrat who could buy the whole place.

As long as you're not bumping into other people, you're doing it right. And if you do bump into someone, generally, utter a quick apology and move on. (Obviously, if it's a more serious bump, one that injures

someone, stop and figure out who needs what help. I suspect you and your wife will be able to avoid such things.)

**JOSHUA KRONENGOLD:** I am glad we had a much more medically boring Intercon than Dreamation. re Mark Wilson re Marvel movies reaching the point where "arguably too much of the movie was set up by the shows ... the point where it loses a lot of relevance and coherence with a larger audience that doesn't watch the shows": Yes. This is what happened to me with the *Star Wars* franchise. Or rather, I've watched the movies and can follow them just fine, but the whole series stuff—how many versions of the *Clone Wars* are there? How many seasons each? Where does Rebels fit in? And then there's, what, *Asoka*? And Kenobi gets a show too? And *Andor*? And we still haven't finished *Mandalorian*?

re Erica Frank re *Blades in the Dark*: On the one hand, I like the idea of playing out preparation, in other words, just roleplaying as if it weren't *Blades in the Dark*, until it seems like the right time for the engagement roll (which probably is what Harper is going for). It feels less like one might as well just roll and not even bother trying to plan.

On the other, keeping things as broad and quick as possible avoids the problem Fortune in the Middle is meant to solve. That is, let's say we describe doing research, we roleplay chatting with people to get information and help, we establish we're setting up stuff on site, all of this, and then—we make the engagement roll, and it comes up a 1. That can take the wind right out of my sails.

It doesn't help that, as far as I can tell, the number of dice one rolls on an Engagement roll is going to be very low. For us in *Scum & Villainy*, we're lucky if we're rolling 2 dice, as opposed to 1 die or 2-take-the-lowest. It would feel different if (and possibly, some FitD games do this) we got more dice for the stuff we specify our characters do pre-Engagement roll, but I don't think *Blades* itself or *Scum & Villainy* do that—am I incorrect? Somehow, even with the whiff factor, rolling a failure on 4-6 D6s feels different, more like the team had unexpected bad luck that no one can plan for or like the opposition was on top of things than like "I guess we just suck".

re "The door handle is slimy and moves as if alive.": "The doorknob opened a blue eye and looked at him." (Kuttner & Moore, "The Fairy Chessmen") re Owlfolk nun warlock in *Brindlewood Bay*: I mean, I bet that would work in the forthcoming Gumshoe game *Merryshire Detective Club*. Just think of her as the nun who trained Maiden Holmes—we've always wanted a show with her in it so now we can do an rpg with her!

It's just, she's an Owlfolk, and maybe also a warlock. It's fine!

re Matt Stevens re it being hard(er) to do *Good Society's* tension between characters' desires and society's demands in *GURPS* or *Over the Edge*: I think *Fate* would do a better job than *GURPS* or *OtE*. I could suggest Belonging Outside Belonging/No Dice, No Masters, but honestly, *Good Society* is in the same general family, so that's almost like suggesting "a *Good Society* variant". I'm not convinced gm-less games are "easier" than gm'd games. You'll note that, while Naomi was quite willing to let either of us have a go at gming Altclair (which used *OtE/WaRP* rules), I never did, and you did it specifically to resolve a plotline she wasn't interested in running. (Side question, which MYLES should also feel free to answer: Would the Strange School PBEM have been better or worse if it were gmless (or, if you prefer, gm-full)? I think worse, but I know I'm biased, and I also think that if I were to start another game in that world today, and we wanted it to be gm-less, that would work much better than it did when I was running Strange School (2007-2012, iirc).

All of that said, I think Matt would be more comfortable with something like *Polaris* (which, to be fair, is gm-full, not gm-less) than with *Primetime Adventure* (which has a GM, but which also puts players on the spot to narrate on a dime). And all that said, I remember one Gen Con many years ago (2012) when I realized that young gamers were going to be just fine, as a young player in a two hour Games on Demand session of *Dungeon World* described his character in great detail, and where I was expecting munchkinesque explanation of how great she was, he instead described her obviously worn clothing and her bow with a string so frayed it looked like it might snap at any point. This was clearly a gamer ready, willing, and extremely able to take on narration duties.

re me re roleplay or dice and the answer is always both: Sure, I'm good with that. That said:

You: Why are we even roleplaying if not to talk in character?

Me (or someone else) feeling less than inspired: Why am I even roleplaying if not to play someone *better* at this talking stuff than I am right now? I want to play someone as smart as Sybilla Crawford, but every time I open my mouth, my character looks more like one of the characters in *Noises Off*, only less funny and more pathetic. Can I just roll dice to see if my supposed diplomat can actually not suck at diplomacy / my supposed suave seductress is actually suave and seductive instead of just silly?

re *Everway*: It is absolutely a response to *Amber*. re *Feng Shui* game: Oh right! I'd forgotten Pam and Dave played in some sessions. re what you mean by "full roleplaying game": Er... original *D&D* is closer to "hyper-specialized", IMO. You go into a dungeon. Or wilderness area. That the GM's prepped. Clearly, not a complete game! And, sarcasm aside, that's kind of true for *OD&D*, given its roots.

*Blades in the Dark*, or any other mission-centric game? Clearly not a "full roleplaying game"! How can it be when characters must do Missions, limiting not just the setting, but also the action? *Feng Shui*? Nope, not a "full roleplaying game"—the GM's job is to get the characters into preplanned combats! *Pendragon*? Clearly not a "full roleplaying game" with its hyperfocus on the Matter of Britain, what with a timeline and everything. Oh, and quests and limits on what knights get to do.

Hogwash. Use some term other than "full roleplaying game". *Pendragon* is not unfull or incomplete, and putting it—or any other game that isn't actually half-baked—in opposition to "full roleplaying game" is going to make me dismiss the valid points you'll be making. I may be playing hyperfocused, hyperspecialized games, but by Gygax, I am playing "full" roleplaying games!

(Tempted though I am to say something like, "Okay, WEG's *Star Wars* with, if I understand correctly, only scenarios that railroad players through unimportant stuff that doesn't affect canon isn't a full roleplaying game", that, too, is hogwash. *Star Wars* (and *Tribe 8* and early WoD games) are absolutely "full roleplaying games", even if they have badly conceived / written scenarios.)

re Brian Rogers re obviously, the failed pilot roll happened 3 hours ago: While I like this, it does threaten to make folks think success is guaranteed, and as you noted, without a real chance of failure, success loses some of its meaning. re Dylan Capel: I don't think not counting comment pages towards the maximum is the solution. It does address "comments vs anything else", but not the question of how to get through the entire apa every month. I think limits are useful.

(I suppose one could come up with a formula to give folks X% more space if it's comments, but that has disadvantages: Added complexity, still pushes folks to stack their comments with stuff that maybe should be separate, still pushes folks to shrink fonts on non-comment material, et cetera.)

re Patrick Riley re what happens if you bite a werewolf: In the *Strange School* game, I had one of the school's vampire students have become a vampire by biting one when the vampire attacked his friends. re battle lines in

*Monsterhearts*: Patrick was replying to me, and I wasn't talking about PvP per se. I was talking about seeing the battle lines forming as the players created the homeroom class. This pretty much always happens, I find, and it is not a case of weak play.

re Clark Timmins re Mass Grave Awakening and the importance of timing: But you can use it to sic the ghosts of a murder's victims on them! re Roger Bell\_West re blind runs: I don't think I've done these in front of the original author. I did do a playtest of one of the scenarios in *Tales of the Crescent City*, and we sent the author feedback afterwards. re Michael Cule: It's actually *Unknown Armies* 3rd edition. 2nd was basically ironing out a few kinks in 1st ed and reorganizing the material so that it was easier to use.

re Patrick Zoch re having a group traveling hither and yon for reasons other than money alone: This is why Pelgrane has *Mythos Expeditions* for *Trail of Cthulhu*, along with an Expedition Points Pool mechanic. re Jim Eckman re one group of PCs fighting for the Taira vs another group of PCs trying to take them down for the emperor: Ah, I see you're thinking of that anime where one player won the game he and his friends were playing and then suggested they continue with them trying to take down his character.

re Jim Vassilakos re player being absent for a session: I think Aviatrix once had my PC vanish into the Dreamlands for a session when I had to miss the game. For one of the *Dracula Dossier* sessions where Vito's player was absent, we had the character do stuff like drive the car the others were in so that they could jump onto a moving train and hunt vampires. In *Eternal Lies*, during one of the player's absences, I got explicit permission to have Vito captured.

re world building in *Dangerous Refuge*: Basically, we're borrowing from other Pended to Good Society games which ask players to do things like each contribute 2 details about the setting. re *Witch and Cat*: While I don't think it exactly *needs* tables, having them feels like it enhances the game, yes.

**BRIAN MISIASZEK:** Sympathy on the car woes and on dealing with folks who don't get that, no, you don't want a new car, just your old one working again, please and thank you.

re Habana Horror: re Zorilla bending ethics, but not being a mad scientist or monster: Important distinction, yes. re telegram and elsewhere: Given your target audience may not read enough Spanish to understand these passages, I recommend you add translations for the Spanish throughout. I see you do it in some places, but not others. re Elda Real: Is she just singing the word "Guantamera" over and over, or the song? I wonder how many people outside of Cuba,

particularly in the USA, still know of the song. I almost certainly learned it via Pete Seeger.

I like the sidebar on running this sequence as 6 parallel tracks. A master timeline for the Keeper would be useful, with entries abbreviated, as would a rough list of various NPCs' current goals. I'm confused about some of them. Esperanza seems to be preparing to flee, but I'm not sure what she's waiting for, what else she wants. I don't know what Viela and Real want once they've locked themselves in.

\**Grin*\* at the folly of art lovers taking away the painting while it's "still tacky". Has Vives left the Mazorra with Solita? Varona thinks *President* Machado is in love with her, not *Director* Machado, correct?

I wonder if any of the PCs will ever just try to sleep during this portion of the scenario, and whether that gains the players any tangible benefit. I think that if some, but not all, players had their PCs rest, I might ask them to play some of the NPCs so that they wouldn't be sitting around just watching for a long time.

While I've not perused them in great detail, the maps look beautiful, clear, and easier to read than many handout maps for published scenarios. I will, of course, need to read everything again, in sequence, so I've a better sense of the whole of it. I do want to see your full version when you have it, including the parts you left out for space reasons. Currently, I'm getting a player's / PC's-eye view, which means I don't quite grok how everything fits together and don't always grasp the why of something, but would totally be able to enjoy playing the scenario.

re Myles Corcoran re Basil of Baker Street: Ah, that *is* the same character as the one from *The Great Mouse Detective*. re me: What did you think of *Tales of the Caribbean*? I ran "The Night Forms a Cover for Sinners", transplanting it to the 1950s (and for some of the historical NPCs, using the next generation, and learning a couple of interesting tidbits). I was concerned a couple of things wouldn't work, yet they did.

**TIMOTHY COLLINSON:** I'm glad you again have a fully functional reMarkable. re me: Glad to help! I've found it very useful as well. re Attronarch re Power Point presentation earning you a bonus for "cheek": Similar things I've heard of:

I explicitly told a player whose PC didn't have Intimidation that he could use Accounting, as the PC had just discovered accounting irregularities, and that was why he wanted to intimidate the NPC responsible for them.

Using a 1-point Biology spend and a handkerchief from a family member to convince a werewolf the PC is part of her pack.

Singing "Barrett's Privateers" as a 1-point Oral History spend to distract a group—not, I think, actually done in a game, but from an episode of the show *Due South*: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbeXh9FZT\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbeXh9FZT_g).

Gareth Ryder-Hanrahan (I think) glossing part of *Dracula* as a player getting the GM to agree that an aristocrat had the Mechanics skill

(<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/pelgranepress/the-dracula-dossier/posts/1140580>): "One of my

favourite moments in the whole novel is the bit near the end where the heroes are pursuing Dracula and his Slovak river pirates using a steam launch. The boat suffers some damage to its steam-pipes, and Arthur Holmwood, Lord Godalming himself, is revealed to be an expert plumber (4th November, p. 478 in *The New Annotated Dracula* for those keeping score at home). It's such a player character moment - one can envision the weary Director saying "Sure. You're playing a rich, upper-class social-type, and you've spent the whole adventure doing high-society stuff, but now you want to spend your XP on Mechanics. You know what, fine. I don't care. It's late and I'm tired and I just want to get onto the big fight scene at the end. Zap, you're an expert plumber!"

### **IGTHEME FOR Issue #10—March 21st: The best/worst/funniest monster combat tactics**

If I never see another penis monster, it will be too soon. The same goes for some femme fatale monster that needs to castrate and eat men for procreation (and usually kills women on general principles).



**Me in Third Contact at Intercon X**

### Very Brief Write Up/Summary of Sweet

**Complex:** a playtest of Shoujo Society, a Penned to Good Society game with a high school setting

Main Characters, their Connections, and what I recall of their fates:

**Nakamura Isamu:** He/him, 16. Drive: STARTING: Friendship. ENDING: Laziness. Desire: STARTING: Reconcile Your Childhood Friends. ENDING: Stay out of people's business. Status: Nobody: You are unimportant to society. No one realizes your potential. Childhood friends with Rie and Hoshi. Rival of Akisa. Confused by much of what's going on around him, including Fujiwara Akisa declaring herself his rival back in elementary school; clearly, she must like him.

**Nakamura Kenji:** He/him, 36. Isamu's uncle and Tea Ceremony Teacher. Kenji is lazy when no one is looking, and has told Isamu to get his act together, as Isamu's going to be the family heir (which Kenji vastly prefers to Kenji being the heir). I had fun playing hm.

**Yamamoto Daichi:** He/him, 16. Cute boy from a different high school. Isamu's crush. Minami's player.

**Fate:** Eventually, the two cinnamon rolls, Isamu and Daichi, got together. Also, Isamu had to play a cat, despite being allergic to them, to save the cat cafe (which, we later decided, was never in danger of closing).

**Kinoshita Minami:** He/him, 16. Drive: STARTING: Anger. ENDING: Connection: Desire: STARTING: Remove yourself from your family legacy and make your own mark. ENDING: Figure out how I feel about Akisa; Status: Known: You're acknowledged by your peers. You might be somebody someday. Old Flames with Akisa. Former friends with Hoshi. Minami is under a lot of pressure from his family to live up to their standards and social position. His passion is theater, but Hoshi "stabbed him in the back" (actually a misunderstanding). Potentially ready to explode.

**Kinoshita Hiroshi:** He/him, 18. The perfect son, vice president of the student council, thinks his brother Minami is wasting his time with theater and doesn't understand why he dumped the socially useful Akisa. Isamu's player.

**Suzuki Mio:** She/her 17. Her player had to drop, and I don't recall whether one of us picked her up. A senior in Theatre Club and a fan of Minami.

**Fate:** I think he prevailed on his older brother to keep the school from ditching the theatre club, but owed his brother for the favor. I think he eventually forgave Hoshi and started over with Akisa. They're not necessarily engaged as of the end of the game, but they're actually communicating with each other.

**Arata Hoshi:** She/they, 16. Drive: STARTING: Regret. ENDING: Power. Desire: Restore your reputation and be forgiven by your former friend. Status: STARTING: Known: You're acknowledged by your peers. You might

be somebody someday. ENDING: Respected: Your words hold weight and your every move influences society. Former friends with Minami. Best friends with Rie and childhood friends with Rie and Isamu. Starts but never finishes projects. Accidentally gave Minami the wrong time and place for auditions, and wound up for the first time with the lead—and the school assuming they did this on purpose. Unaware that Arima Rie has a crush on her. (Rie's player had to drop, so this became irrelevant.)

**Arata Masaki:** He/him, 14. Hoshi's kid brother, techie, had adventures all his own when deciding to Help Hoshi Out. Akisa's player.

**Sawada Amaya:** She/her, 18: President of the student council, and delighted that Hoshi got cutthroat enough to finally start to make something of herself. Isamu's player.

**Fate:** I think eventually forgiven by Minami. Wound up working with Akisa, who taught Hoshi the power of spreadsheets and networking. Hoshi developed an unrequited crush on Akisa, but also liked the taste of power Akisa gave her. This isn't a bad end, given that Hoshi is now willing to do the work.

**Fujiwara Akisa:** She/her, 16. Drive: Ambition. Desire: STARTING: Push your rival to match your ambition and achievements. ENDING: Ensure the happiness of the one you love. Status: Powerful: Your every breath has authority. Others covet your position and power. Rivals with Isamu. Old flames with Minami. Isamu had higher scores in something than Akisa, which delighted Akisa—At last, a worthy rival! Alas, Isamu wasn't interested. Determined not to let Minami dumping her stand. Originally, tapped Hoshi for a project to keep Hoshi from outmaneuvering Minami again, which Hoshi never realized, and I think eventually appreciated Hoshi's appreciation for the kind of power Akisa wielded. (Hoshi: Wait, should I even have access to this information? Akisa: Normally, no, but...)

**Fujiwara Chiaki:** She/her, 16. Akisa's twin sister, picked up by me when Rie's player had to drop. Very supportive of Akisa and vice versa.

**Wakamura Mayumi:** She/her, 18. President of Akisa's Fan Club and secretly (because it's against the rules Mayumi herself wrote) in love with her. Discovered monitoring Akisa by Masaki, whereupon all of us learned that Mayumi's family is or has ties to the yakuza. Isamu's player.

Additionally, while **Sawada Amaya** is technically Hoshi's connection, there was some rivalry between her and Akisa, culminating in the two getting "accidentally" locked in a shed by Mayumi (trying to get them together) where cellphone signal doesn't work, with kabadons and unresolved sexual tension.

**Fate:** I think starting over with Minami now that they're actually communicating with each other, and possibly having Hoshi as an apprentice in the ways of social power.

# GOING TO BE *Ad-Libbed*

#8



Y'all might have noticed that I've been putting a lot more links in my zines, including to stuff that you're all probably familiar with. I've been thinking that any random issue of E&A could be someone's first issue, and some readers might be new to the hobby, so I want to make it easy for newcomers to get context for the various things I'm talking about.

Also, [hypertext](#) is kinda my natural writing style, so I'm taking advantage of the digital nature of E&A to indulge myself.

## ATTENTION CONSERVATION NOTICE

A.I., huh, what is it good for • the Delvish dialect • Satah podcast • *Monsterhearts* • *Scum and Villainy* • *Apollo 47 Technical Handbook* • Lajos Egri & dramatic premise • goal-based resolution • page count vs word count • what is the OSR? • narration vs roleplaying • roleplaying vs rollplaying • *Neoclassical Geek Revival* • origin of the gelatinous cube • more noun vs verb • Graphviz for relationship maps • con artists and protection from dragons • diegesis vs non-diegesis, with filk • text editors in *LotR* • tameness in the MCU

## “The Fullest Possible Use”

I am putting myself to the fullest possible use, which is all I think that any conscious entity can ever hope to do.

— HAL 9000, [2001: A Space Odyssey](#) (1968)

I've tried fiddling around with AI. Not for actual creative or generative work! But as an assistive device, it seems to be pretty useful. The traditional caveat of working with computers still applies — you can't just turn your own brain off and blindly trust the machine:

**Copy Editing:** Before sending it in, I fed last month's PDF into [Google's Gemini AI](#), and asked it to check for typos and other errors. It gave back a list of about a dozen supposed errors, of which maybe four or five were actual typos, two or three were legit queries about my weird stylistic choices ([Stet!](#)), and the remainder were bad calls

or outright hallucinations. This isn't a bad ratio for a short document, but for something long, like a novel or a big RPG manual, where you might get hundreds of queries, it would be infuriating.

**Handwriting Recognition:** I had both Gemini and [Anthropic's Claude](#) try transcribing a page of my handwritten notes from the *Monsterhearts* game. (Using the free web-based versions of both.) Gemini did a much better job reading my handwriting, but there were still a few errors to correct. Snapping photos of my notes, having the AI transcribe, and then correcting and expanding upon the result, was faster than starting out by typing the notes out myself.

**Audio Transcription:** I wanted a transcription of that hour-long podcast I linked to last month, so I could write the summary on the next page. The free version of Gemini wasn't up to handling an MP3 that big, so based on [a friend's recommendation](#), I installed [Open AI's Whisper](#) on my home machine. (I have a Mac, so I let [Homebrew](#) do the actual installing.) It took Whisper about half an hour to chew through the hour-long MP3 file and spit out an [SRT file](#) containing a transcript with timestamps.

**Coding:** This one's actually generative. I usually compose my zines in Typst, but I used to do most of my writing in [Markdown](#), which is still more widely supported. If I want to hang out at a coffee shop and write on my iPad, my life is easier if I can do that writing in Markdown. But then, how to convert it to Typst markup? Easy enough — [Pandoc](#), a document markup converter. But out of the box, Pandoc converts Markdown's emphasis markup into Typst's function syntax, instead of Typst's shorthand markup syntax.

So I asked Gemini how to solve this. Answer: Pandoc can use filters written in [Lua](#), a programming language I've never worked in. Hey, Gemini, could you write me a filter? Sure thing, and it's just a dozen or so lines long. And it doesn't work. Hey, Gemini, it doesn't work! Oh, no prob, here's a second one. That doesn't work either. But the third one worked! [And that's what you're going to get, lad, the strongest Lua filter in these islands!](#) The whole process took maybe five or ten minutes. In olden times, when Google

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search pretty much worked, this would have involved half an hour or more of hunting around on various online fora.

**Answering Questions:** I asked Google *do monsterhearts conditions stack*, and it gave me back a response that *appeared* to answer the question without *actually* answering it. It pointed out that a character can have multiple Conditions, and a bonus from a Condition can stack with other bonuses, but it didn't unambiguously tell me whether I can invoke multiple Conditions on the same character for a bigger bonus on one roll. Worse, a superficial skim of the response would lead one to believe that the answer is an unambiguous yes. When I rephrased the question as *in monsterhearts can I invoke more than one condition on one roll for a bigger bonus*, I got a more specific answer. (The actual answer appears to be: Yes, but you have to fictionally justify your use of Conditions, and some tables house-rule a cap on bonuses. The general philosophy of the game seems to be that you can build yourself a big bonus, but you've gotta generate some juicy fictional drama to earn it.)

I also asked if there was a Skin that had a move that allowed using Volatile instead of Cold to Shut Someone Down, and it told me that the Calaca skin from the 1st edition supplement *Skins for the Skinless* did that, but nope, that swaps Dark for Cold. So yeah, this technology is still really good at confidently giving wrong answers that look like right answers.

The future masters of technology will have to be lighthearted and intelligent. The machine easily masters the grim and the dumb.

— [Marshall McLuhan](#), *Counterblast* (1969)

**Developing Ideas:** OK, this one also verges on being generative. Decades ago, I had an idea for a game where the PCs are all the children of nobles, in a typical [secondary fantasy world](#), held as wards of the central king (or maybe emperor) as hostages to ensure their families good behavior. This, I think, could work pretty well as a *Monsterhearts* setting, but I was unsure how to integrate the metaphoric fantasy elements into a setting where belief in vampires, werewolves, etc, is common.

Anyway, I asked Gemini, and followed up with more questions, and it honestly did a pretty good (but not great) job of suggesting things, though as I continued the discussion I noticed it starting to repeat itself, and the responses starting to drift off-topic. I'm assuming most of the material comes from some forum discussions somewhere, but I don't know if I'd have found it with just Google search. This ability to synthesize material from a wide variety of sources and present it in a neat, easy-to-read summary is pretty great, as long as it's not too technical and the stakes of getting a wrong answer are low. I still wouldn't want to use this for medical or legal advice.

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## Delving too greedily and too deep

Delvish is a surprisingly tender, delicate, decorous and courtly language; it does lack human breath and blood, but it has its own native character, like the deep-woods twittering of hallucinatory machine-elves.

— [Bruce Sterling](#),  
“[Preliminary Notes on the Delvish Dialect](#)” (2024)

Bruce Sterling has an article on Medium about what he calls “Delvish,” the collective dialect of large-language-model chatbots. He calls it that because one of the characteristic words of chatbots is “delve.”

He includes a chart at the top of the article showing the increase in the use of “delve,” and I notice that the line starts to bend slightly upwards in the early 2000s, as [the OSR](#) is taking shape, then again a bit more shortly after the release of D&D 5th edition, before launching dramatically skyward in 2022.

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## Recent Reading

I read [Thomas Pynchon](#)'s newest, *Shadow Ticket*, a few weeks back, and it reminded me that I've always meant to get around to reading *Gravity's Rainbow*, and now seemed as good a time as any, and damn, it's long.

I encountered a paper online, “[The Abstraction Fallacy: Why AI Can Simulate But Not Instantiate Consciousness](#)” by Alexander Lerchner, a scholar at Google's DeepMind. It's mostly over my head, and I'm tempted to feed it to an AI for a simplified summary. But Lerchner's thesis seems to be that truly understanding meaning requires actual experience of the universe, and can't just be generated by running mathematical transformations on text.

I was struck by a line from the paper's conclusion: “conscious experience cannot be the downstream result of computation because it is the necessary physical prerequisite for it,” because (as I mentioned a couple of months back) I recently reread [Robert Pirsig's \*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance\*](#), and this is a more formal statement of Pirsig's theory, that our experience of what he calls “Quality” — our in-the-moment perception of the world — empirically precedes any intellectual understanding of it. (Though Pirsig takes the idea farther than that.)

[Kieron Gillen](#) wrote a [blog post](#) about running [Mythic Bastionland](#) that has me really wanting to run it.

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## Recent Listening

I linked to that [Campaign Spotlight podcast](#) last month, Satah talking about “Game Mechanics as a Poem Structure,” and since I listened to it just the day before finishing up my zine, I didn't have time to go into it in detail. Here are the bits that stood out to me, some of which relate to various issues that we've been discussing here:

- ◆ There's some stuff about GM-less games near the beginning. Around 6:45 they talk about how one player in a GM-less game can wind up taking on a GM-like role if the other players are more passive or less interested in collaboration.
- ◆ Around 11:15 there's a bit about learning to play actively and push for things instead of just reacting to what a GM tosses at you, which is something I'm trying to get better at. (There's an old term, "[Mother, May I?](#)", for playstyles in which the GM has strong veto power over player input, and GMless games ought to be a way of getting away from that, but it can be hard to unlearn habits.)
- ◆ About 16 minutes in, they talk ("they" is Satah, who's non-binary) about a game of [Galactic](#) (a GM-less *Star Wars*-type game using [Belonging Outside Belonging](#)) they played in once with three other people (during the COVID lockdown, I think), and here's the cool bit: Though they only played about 12 sessions of *Galactic* itself, they got so into the characters that they'd play various duet games on the side to flesh out the characters and stories, and a prequel game with a tweaked version of [Masks](#). They also wrote about 150,000 words of in-universe fiction about the characters, about a third of it smut. This sounded so exciting that I promptly backed the Kickstarter for *Galactic* 3e.
- ◆ Around 19:20, they talk about [Daniel Tozier's Adventure by Mail system](#), duet games designed to be played through the mail by two people sending letters with playing cards to each other, and the playing cards serve as a prompt for your letter writing.
- ◆ About 24 minutes in, there's a discussion of the difference between an RPG and an improv exercise. Satah's take is that it feels more like a game if there's some kind of choice about scarcity or giving up one thing to pursue another. At the half-hour mark, there's the observation that provides the podcast title: playing an RPG is like writing a sonnet, while improv is like free-form slam poetry. The game rules provide a structure that you have to adhere to, but they also provide guidance.
- ◆ Around 33 minutes, some talk about solo games.
- ◆ At 40 minutes, what "OSR" means to Satah: "sort of like, your [Motherships](#), your [Into the Odds](#), that kind of thing. Relatively simple, high brutality, high fatality. Rolls really mean something. There's a big consequence." Though they admit that's kind of "new school, old school revival" rather than the original meaning of OSR.
- ◆ Around 46 minutes they talk about using a solo journaling game to generate some backstory for a character they were playing in a multiplayer game.
- ◆ About 54 minutes there's a recommendation of Takuma Okada's [Alone Among the Stars](#), a solo journaling game with [hundreds of hacks](#) for

various settings.

- ◆ Around 57 minutes Satah recommends reading/watching books/movies that are "fine – not bad, but not really good" for inspiration. There's something inspiring, they say, about a work that has something cool and compelling in it, but is kinda mediocre, so your brain starts thinking about how it could have been done better, which gets your creative juices flowing, and hey, there's that hot-vs-cool theory I've been talking about!

## Recent Gaming

### **Monsterhearts: Vermilion Cove, Session 5**

Mar 1. NJ couldn't make it to this session, so Laeli was off somewhere moping about everyone else having seen Steffan's junk.

- ◆ **MC:** Briar (she), who also hosted
- ◆ **Blue** (??), the **Hollow** (Johnni, they/she)
- ◆ **Drake Kennedy** (he), the **Queen** (Mike, he)
- ◆ **Laeli Vahad** (she), the **Mortal** (NJ, she)
- ◆ **Logan Caldwell-Collins** (he), the **Infernal** (Erica, she)
- ◆ **Steffan Mactire** (he), the **Werewolf** (me, he)

It's still Wednesday night! Logan had tried going home, but couldn't face his parents. He spent the afternoon moping on the Old Pier, thinking about feeding Ernie to his Dark Patron.

Logan gets texted as to our whereabouts, walks up the beach, rejoins the group at the place where we'd been having pizza, JC's Diner. Walks in just after the events at the end of last session, so he sees Drake on the floor with Steffan naked on top of him, and a crowd. Briar puts on [our theme music](#), so I guess this is an episode that starts with a bit of footage before the theme plays. Logan notices that Tina, whose dad is part of the town's three-man police department, is noticing the shredded clothing in the men's room. (Tina's an NPC, but not in our homeroom, so we don't have any other details about her.) We all leave; on the way out, Steffan recovers his Carhartt jacket (that and one of his shoes were the only items of clothing that survived his wolfing out; those jackets are tough), and grabs a towel from the kitchen to wrap around his nether region. Logan checks to see if Steffan's surviving sneaker will work on his bare foot, but nope, wrong side.

There's a discussion of Logan's "Higher Power," his Dark Patron, who healed up Pete after the shooting. Is Pete's soul in danger? What are the limits of its power? Shouldn't it be a "Lower Power"? (I idly wonder whether any of the others have read [CS Lewis's The Screwtape Letters](#).)

Drake gets a call from Ernie – the mayor is firing the school's principal, replacing him with the sheriff. (The principal is Ernie's dad.) Drake promises to help, somehow. We consider going to Logan's Patron. Drake texts Byron, asking him to intervene. (Byron's parents are

rich, old money, high-status in the town.) Byron says he can do it, but it'll cost him, it'll involve "burning a bridge," and he wants something big in return: He wants Laeli.

**Drake:** What's up with you and this girl?

**Byron:** You aren't my therapist.

Drake points out that Laeli will be at his party on Saturday, but that's not enough – Byron wants Laeli in a specific room, with specific things, on Friday night, and he wants dirt on Drake as "insurance" in case she's not there. (**Drake:** You are playing a very dangerous game, and not well.) We decide to feed Byron's soul to Logan's Patron, stopping off at Drake's first for clothing. Steffan gets a sweatshirt and some sweatpants that show off his ass to good effect. (I am not aware that this is a thing sweatpants can do, but the rest of the table is quite insistent.) Logan gets shoes that are too big for him. Drake texts Byron, arranges to meet at the graveyard. (That's the place where Logan communes with his Dark Patron.)

At the graveyard, Blue sends Laeli a photo of Steffan's butt in sweatpants. Byron's car is already there. We hear Byron *already talking to the Dark Patron!* We walk in boldly, looking cool. (Drake rolls 10 on Keep Your Cool). Byron looks shaken to see us. Other guy, the Patron, is very handsome, looks like [the actor from the Netflix Lestat show](#). (Erica & Johnni are excited about this, but it means nothing to me. I just remark that I hope he doesn't introduce himself by saying "[Lestat, c'est moi.](#)")

Logan mocks Byron, rolls 11 on Shut Someone Down, and gives him a Condition: "Weak." Blue, also trying to mock Byron, actually turns him on! Byron propositions Blue for an eventual three-way with Laeli. Blue lures Byron off into the bushes, supposedly to see if their sexual tastes are compatible. (Will it happen at last? Will someone *finally* have sex in this game where the PCs are expected to be having sex with each other all the time? As it turns out, no. Keep reading.) Logan asks the Patron if he'd be interested in Byron's soul; the Patron says "Worthless."

With Byron gone, the Patron reverts back to the form it usually uses with Logan: a sort of dark orb with glowing eyes. Logan's a bit miffed that Byron gets the fancy TV star version of the Patron, while he gets this thing that looks like, like... I say "Isn't there a Pokémon that looks like that?" but can't remember the name. Johnni suggests [Gengar](#), but I think I was actually thinking about [Gastly](#). Anyway, Drake refers to the Patron as a demon.

**Patron:** A demon? In this new regime, maybe that's all I am.

**Drake:** New regime?

**Logan:** < sotto voce > Don't ask questions!

**Drake:** If there's a political situation in Hell, I want to know about it.

Blue & Byron chat in the bushes. Blue has one of his [Heelys](#) off, fiddling with it seductively. They get to talking

about violence, and their tussle at the party. (See the Special Flashback Session writeup in E&A #8, pgs 174-177.) Byron says he wants to see Blue "throw Laeli around" as a "tenderizer." Blue whacks Byron in the head with his Heely. Harder than expected (a partial success with Lash Out Physically, and Johnni took the option of letting Briar decide how much damage was inflicted). Byron staggers, blood streaming down his face, then runs. Blue shouts to the others that Byron's heading for his car.

Steffan beats Byron to the car (a good result on rolling with Volatile – not actually the Run Away move, but something improvised along those lines that we didn't need to fully work out because I rolled a full success), but fails to stop him from driving off (tries to ward Byron off by growling at him, rolls crappily on Shut Someone Down), gets grazed by the car (1 Harm).

We pile into Drake's car and follow Byron. Briar narrates that we're on the section of the highway that borders on an oceanside cliff, and we all know what's coming, but none of us suggest stopping. Drake keeps after Byron, not letting him get away, and Byron's driving gets more erratic until... Well, usually in *Monsterhearts*, the MC doesn't roll dice, but in this case, Briar wants to give Byron a chance, so she picks up 1d6, says that if it rolls 4 or higher he'll make it, and rolls a 1. Byron fails to make a tight turn and plows through the guardrail and off the cliff. Drake calls 911 to report seeing a drunk driver go off the cliff, and deletes his text history with Byron.



Briar asks Mike to make a Gaze Into the Abyss roll, which succeeds, so Drake realizes that we need to get into Byron's house to recover compromising information Byron has about him. (This stuff is mutually-compromising; the [kompromat](#) Byron was angling for earlier is stuff that would have just affected Drake.) Fortunately, Steffan's dad is the groundskeeper at Bluestone Manor, Byron's home, and his family lives in a cottage on the grounds. (Established way back in our Session Zero.)

**Johnni:** We're breaking into two houses in one day?

**Briar:** This has been *the longest day!*

(We take a short break here. Our sessions are four hours long, and we usually break for a bit around the two-hour mark.)

The group drives up to Bluestone Manor. As they drive up

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the winding private road, they pass another car, Byron's parents' car, coming down, with two people in it. Blue & Logan duck down to avoid being seen. Drake & Steffan go into Byron's house (Steffan has keys), leaving the other two in the car. Our cover story is that Steffan lent a book to Byron, and is getting it back. Steffan knows that the Lees (Byron's family) have a live-in maid named Patricia, who was like a grandmother to Steffan and Byron when they were younger. Her rooms are in the basement, and she's usually asleep at this hour (about 10PM), so they walk softly, but I roll low for Steffan's Keep Your Cool move, so a floorboard creaks, and the maid calls out. Steffan distracts her while Drake goes on to search Byron's room.

The maid tells Steffan that Byron's dead. (The cops have already called the Lees to identify the body; that's why they were driving past us.) Steffan tells her about how Byron was into some bad stuff – drinking, drugs, abusing girls. (The first two are, I think, a lie. Byron seemed to be straight edge at the party in the flashback session. But we want people to think he was driving under the influence.) She wants Steffan to tell the cops about it.

Drake searches Byron's room, fails to find the drive he's looking for.

Logan & Blue are in Drake's car. Blue writes a fake love note for Drake from Troy, and Briar asks Johnni to roll Turn Someone On for it. A 10! Drake's going to get turned on when he finds it. Then they see the Lee's car returning. Logan texts Steffan & Drake. Steffan breaks off his conversation with Patricia, saying that he needs to go be with his friends. Drake also gets the text. One more Gaze Into the Abyss roll – boxcars! He finds what he's looking for. He also grabs a textbook off the shelf. On his way out, he hears voices – runs into the Lees. Drake gets stuck in an awkward scene with Byron's parents. Drake's family is new money, the Lees are old money, and it's not a big town, so there's a social relationship there, but not a strong one. He keeps trying to smooth-talk them without giving away our involvement, and Mike keeps rolling partial successes on Keep Your Cool. Briar's clearly not having an easy time coming up with new ways of interpreting that. The Lees ask Drake if he gave drugs to Byron, Drake implies maybe it was Talia.

Steffan tells his parents about Byron (Erica and Johnni take on the roles of Steffan's ma and da, and they're hilarious), so they can pay a condolence visit to the Lees, letting Drake escape and giving us a way out of the scene.

Steffan stays at home. The other three PCs go off to warn Scottie that the cops might be looking for him. (If they talk to Talia, she might hand over Scottie.) Also Drake talks to Ernie, hugs him, winds up turning him on. (The dice really want everyone to be turned on!)

Blue texts Talia; I don't catch the whole thing but he tells her to maybe be queen of the monsters, which apparently turns her on (Johnni's been trying to get Blue to turn on Talia since the second session). Mike writes "RIP" on Byron's desk on the homeroom sheet.

So five sessions in (six if you count the flashback), the score is Death 1, Sex 0, which is odd considering how turned on everyone is. But at least we're done with Wednesday, or will be once we establish what Laeli was up to. The PCs have definitely shifted out of mutually-antagonistic mode, into work-together-against-a-greater-enemy mode, at least for now.

### **Scum and Villainy, Session 6**

Mar 14. Gareth was back to playing Von again; no idea where Bella went. This was a pretty quick session.

- ◆ **The GM** (Gaylord)
- ◆ **Harmony Qián**, a **Mechanic** (me)
- ◆ **Valsi**, a **Mystic** (Lisa)
- ◆ **Von Redwell**, **Muscle** (Gareth)
- ◆ **Varilas**, aka **Vary**, a **xeno Speaker** (Josh)

We're in Holt system. We seem to have at least 4 Heat in every system except Brekk, the one we've never been to. We get a message from Blish, a Mystic and rival of Valsi. He works for House Malklaith. (The rest of the table seems to have settled on "Malaketh" as their pronunciation.) He wants to hire us to rescue an heir of House M who's been kidnapped by the Suneaters, a group that's trying to recreate jumpgate tech, and looking to extinguish a star to do it.

The heir (we aren't given a name, but he's a human male) is being held on a Suneaters battle cruiser. Blish seems reluctant to tell us what the heir looks like or give us more info. Harmony & Valsi hack into Blish's computer system to get the facts: it's a clone of the head of the house. The target ship is currently in Iota system.

Our plan is to pretend to be a supply ship – A Deception plan. We get a 2 on the Engagement roll. We pick up a load of goods, need to rendezvous with the Suneater ship, which is near a comet that seems to be disrupting the Way. We approach, identify ourselves, and they start firing to take out our engines! We evade, and take damage to our hull (making our secret smuggling hold unusable), but fake engine damage. They come over to get the supplies. We let them board, but there's just six boarders, only two visibly armed, so we ambush them.

Von takes out the guards, but the other four are experienced Way users, so one telekinetically tries to slam Von, who resists. They try to use Way to damage the ship. Valsi, who's still Way-deaf and Haunted, tries to block by extending their Way-deafness. It works, so they try to shoot us. Von & Valsi topple crates on top of them, killing two (a Devil's Bargain), knocking out the rest.

We tie up the unconscious ones and dress up like them, bringing the two bodies back, along with the cargo. We're lucky (Fortune roll) and the battle cruiser crew doesn't pay too much attention to us. We overhear some discussion of attacking other supply ships and "adding them to the comet." Pretty much everyone on the ship is Way-capable, like even the janitors. We're dismissed to a rest shift. "If you need counseling for the deaths, we can

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send a priest, but this is your fourth death in five weeks, so you're probably used to it."

Von checks our room for bugs; it's got very little in the way of electronics. There's a Way artifact in the form of a chalice, which Valsi attunes to. It's a Way-based monitor/terminal system. Valsi uses it to find our target – he's on the bridge!

Everyone is called to battle stations, a House Malarkey battle cruiser has been spotted. We go to the bridge. The bridge has a fountain & banquet table, for some reason. The clone guy is blindfolded (not just a piece of cloth; this is some kind of helmet that covers his eyes), maybe asleep.

Gareth introduces a flashback: Von stuck an explosive into a pineapple, which is being served at the banquet, and he wants to detonate as a distraction. But this turns out to be irrelevant, as he distracts everyone just fine by directing their attention to the House M ship, which is firing at our ship, the Stardancer. Valsi tries to pose as someone taking the hostage to a more secure location. One of the crew pulls a gun and starts shooting people, shouting "For House Malklaith!" The crew start fighting back with Way abilities, which are distorted by the comet. Harmony almost gets shot, but resists. (I narrate using her Way sensibilities to zig while the shots zag.)

We go to the shuttle bay with our hostage. Harmony removes the helmet from the guy, but it's got a Way component that tries to rip out a piece of the guy's soul. Valsi intervenes, somehow, and discovers that he's got shapeshifter biology of some type. (The action narration here was pretty awkward and abstract.) We board a shuttle and wait for an opportunity to return to the Stardancer.

The Suneaters seem to be winning. We eventually get the signal to go board the House M ship, go out with all of the other shuttles, but we go to our ship instead. We stick the four prisoners into the shuttle and jettison it. The House M ship broadcasts that they have been attacked by an unknown ship and the Stardancer. We get away.

We go back to the shipyards. Valsi examines our passenger on the way. He seems to be made of Magpie, but locked into human form, or something weird like that.

We meet with our contact, hand the guy off. Pay: 12 Creds; 2 each for us, 4 for the ship. We gain 6 Heat, which bumps us up to 2 Wanted and 2 Heat left over.

Entanglement: Hegemony News Network wants to do a story about us, describing us as dangerous criminals. Nope! We pay 2 Creds to get a better story, more sympathetic, portraying us as misguided Way users.

Downtime: Harmony Repairs the ship, Trains Prowess. This, plus the XP for the session, gives her a dot in Scramble, which means she now has 3 dice in all three Attributes (the things you use for resistance rolls). Others PCs reduce Wanted/Heat in Rin & Holt systems. I think we forgot to do anything about the space cockroaches.

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## Monsterhearts: Vermilion City, Session 6 Flashback: The It Crowd

Mar 15. Johnni gave advance warning that they couldn't make it. This worried me: the fourth consecutive session where one player couldn't make it, a different one each time, which implied a target on my back for the next one.

Briar suggested doing another flashback session, but this time, we make up characters from the other, non-remedial, homeroom. The kids who are smart, rich, socially competent, or at least one of those things. Specifically, the popular kids who used to hang out with Talia, but rejected her after she got caught sleeping with Coach Benton. Briar emphasized that these are supposed to be terrible people, who'll be villains for the main group, but I couldn't help but make mine just a bit sympathetic. I'm just a big softy at heart.

Sadly, Mike and NJ also cancelled shortly before the game, but Erica and I showed up, and that turned out to be enough.

I didn't really do a good job of taking notes on this one, so I'm reconstructing a lot of it from memory.

- ◆ **MC:** Briar (she), who also hosted
- ◆ **Carly Danvers** (she), scheming over-achiever from a rich family (Erica, she)
- ◆ **Bianca Chen** (she), socially inept computer genius (me, he)

We start off by doing a simplified version of *Monsterhearts* PC creation. No skins, no skin moves, just some character concepts, followed by some Q&A to flesh them out and establish relationships:

- ◆ Carly's very blonde, and has a superficially pleasant demeanor while she's trying to figure out whether to use you for her own advancement or destroy you as an obstacle. She expects to get into Harvard.
- ◆ Bianca's a computer nerd who gets a thrill from using technology in disruptive ways. Socially awkward, though. She was thinking of going to Harvard, but got pissed at them for not standing up better for [Claudine Gay](#), so now she's got her cap set for MIT.
- ◆ Once we've established the basics of our characters, Briar asks which of the two of us was in charge. I don't want that responsibility, so I just look at Erica, who volunteers.
- ◆ This gives us the fundamental social dynamic: Carly's the one with the actual social chops, while Bianca's the useful tool who relies upon Carly for a social life, and can be rejected if she fails to earn her keep. It's not quite [Spike & Chester](#), but it's not entirely *not* Spike & Chester.
- ◆ We also give 'em stats: +2 Dark and +1 Volatile for Bianca, +2 Cold and I don't remember what else for Carly.
- ◆ Carly & Talia were besties in middle school, having bonded over a project on medieval life. (They both

had interests in what it meant to be a queen.) Carly's also homophobic, but hides it, since she realizes that's not popular.

- ◆ When Briar asks me who Bianca has a crush on, I reply that she's got a thing for Talia, but barely even admits it to herself. Keep in mind, we know in advance these PCs are going to wind up wrecking Talia's life.
- ◆ During the 2020 COVID lockdown (when the PCs were in middle school), Bianca found out about a secret party that some older kids were throwing, and told Talia, and they both crashed it. The older kids treated Talia like a highschool student, but Bianca like a kid. Talia made enough social connections from that party that she could keep in touch with those kids without Bianca's help.
- ◆ Four months ago, Carly & Talia swiped the tires from Coach Benton's car as a prank; this caused him to miss the birth of his kid, which put strain on his marriage. He had to sleep in his office for a while, and got closer to Talia. Carly had Bianca erase the security camera footage of the prank.
- ◆ Briar also asks me which characters from the remedial homeroom Bianca has good dirt on. I go with:
  - ▶ Kenny's father has a history of drug abuse, which they moved to Vermilion City to escape from, and she has records of his arrests and time in rehab.
  - ▶ Those videos of Byron's that Drake made off with? She's got copies of some of 'em.
  - ▶ She knows who Scottie's drug suppliers are.

As we start the session, it's shortly before the end of our junior school year. We don't have theme music. Talia's secret hasn't been discovered yet. The Tenleytown shooting hasn't happened yet. Neither has the party from the previous flashback (see E&A #8).

Talia's gotten us invites to a party in Tenleytown! [Clavicular](#) is gonna be there!

(We – the players, not the PCs – have been talking in the group Discord about Clavicular, and [incel looks-maxxing](#) culture in general. And I apologize to readers for whom those terms are new. Clavicular is infamous for having bashed his own face with a hammer to change his bone structure. I am not making any of this up.)

On the way to the party, Bianca (alone in the back seat) gets an alert on her phone. She's got AI agents that scour the net looking for dirt on people, and they've found video of a couple having sex in Coach Benton's car. Driving between the two towns, bandwidth is too low to download the video, but Bianca has the agent send her a textual summary, and then extract some key stills. It's Coach Benton and Talia! Bianca keeps this to herself for now.

When they get to the party, Carly sends Bianca off to

fetch drinks, while she and Talia find people to look good for. Carly tries to get some social media attention from Clavicular, and fails, but Talia hits it off with him.

Bianca gets the drinks (**Me**: I assume they're spiked? **Briar**: No, they're *entirely* alcohol.), but C & T are lost in the crowd. Fortunately, the AI agent in Briar's phone can track their phones down easily. (I decide Bianca named it Pikachu, which also works as a pun on "Peek-at-you.") She has to elbow her way through the crowd (**Briar**: So you're holding two drinks... **Me**: Three in my hands, plus one inside me.), so Briar has me roll with Volatile, and it's a partial success: Bianca gets through, but spills booze on her blouse. The material is sheer, and getting it wet turns it near-transparent. Some guy in the crowd snaps photos. Bianca has Pikachu identify the guy's phone and infest and wreck it, first taking down his contact info for later revenge.

Bianca gets through to Carly and Talia, but they've already gotten drinks from someone else, and don't really have time for her. Also, Carly isn't drinking. Bianca swaps her partial cup for Carly's full one, and heads for the restroom to try to dry off her blouse. While she's holding it under the hand-dryer, another alert comes through on her phone: the AI has spotted a third figure in the video. It's that kid Logan, from the remedial homeroom! That poor little goober who thinks Stanford is a big-deal college! She tracks down Logan's location, in case he's at the party, but no, he's at the library. (No way Logan's cool enough to get invited to this party!) Bianca sends him email from a throw-away address, saying "I know you saw it. Are you going to tell anyone?" Erica (who plays Logan in the regular game) decides that Logan would delete the email without replying, and add the address to his spam filters.

Carly checks in on Bianca in the restroom. I forget exactly what they talk about – I think this is the point where Bianca spills the beans to Carly about Talia & Coach Benton. Carly has Bianca send her the photos, and set up some kind of deadman-switch thing where the photos will get sent to the local news if they don't check in at some interval.

They reunite with Talia, who's on a couch with Clavicular, getting promoted on Instagram and TikTok. Carly tries to get in on this, but Clavicular doesn't seem to like her much. Carly suggests they all leave – she's got a curfew to keep, her parents are good Christians, etc – but Talia wants to hang around for at least another hour or two. Carly gives her an hour.

I forget what we do in that hour, except for Bianca throwing up in the restroom. (She'd been drinking too much.) I think Bianca also sets up an agent to scan and identify people's phones, and look for patterns in who spends time near whom. Nothing really comes of this, but it seems like something she'd do.

On the drive home, Carly tries to get Talia to talk about her relationships, hoping she'll admit the thing with the coach, but no going. Bianca uses AI to create videos of Clavicular being hit in the face various ways – punched,

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hit with a hammer, etc – and sends them to him anonymously, to bully him. (My intent here is that she winds up inspiring him to bonesmash himself, but it looks like bonesmashing was a thing as early as 2023. Ah well.)

Over the weekend – holy cow, a session that covers multiple days! – Carly and Talia spend some time together at The Strip (the highly commercialized row of shops in the rich part of town), sipping Starbucks drinks and looking at people coming out of Hobby Lobby and trying to figure out what they bought based on their general appearance. Carly’s trying to get Talia to admit that she slept with the coach. She talks about English class, and mentions they’re studying *Lolita*. Still no reaction from Talia.

Bianca tracks down the guy who took pictures of her, and finds evidence that he used AI to cheat in his classes, and sends that info to the college which had accepted him. (It’s Stanford! We might have just opened up the slot that’s going to be given to Pete, ruining Logan’s life!) (See E&A #8.) She also tracks down where Coach Benton is: a motel. Talia’s been trying to text him, but he doesn’t reply. The texts start out neutral, but at one point she sends him one with a wink emoji. And Bianca’s AI agent finds video of the school meeting where the decision was made to fire Coach Benton but keep the reason secret.

On Monday, Carly has nearly lost patience with Talia, especially after Bianca tells her about the wink emoji. “Friends don’t keep secrets from each other,” she tells Bianca. Carly has Bianca set the deadman switch to send the photos half an hour after... I forget exactly what the deadline is. End of the school day, maybe? If Talia spills the beans to Carly before then, they won’t get sent.

At some point, Talia leaves class (ostensibly for the restroom), and Carly (pleading the same reason) follows her. Bianca stays put, hacking into the school’s security cameras to watch them through her phone. Talia heads to the gym, seems to be looking for someone, talks with an assistant coach, gets an answer that disappoints her. Bianca texts Talia: “He’s here,” and the motel and room number. (**Briar**: An anonymous text? **Me**: Nah, she’d know exactly who sent it.) Talia leaves the school building, drives to the motel. Bianca tracks Talia’s phone remotely; Talia tries to text Benton, but gets no reply. Time passes, and the photos get sent to the news.

Next day: The photos of Talia and the coach spread primarily over social media; Byron appears to have a contact at the local news media who shared to scoop with him. Talia’s desk, next to Carly’s at school, is empty. Carly writes a social media post front-loaded with links to online sources for kids to tell when they’re being sexually groomed, and claims that she regrets having severed her friendship with some unspecified person four months previous, otherwise she could maybe have helped prevent that person from making a terrible mistake.

Carly also blocks Talia’s number on her phone, and

suggests that Bianca do the same. (Then Carly unblocks Talia, texts her “Thoughts and prayers,” and re-blocks her.) Bianca is about to, but sees that little three-dots thing that pops up when someone is composing a message to you. She waits for a bit, and eventually Talia’s text comes through: “How could you do that?” Bianca texts back, “How could you?” Briar calls for a Shut Someone Down roll, and Bianca’s Cold isn’t great, so it fails. Bianca’s eyes start tearing, she raises her hand to ask for permission to leave, can’t even get the whole sentence out, and just runs from the class. The session ends with her hiding under a staircase, sobbing.

**Conclusion:** Like the previous flashback session, this was a lot of fun. I do feel like Erica did a lot of the heavy lifting – I’m still not great at in-the-moment dialog, and my character was a shy nerd on top of that! But we got some good character development in there, and Erica and I are going to get to play these characters as they interact with the main PCs in other sessions. I don’t see any obvious opportunities for Bianca to interact with Steffan, so maybe I won’t have to talk to myself.

Also, Monday night, while I was trying to sleep, a chunk of Bianca’s backstory congealed in my head. Mostly details about her family. I’ve got it written out, so some of it might turn up in future writeups.

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## Comments on E&A #9

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### Chrysalism & Felicity

Welcome to the apa! It looks like Chrys uses they/them pronouns, and Felicity uses she/her. Have I got that right?

Have either of you read [Aristoi, by Walter Jon Williams](#)? It’s a science fiction novel in which members of the interstellar ruling class have developed techniques that let them split their minds into *daimones*, sub-personalities which can operate independently.

### Lisa Padol

YCT **me** RE the *Monsterhearts* game ⇒ Yeah, the students were blamed for the riot that broke out at the end of Session 1 (in November, but just yesterday in game-world time!). Drake was trying to get all four of the students out of the school; he’s got rich, well-connected parents, and Blue was assigned to be his bodyguard, so the roll was to see if he could get Laeli and Logan out as well. That’s what failed.

At that point Logan had not yet had chance to repossess his boot; thus reason said he was then bootless still. Would he be in addition weather-beaten, I can’t say, though since he ’scaped the agues, it was likely done with recourse to the devil’s name.

RE “The werewolf is ‘supposed to be a cruel bully?’ Says who?” ⇒ The Werewolf Skin sheet describes the Werewolf as “Aggressive, domineering [...] knows that physical dominance is the root of social power.” The Hot 2/Volatile 1 stat version represents “a heart-breaker

with a mean streak.” The Volatile 2/Hot 1 version is “an unpredictable loose-cannon who it’s dangerous to get too close to,” which sounds less bully-like. Though Steffan is currently Hot 2, Volatile 2, so I guess he’s mad, bad, and dangerous to know.

YCT **me** RE premise and the G1-3, D1-3, and Q1 modules ⇒ That’s not *premise*, at least not as Ron Edwards defines it (which is the definition that influenced this branch of the hobby). His definition, taken from [Lajos Egri](#), is a single sentence that expresses a truth that is proven or tested by the protagonist’s actions over the course of a story. So the (Egri-style) premise of *Macbeth* is “Ruthless ambition leads to its own destruction,” while the premise of *Romeo & Juliet* is “Great love defies even death.” The premise of the original *Star Wars* trilogy was “Faith, love, and persistence can defeat power and imperialism,” and that of the original *Star Trek* show was “Technocratic liberal democracy can solve everyone’s problems.”

I think that this is called *theme* in most schools of literary analysis, so this is probably another Ron Edwards lightning bug, though he can blame Egri for it. (Egri apparently had reasons for redefining the terms. I don’t think I’ve read his book, though Amazon tells me I bought a copy 20 years ago. <sigh>)

The Egri-style premise (traditional theme) for *Call of Cthulhu* would probably be “The truth of the universe will drive people mad.” (The opening lines of [Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu”](#) – the bit about correlating the mind’s contents and the placid island of ignorance – spell the premise out pretty directly.) The examples you brought up seem to me to be *plot* or *motivation*.

YCT **Matt Stevens** RE *Apollo 13* ⇒ Have you heard of the [Apollo 47 Technical Handbook](#) by Tim Hutchings? This is a very odd RPG that I haven’t looked over myself, but just read [a review of](#). It’s one page of rules, another 20 or so pages of advice, and then 1,100+ pages of actual NASA manuals to use as prompts. (The PDF version, apparently, doesn’t include the NASA manual material.)

### **Matt Stevens**

Wait, how are there no bold or italic options for Calibri? [Microsoft lists](#) three weights (regular, bold, light), each with an italic.

YCT **me** RE task-based vs goal-based resolution ⇒ If the GM already knows that there’s no cocaine on the boat, then he ought to take that into account when setting the stakes for the roll, but “You discover that there was never any cocaine to begin with” is probably a valid outcome, depending upon exactly what facts had been previously established in play.

In actual play, I doubt that you’d condense an entire complicated situation into a single roll like that. Even in *Blades in the Dark*, where you have a single Encounter Roll to cover the early stages of the heist, that roll doesn’t

cover the *entire* heist, it just fast-forwards you to the meat of it.

In [that excerpt I posted](#) from the *Sentinel Comics* RPG, the issue there isn’t that the resolution is goal-based. It’s that the resolution system lets you generate a *twist*, a secondary outcome distinct from the main outcome, which can’t negate the main outcome.

YCT **Josh Kronengold** RE wordiness ⇒ I don’t have a copy of [Land of the Rising Sun](#) handy, but I think it probably was typeset and formatted like [Villains & Vigilantes](#), another FGU game from the same period which I do have handy. I just looked over page 3 of *V&V*, and it’s got about 1,200 words. Page 2 of *Blades in the Dark* weighs in at about 450 words. So at about double the page count, *Blades* should have about two-thirds the word count of *LRS*.

### **Patrick Riley**

RE narration vs roleplaying ⇒ Useful point there about vocabulary choices. I think your use of *narrate* here is influenced by its current use when talking about films and TV shows, in which it serves as a side-channel to the primary flow of story-telling, which comes from the actions and speech of the actors. The original meaning of the word is basically just *to tell a story*. In a prose novel, the author is narrating the whole thing, and that can include zooming in on the interesting bits to include full dialog, and zooming out to gloss over the boring bits. I think it’s this latter sense that most rulebooks are using.

Interesting to note that you sometimes surprise yourself when speaking in character spontaneously. This is one of the things [Johnstone talks about in Impro](#). I haven’t yet gotten to the point where I feel comfortable relaxing into character that far.

YCT **Dylan Capel** RE the stepped die system in [Neoclassical Geek Revival](#) ⇒ Each PC is always in one of three states: Calm (takes 10), On Edge (rolls 3d6), or Reckless (rolls 1d20). You can voluntarily shift up one or more steps, from Calm towards Reckless, but once you’ve done so, you can’t shift back down without a long rest. So the thing being escalated is risk – rolls get swingier and less predictable as you move along that spectrum.

YCT **me** RE “Baker’s noun-based versus verb-based talk sounds like a load of horseshit” ⇒ One of the things I have discovered during my stumbling journey to elderly sagacity is that sometimes – *sometimes!* – when I think some statement is “horseshit” it’s because I’ve failed to understand it. So I’m suggesting here that maybe – *maybe!* – there’s a real distinction Baker is drawing that you’re possibly – *possibly!* – not seeing.

I’m not 100% certain that I’m fully grasping Baker’s meaning, myself. But I think the two main things he’s getting at are ① that designers of “noun-based” games tend to think first about how to model characters, and second about how to model actions, while for “verb-based” games

they reverse that order; and 2 that verb-based games rely more upon the fiction for tracking outcomes than noun-based games do.

I think Baker's probably right about 1. Consider, for example, my comment two issues back to Lisa about how *Monsterhearts* lacks rules that would allow for a typical PC to defend themselves from an incoming blow – no equivalent of parry, block, or dodge. In a noun-based game, where characters come first, this lack would be considered an omission. In *Monsterhearts*, Avery Alder seems to have started out by thinking about what sorts of things she wanted PCs to be able to do, and come up with moves for those, and then designed character types that would specialize in certain combinations of those things.

I'm not sure about 2. *Blades in the Dark* is often cited as a descendant of, or even a member of, the *Powered by the Apocalypse* family of games, but it mechanizes outcomes pretty strongly.

Ooh, wait, I've thought of a 3rd thing! In verb-based games, the actual details of a character's special abilities can be left vague (at the rules level), and decided by the table as the fiction requires. Because a Werewolf in *Monsterhearts* is basically just a person with poor impulse control and a tendency towards violence, you can leave it up to the table whether the Werewolf actually turns into a literal wolf. In *Masks*, the actual details of what superpowers the PCs have isn't really important – you just have to come up with something that lets you flavor your narration appropriately, and suits the playbook you've chosen. (The Bull needs to be tough and destructive, the Nova flexible and powerful, the Beacon either unpowered or low-powered. The rest are pretty open-ended.) Contrast that with *Champions* where figuring out exactly how to cost out that big ol' Multipower causes you to break out a spreadsheet and/or into a rash.

### Roger Bell\_West

YCT **Michael Cule** RE the origin of the gelatinous cube ⇒ I remain convinced (based on no firmer evidence than my gut and my visual imagination) that the first figure for the cube was a large transparent d6, the same width as the dungeon corridor on the map.

YCT **Lisa Padol** RE using Graphviz for relationship maps ⇒ We did this for the failed *Smallville* campaign Lisa [tried to run in 2012](#). I just installed [Graphviz](#) on my system and rendered both the full map (huge! too big to include here) and a mini map we made of just the PC relationships (manageably small, but messy, with everything overlapping; I should probably look over the various layout engines, but I can't be bothered now).

YCT **Josh Kronengold** RE [Fiasco](#), and the diegetic meaning of the ending mechanic ⇒ Well, see, there's the issue: It doesn't represent anything diegetic! It represents the fact that the game is about fiascos – failures. If your PC doesn't fail during the main part of the story, he's more likely to

### Diegesis

Tune: ["Plastic Jesus"](#) by Tia Blake

I don't care if I cry or sneeze, as  
Long as I got my [diegesis](#)  
Sittin' at the table for my game  
G.M. handles other factors  
Happy that [my stance is Actor's](#)  
Sittin' at the table for my game

I know that my eyes feel weary  
When [it's time for some game theory](#)  
Sittin' at the table for my game  
Glancing 'round at other folks in  
Games with metagaming tokens  
Sittin' at the table for my game

Got bored with my old trad system  
Tried out some Narrativism  
Sittin' at the table for my game  
Giving storygames their chances  
And adopting other stances  
Sittin' at the table for my game

Now I don't say ["Mother, please"](#) as  
I like me some non-diegesis  
Sittin' at the table for my game  
[Powered by Apocalypses](#)  
Hopin' I roll over sixes  
Sittin' at the table for my game

fail at the end. If he never fails, well, that's not much of a fiasco, is it?

More generally, not every game mechanic represents something diegetic. Some of them represent genre clichés, or story logic. For example, the Fate Point economy in [Fate games](#) and the token economy in [Belonging Outside Belonging](#) aren't diegetic; they're gamified bits of [Author and Director Stances](#) meant to cause something like [three-act-structure](#) to emerge in a decentralized manner from player decisions, without having to be imposed by a GM.

YCT **Jim Vassilakos** RE salve of protection from dragon ⇒ I recall reading a fantasy novel long ago (I think it was Will Shetterly's *Cats Have No Lord*) in which a wizard gives a barbarian, about to fight a dragon, a biscuit which the wizard says grant magical protection from dragon flame. The barbarian promptly lunges at the dragon, and gets roasted and eaten, after which the dragon itself falls over dead, because the non-magical biscuit had been baked with dragonbane, an herb toxic to dragons.

### Jim Eckman

YCT **Lisa Padol** RE being confused about what OSR is ⇒ That's OK. At this point, there's no broad consensus on exactly what the term means. Even when it was first coined,

there was dispute over whether the R stood for *Revival* or *Renaissance*.

Matthew Finch's [Quick Primer for Old School Gaming](#) (originally written in 2008, though that's the 2024 update that I linked to) lays out four pillars of OSR gaming:

- ◆ **Rulings, not Rules:** Many situations will be handled by discussions about the in-universe situation, rather than just by the interactions of abilities. The GM will often have to make off-the-cuff judgment calls to resolve player tactics.
- ◆ **Player Skill, not Character Abilities:** Players are expected to think, scheme, strategize, and ask questions, and not just rely on their feats.
- ◆ **Heroic, not Superhero:** Even high-level characters are like Conan, not like Superman.
- ◆ **Forget Game Balance:** Encounters aren't tuned to the power level of the PCs. Sometimes the PCs will run into things they can't handle; the smart thing to do is scout ahead, and be willing to run away.

If you look back at that podcast writeup at the beginning of this zine, you'll see Satah has their own rough definition at the 40-minute mark.

As with any artistic movement, you can't really understand what distinguishes the movement without experiencing the art.

### Patrick Zoch

YCT **Roger Bell\_West** RE gunpowder in D&D ⇒ I saw a blog post years ago by some OSR designer (James Raggi, maybe?) talking about adding guns and canons to his D&D-like game, so that he could take out the damage-causing spells like fireball, and let magic be weird rather than just a form of artillery.

### Joshua Kronengold

YCT **Mark Wilson** RE the Marvel Cinematic Universe ⇒ While I enjoy a bunch of MCU shows and films, part of me regrets the apparent need to tame the bizarre wildness of the Marvel comics universe to make it more palatable for movie audiences. JK Simmons is great as J Jonah Jameson, but Jameson in the comics [has a son](#) who's both an astronaut and a werewolf, and eventually marries She-Hulk. I enjoyed seeing [Patsy Walker](#) (one of the handful of Marvel characters who predate Marvel Comics itself) in [Jessica Jones](#), but in the comics, she's got a costume and superhero identity (Hellcat), and is married to [the son of Satan](#). The comics have a level of weird inventiveness akin to Mexican *telenovellas* and the more baroque pro wrestling plotlines, and it's a shame that the MCU can't bring itself to go that far.

YCT **Lisa Padol** RE dice vs roleplay for negotiation ⇒ We can all three of us remember at least one occasion (that [Dresden Files](#) game) when a roleplayed negotiation turned out badly, and would have been helped by some dice-rolling.

Though [fortune positioning](#) probably matters. I imagine there are a lot of people who'd be happy with roleplay-first-then-dice-to-determine-effectiveness, but would rebel against dice-first-then-roleplay-out-the-result. Although fortune-first-then-roleplay is exactly how it works in those play-by-mail duet games Satah was talking about in that podcast I describe up above, so some people clearly enjoy it.

I suspect that another axis of player preference in RPGs, to go along with genre, creative agenda, fortune positioning, metagaming-vs-non, player-skill-vs-character-skill, etc, is in-the-moment-narration (right there at the table, with the pressure on) vs at-leisure-narration (at your computer, with hours or days to write your turn up).

YCT **Lisa Padol** RE hyper-specialized games vs "full roleplaying games" ⇒ For another approach to having a campaign that can shift to follow the players around, see the bit in the podcast description above about Satah's game of *Galactic* which spawned side campaigns using other systems.

YCT **Dylan Capel** RE vi and emacs ⇒ This suddenly reminded me of Kieran Healy's old ["Text Editors in The Lord of the Rings"](#) piece, which describes text editors as Middle-Earth locations. Somewhat Mac-centric, but still a classic.

YCT **me** RE Skirting Death in *Monsterhearts* ⇒ There's an interesting rules question: Can you "Lose all Strings you have on everybody" if the number of Strings you have is zero? We don't seem to be using up Strings all that quickly in the Vermilion City game – the Strings and Conditions mechanics are being sadly underutilized. Still, I brought the matter up in the group Discord, and Briar is adding an additional option to the Skirting Death move: "something extra terrible will happen (mc's discretion 🐾)."

### Jim Vassilakos

YCT **me** RE RISS ⇒ I had not been aware that RISS actually stands for Rails, Improv, Skills, and Sandbox, and now I'm a bit sad.

This logo unites at least three or four different *Monsterhearts* skins.





# THE DRAGON'S BEARD

APRIL 2026

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I can be found as pdzoch at  
[boardgamegeek.com](http://boardgamegeek.com),  
[rpggeek.com](http://rpggeek.com), [enworld.org](http://enworld.org),  
[fantasy-grounds.com](http://fantasy-grounds.com), [discord.com](http://discord.com),  
and [boardgamearena.com](http://boardgamearena.com).

position to determine how many ghosts would finally emerge.

The ghosts resented the living and the disturbance. What better punishment than to inflict death upon the living in the same way they died. I established two parameters for the possession purpose. The first target were elves and dwarves in the party. This would be the only player vs player attacks. Once one was defeated, the possession would end. The other parameter was the kissing stone trap. Possessed character would be forced to trigger the traps and fall victim to the bridge defenses.

## POSESSION FOR PUCKERS

Possession is a dangerous thing. It does not just rob one character of its free will. It also compels other characters to act in a way they do not want. A player character who falls victim to a possession is bad enough because it take away from a player their agency in a game. When that possessing spirit then attacks the other characters, it forces the players to do the one thing they do not want to do: attack their team mate. The whole encounter turns into a situation where none of the players are doing anything they want to do. It feels forced, desperate, and unfun.

But a possession can be fun. During a Dungeons & Dragons game years ago, I ran an encounter set underground at the scene of an old dwarven battlefield. A bridge spanned a dry moat, now filled with the bones of thousands of slain dwarves and elves from a battle long forgotten. The bridge was lined with statues of dwarven warriors in an uncharacteristic pose: they all were in a kissing pose, as if kissing, or trying to kiss, the statue on the other side of the bridge. The statues were part of a trap series on the bridge. When a target stone was stepped on, the statue slammed forward to hit whoever stood on the target stone. This was a trap call Kissing Stones.

But the players were not looking for any traps on the bridge. They were distracted by all the bones in the moat. While they did not think ALL the bones would suddenly come alive, they were certain that some most certainly would. The scene of so much death is too ripe for an undead encounter. They were partially correct. As the party slowly crossed the bridge, they kept an eye on the bones of the fallen. Meanwhile, my little DM inner voice was saying, "Yes, just a little further. One more step before one triggers the first trap!" But no, the bones were too much of a concern for the party and they stopped and went back to the edge of the moat to check the skeletons more closely.

This closer examination of the resting place of thousand of dead warriors disturbed the ghosts of the slain. As the spirits emerged from the boneyard, the players retreated to a better

The party did not have any dwarves, but they did have an elf and a half-elf, so they became the targets. The players were able to resist the possession attempt from a couple of the ghost, but not all. Once possessed, the character found themselves disengaging from the fight and running across the bridge. The players were surprised to discover the possessed character had triggered a trap, and even more surprised to discover how the trap functioned. The first "kiss" of the stone statues sent the character flying off the bridge and into the moat for fall damage in addition to the initial bludgeoning impact. Surviving, but still possessed, the character was compelled to make another trip across the bridge.

The other players did their best to prevent the character from running across the bridge again, but they refrained from attacking their possessed companion. As he ran across the bridge again, he triggered another trap. This time, something unexpected happened. The stone slammed into the character, making solid contact and causing damage, but the character resisted being pushed off the bridge. Where did all that force go? I decided to have the possessing ghost roll a save against the effect, having shared the same space as the character. The ghost failed!

I described the scene. The stone slammed against the character, but he held firm on the bridge, the lips of the stone statue still pressed against his cheek. However, the force of the impact sent the ghost out of the character's body, knocking the ghost five feet to the left, leaving the ghost floating above the bone-filled moat and with a surprised expression from finding itself suddenly outside the body.

It was the best possession encounter experience the players ever had. They still talk about it.



A D&D 5<sup>th</sup> Edition 2024 campaign set in Greyhawk. Played over Fantasy Grounds Unity and Discord. Session reports by Kevin Santschi and Patrick Zoch.



**Arael Vexwood** (Kyra)  
Wood Elf 1st level Sorcerer  
Merchant



**Bareas Wilhelm** (Sarah)  
Dwarf 1st level Rogue  
Marine



**BoB** (Chris)  
Dwarf 1st level Barbarian  
Soldier



**Cassian Dawnguard** (Kevin)  
Human 1st level Paladin  
Soldier



**Frocaryn Stonegather** (Delia)  
Halfling 1st level Cleric  
Guide



**Juan Quixote** (Christie)  
Halfling 1st level Fighter  
Noble



**Lux Cantata** (Jackie)  
Aasimar 1st level Bard  
Artisan

## Session 5, 6 & 7: The Haunted House and Return to Saltmarsh

- Prologue -

In the previous session, the party had continued their exploration of the haunted house. They ran into a dead end in the cellar, so continued their exploration in the up stairs. Unfortunately, all matter of creepy crawlies and toxic mold took its toll on the party and they were sorely wounded before they had unraveled any secrets in the house. The rest of the session report is told from the perspective of Cassian.

### - Scene 1 - Smugglers at Midnight

We open back in on the party, exploring the upper floor of the house.

Many of us are wounded and weary, with spell slots and abilities spread extremely thin. Drained of health and energy, we decided to take a much-needed rest in one of the less trashed rooms in the western wing. We debated remaining in the haunted house for our rest, but we decided to risk an encounter with any smugglers we knew were somewhere in the building over having them possibly escape because we camp out of sight. It was still early in the day, and by the time we completed our rest, it was the middle of the night. We were thankful the night was not interrupted. We decided to head straight to the smuggler den through the trap-door on the first floor.

As we approached the trap-door, a voice boomed out again, "Welcome Fools! Welcome to your death!" So much for a surprise in the middle of the night. BoB put his ear to the door and heard movement, so the enemy below was now preparing for our arrival. Popping down through the door, we saw another smuggler, as well as a more put together looking fellow in the back corner.

He screamed at us, "Who are you? What are you doing down here?!"

I replied, "I am here by order of the king! Surrender yourselves, and your lives will be spared."

"Not bloody likely."

"So you have chosen death."

The fancy man blasted a *Ray of Frost* and hit me square in the chest, dealing quite a bit of damage, and I returned with a javelin throw that clattered uselessly to the ground. Bareas sent an equally vagrant arrow towards the smuggler ("warning shot", he called it). After some back and forth, the others were able to make their way through the trapdoor at last. I dashed across the room behind the fancy fellow, blocking his exit route, and BoB moved forward to pincer the man. Bareas moved forward to shoot the smuggler, sending him crashing to the stone floor. Juan moved forward as well, sending his warhammer into the fancy man's side. With a final, well-placed *Fire Bolt* from Arael, the man fell to the ground, dead.

We searched the bodies, finding loaded dice and a smoking pipe on the fancy man.

- Scene 2 - Danger in Darkness

The only unexplored area remaining in the cellar was the barred door labeled **DANGER**. We avoided it when we here the day before, but now it seemed our only remaining path. I took lead, unbarring and opening the door into a dark room with bones littering the floor. As I called back for a anyone to give light, BoB skirted past me and entered the room. Immediately, six skeletons rose from the floor, grasping weapons.

BoB and I were taken by surprise, reeling back a bit from our newfound foes. Bareas entered next with a lantern, providing enough light for me to finally see our foes in the dancing of the shadows cast by our bodies. Juan and Bareas leapt into action, crushing the nearest foe into dust, evading many a bony swing. BoB missed an attack against one of the foes, and (if such a thing were possible) got even angrier. I moved in, taking advantage of the vanguard to strike a critical strike against one of the skeletons, sending it crumbling to the ground. The spellcasters responded far more appropriately, sending a barrage of spells at the undead, and the skeletons charged those of us in the front line. With a scuffled exchange of blows, we obliterated the evils facing us one by one, taking a few hits along the way. If reanimated corpses could feel fear, these would surely be quaking, surrounded by such fearsome combatants. Before we knew it, the room was still, piles of motionless bones littering the ground.



Before we could celebrate, a door hidden in the wall swung open, and in staggered a robed and hooded skeleton, with magic wisps around its face. It clawed at me, but my armor held up against the bony attack. Our onslaught began: Bareas loosed an arrow into the creature through the crowd, and Arael threw a *Fire Bolt*, blasting into the skeleton from afar. I moved in on the creature to retaliate, but missed spectacularly. BoB moved in from the side and with a single mighty swing of his maul, crushed the skeleton into the ground, turning many of the bones into a fine dust. We emerge victorious (for certain this time). Arael and Lux followed us into the room of slain skeletons as we began to the explore the room where the undead spellcaster came from.

We moved into the hidden room and found all manners of strange alchemical equipment. The tables were littered with objects, seemingly made of solid gold, and a book about a mystic item called the "Philosopher's Stone". A short investigation of the room turned up nothing, but Bareas discovered a hidden drawer in the main desk, containing a book of magic.



- Scene 3 - The Smuggler's Cove

Moving back to the main room, we finally thought to inspect the walls for more hidden openings. Finding a crevice in the southwestern corner of the room, we continued down stairs into a brightly lit cave system, where we discovered another group of vile smugglers. Let the beat-down commence.

Bareas, BoB and I dashed down the long hallway to the east, towards a group of three villains, but return fire left Bareas unconscious on the floor. Moving in behind us, Juan joined the eastward procession, and Lux took the opportunity to heal Bareas' wounds. More smugglers approaching from a southern hallway loosed arrows toward the magic users, but Arael responded with a mighty *Thunderwave*.



(DM: Look how spread out they are!)

The plate armor I commandeered finally showed fruits; I withstood an onslaught of attacks from the eastern smugglers, and BoB dashed in to cut down one of the men. The sheer momentum of his axe cleaved into a second man as well. Behind us, Arael cast a magic *Cloud of Fog* to envelop the southern smugglers, and Bareas scattered handfuls of ball bearings into its darkness, trapping the foes in a purgatory of blindness and broken tailbones. Juan charged into the eastern room ahead of me, finishing off the second man, leaving only one facing us, who soon took the full heat of Frocaryn's *Sacred Flame*.

Deeming the situation to the east handled, I dashed back through the cavern past our compatriots to a smaller passageway to the west, which seemed to curve back around to flank the southern smugglers. Lux followed closely behind me, expending some magic to inspire me. All of a sudden, a green gelatinous mass fell from the cave ceiling, encapsulating me in its acidic touch. Finding no other reasonable solution, I took the obvious move: I punched myself in the face, hoping to blast the gel away from a *Thunderous Smite*. Obviously, I fell unconscious from my own Herculean strength (and the magic thunder blast). Frocaryn attempted to burn away the gelatinous mass with a *Sacred Flame*, but it somehow managed to wiggle out of the way. Meanwhile, the southern smugglers finally found their way out of the *Cloud of Fog*, only to find themselves at the end of Bareas' blade.



(Illustrated by Sarah Zoch)

Lux, thoroughly disgusted by the acidic gel, shot at it a *Starry Wisp*; though it proved a small target, the *Wisp* flared up and singed the slime away, leaving me temporarily safe. While Frocaryn healed me from a distance for fear of more slime raining from the ceiling, Juan finished off the last of the smugglers to the east. Getting up, I spied another slime on the ceiling nearby, and so I retreated to the safety of the main cave with the others. The two remaining smugglers sent Bareas to the ground again and moved to

attack Arael, but found themselves on the receiving end of an onslaught from BoB and Juan. Having just recovered from the brink of death, I missed a strike against one villain, and retreated to heal Bareas with *Lay on Hands*. Juan put one man to rest, and Bareas, recovering quickly, put the other down.

Following the end of the battle, I guided Lux back to burn the second slime to neat crisp, and we ventured back into the eastern cavern to investigate our spoils of war. We found casks of brandy and bundles of silk, clearly smuggled in by the crew of rogues. Moving into the southern caverns, we found a hobgoblin relaxing by some more goods. Needless to say, we made short work of him, and discovered that the cave extended farther to the southeast. Moving along, I saw that the cave met the sea just ahead; a boat was tied up to a stalagmite, and another hobgoblin stood watch over the boat. He was not expecting us, and we moved in and pinned him down quickly, interrogating him for information on the smuggling operation. He and his hobgoblin friend (bloodied and dead in the next room) were hired by the man in fancy clothes, and were only hanging around as long as the pay was good. After a few more questions to little avail, we decided to end the hobgoblin's life. Though he may have been somewhat cooperative, there is no room for evil in this world. Any that may threaten the safety of good people must be eradicated without hesitation.

#### - Scene 4 - Return to Saltmarsh

We decided to take a short rest and head back up to the upper floor to investigate the two remaining rooms. One was remarkably empty; the dislodged floorboards proved unsafe to traverse. Bareas made short work of the lock on the next room, and moving into the room, we found a man bound and gagged. We led him out of the rotting room and back into the safe room in the west hallway. After we ungagged him, he introduced himself as Ned Shakeshaft, a traveler on his way to Saltmarsh who stopped in to find a place to sleep for the night. When he had entered through the backdoor, a mysterious figure had knocked him unconscious from behind. Ned was hiding something... but I couldn't figure out what. We retrieved his clothes from a nearby room, and set out for Saltmarsh. Upon arriving, Ned parted ways with us, presumably to find lodgings or employment.



We decided to speak with Anders first, and set out for his compound. We were greeted by another man, Skerrin, (whom Arael was suddenly eager to speak to – the term “silver fox” was bandied about), who informed us that Anders was not at home, and that he would send someone to fetch us upon his return. We asked the tavernkeeper back at the Wicker Goat to keep an eye out for the message, and following a quick cleanup (and a another horrendous performance from Lux) we left for the town hall. In spite of our obligations, Lux and Bareas made time to stop for brownies. Not fifty strides further, they stopped at another bakery, where BoB joined them in indulging in more fresh goods.



The town council was not available. Apparently they only meet when they see fit, and otherwise we will have to seek them out across town. Arael determined that the goods we confiscated were likely not stolen, but rather brought illegally to avoid import taxes. We have little choice now but to await a message from Anders. We decided to spend the afternoon shopping for various necessities.

Back at the Wicker Goat, we received a message from Anders and the town council. After a quick dinner, and a pleasant redemption song from Lux, we made our way back to the town hall. BoB and Lux warned them of the undead alchemist that we dispatched, and of the smuggling ring. We produced the silk and brandy as confiscated goods, and the council set to work examining them. Eda and Eliander made plans to travel to the house and confiscate the remainder of the goods the next day, and Anders thanked us for saving Ned, who it turns out was a new hire to the Solmor estate. After discussing next steps, they bade us goodnight, and we returned to the Wicker Goat.

As of this following morning, I feel stronger, and it would seem my comrades have grown as well from our shared adventures. In the morning, we sold off many of the spoils from our expedition, and our journeys shall continue at a later date.

The session ended with everyone leveling to level 2.

- End of Session -

*Notes from the DM:* No player comments this time as I forgot to ask them in a manner timely enough to get a response. My younger adult

players communicate quite well on Discord and are fairly responsive to questions and scheduling coordination. My older adult players, not so much. I use the Apollo app to schedule games through Discord. This helps formalize play date and posts the schedule and reminders in my Discord channel. One of the other groups I play with on Fantasy Grounds and Discord does not use such a schedule feature, mostly because we play every week. But sometimes, we skip a week, or two, and it is hard to remember the day of if it was a playing day or not.

*My mistakes:* There is always a mistake or two in a game, but I made a couple that I regret for its impact on the mood of the game. My first mistake was the re-trigger of the Magic-Mouth spell that acted as an alarm on the trap-door to warn the smugglers that someone was in the house. It should have only gone off once. The player's did not see the trap door and the single alarm would have added more to the "haunted" reputation of the house. Once I re-triggered it, it completely removed that mystic. My second mistake was failing to roll for encounters while they slept in the haunted house. I was so focused on getting everyone's actions, rest orders, and rest effects done right that I suddenly rolled into the end of the rest without checking for an encounter. While there may not have been any "wandering random" monsters, there could have been a smuggler making his rounds or the "bump" of Ned Shakeshaft getting into position. Had I kept the "Haunted House" mystic going, I could have leveraged just random noises as "things that go bump in the night" to increase tension of the environment. I could have just had whispered voices in the hallway as the smugglers checked to see who the intruders were. Lastly, I lost track of the enemy positions for the encountered. The published adventure describes positions for the smuggler crew based on whether they are alert of the party or not. In some encounters, the smugglers were alert; in other, they are not. But that means an NPC encountered in one location will not be in another later, especially if they were slain in the first encounter. The result was an extra hobgoblin at the end, which gave the party an opportunity to interrogate a smuggler. I was surprised that they did not think of it sooner.

*A Large Party:* So far, a large group of players has not been too much of a problem for me. For the players, it creates some different challenges. The most significant of which is how much space they take. Navigating through the house makes for crowded work for a large party. Some rooms could only hold six occupants, meaning the entire party could not fit even if they were the only occupants. Many times, it means that the front of the party is leaving a room as the back of the is entering it, spreading the party to the point that the back of the party does not see the new enemy that the back of the party has stumbled into. This is something that the players will have

to sort out among themselves. Outdoors, it is not much of an issue. But Indoors? Or on a ship, it might cause allies to be out of support position when really needed.

*Diverse Interests:* At the beginning of the campaign, I polled by players about their interest in combat vs role-play. The interests are mixed, so the adventure is also mixed. During combat, some players are more engaged than others. Likewise, during role play, different players step forwards while other take a back seat. Some do both well. My bard player just wants her singing to solve every problem. It was especially amusing and confusing when she wanted to sing during the interrogation of the hobgoblin (a scene that Cassian did not elaborate on). While she has been given ample opportunity to perform, her success has not been great. I do have a side-quest ready to run that will give her the opportunity to shine that she clearly wants. The propensity for the characters to visit shops and sample food and drink wherever they go was not something I expected. They act more like tourists than adventurers. I may need to take advantage of that habit. I have a hook or two for side-quests related to ingredients and foodstuff I can use. Not only will it be a diversion for extra experience, it will help build their connection to the townsfolk.

*Politics:* So far, I think I have managed the political tension well. Cassian did not articulate the final council meeting very well, but the revelation of the smugglers to the council revealed a balancing act of the traditionalists. While they acknowledge that some smuggling was always going to occur in any port town, the operation of the size that the party discovered was too big to go unaddressed. It was better for Saltmarsh to address the issue themselves than risk the King from solving the issue personally by moving his military into town (like what happened in Seaton). The players can't tell for sure who is a traditionalist and who is a loyalist. They are certain that Mannistrad, the dwarf mining leader, is one of the loyalist, being assigned personally by King Skotti, but she seems uninterested in the actions and decisions of the council unless it affects her mine. They are certain Eda Oweland, the leader of the council, is a traditionalist, mostly because she has been in charge for so long and is keen on keeping the king's forces and eye out of Saltmarsh, but her decisions are in keeping with good law and order. What the party does not know, yet, is the forces of the Scarlet Brotherhood. The party knows there is a criminal element in the city – smugglers and at least one murderer – but they do not know the extend of crime or anything about the Scarlet Brotherhood and their political machinations.

*Anders Solmor:* Anders Solmor is unknowingly serving the interests of the Scarlet Brotherhood. He is a very likeable guy, energetic and desirous

to do well as a businessman and leader in the town council. But he is also a little naïve in politics and motivations and manipulations of unknown forces. So while he preserves his goodly intentions, he nonetheless influenced by evil forces. I am SO pleased that the player's first encounter with the Saltmarsh council has been through Anders and being in his employ. His gratitude at their saving his ship from attack was both sincere and laudatory. Last issue, Lisa Padol asked why the marines in Gradsul would not serve aboard the Solmor vessel. It was a very good question that I was surprised that the party did not ask while they sailed with Captain Archer. (for the record, my other group did ask). The marine in Gradsul are a guild organization, and reserve their services to loyalists to King Skotti. However, it is more a political statement for business purpose than anything else. They will also provide services to independents and others as well, but there is no need to draw the attention of King Skotti's forces. While providing services to independent minded shipping goes relatively unnoticed, providing services to a ship once in service to the Sea Princess or other pirates is too risky, even if that ship is now under Keoland merchant employment. However, Anders shipping is far-reaching, all the way across the Azure Sea (close to lands of Scarlet Brotherhood control). All everyone else know is that Anders is not afraid to trade with ports outside of Keoland influence and partnership. Anders' unofficial confidant in business matters is Skerrin Wavechaser, who is a Scarlet Brotherhood agent. Skerrin does not get too involved, but he does provide approval and encouragement ("your mother would be so proud, sir") when business decisions further Scarlet Brotherhood plans (which may also benefit traditionalist, loyalist, niether and both depending on the deal). When Areal seemed to strike an attachment to Skerrin, I saw an opportunity to leverage that agreeableness to further enmesh the party in Scarlet Brotherhood plans as dupes along with Anders. At some point, it will unravel as a big reveal that promises to be a pretty big event for the players. Hopefully, Anders survives it. I was surprised that Ned Shakeshaft was escorted back to Saltmarsh without a second thought. The party had some suspicious at first, but ignored them. Now that Ned has been hired by Anders, will that cause the party to doubt his decisions and motivations, or will they give Ned further benefit of the doubt and fall further into the web of Scarlet Brotherhood plans.

Meanwhile, the party's focus is on the criminals, in service to neither King Skotti or the Scarlet Brotherhood, and traditionalist only in the sense that crime is a tradition. This serves the Scarlet Brotherhood just fine.



## COMMENTS ON #9

**Art Director** – I'm not too sure who is making the decisions for the cover art, but E&A has knocked it out of the part with another fantastic cover art. I'm making sure that art credit is given to them and including the links to the artist's home page on their artist entry on RPGGeek.com. By the way, I do the same for every artist whose art appears in the zines of the APA.

**Brian Rogers** – Re: Easy Company. One of the first comics I read was *Sgt. Rock and G.I. Combat*. So I completely understand your reference for Easy Company. I still think of it as Sgt. Rock's crew and not the Band of Brothers. The Haunted Tank was a bit odd of a premise, but I liked tanks, even that little tank that could, the Stuart. I was a big fan of the Unknown Soldier and Enemy Ace. For some reason, Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos just did not do it for me.

**John Redden** – Re: Morgan's Tarot deck. Those are neat looking cards. Yep, you would be amused by the look on my face, too. Re: Initiative order. I like your rule. It certainly would alleviate the "I always go last" whine I hear from some players (I'm guilty, too). There is some better planning that can occur in the predictive, and the last one round is first the next round allows for some neat combo planning for maximum effect at the transition of a turn. I've grown to appreciate the Popcorn Initiative for setting up team play decisions. It certainly encouraged teamwork and that works extremely well in hero games, like *Sentinels: the Role Playing Game*, which uses the Popcorn Initiative. However, I think it only worked when a player's decisions (and character powers) were limited (and complimentary of another character's powers). Combo's were clearer to execute to consistent effect and timing was key. In games like D&D where players have nearly unlimited choices of things to do in every turn, the discussion about who should go next and why seemed to turn into massive strategy debates between every turn. It almost made me yearn for the days when someone just decided to do their own thing.

**Lisa Padol** – Re: Roses and Thorns. I usually solicit feedback from the group at certain stages of the game to gauge what players are liking and what they are not so I can adjust the game play to increase their fun. I don't usually do it so early, but I wanted to get an initial feel from a couple of the players who I had not played with before. My Sunday Saltmarsh group is a slow group that only meets twice a month and for only three hours at a time. They tend to dally in places a lot, so they are not winning any speed run records. I'm not sure I can sustain a Roses and

Thorns feedback for every session, or for every month. Thus, this month has DM's notes instead. Re: Location, Location, Location. The question from Over the Edge in character creation, "What are you on the island of Al Amarja?" can be too challenging for many players. It is open ended so that a player can really be creative in their response and come up with something that really suits their character concept, but it is SO open that players may be overwhelmed by options and crafts something that is inconsistent to the character or adventure at hand. The most disconnected background I heard was once in my youth a player had this elaborate character backstory but it had nothing to do with places, people, or things we were doing in the adventure. And while the campaign went on for a long time, the character had this whole other life that was somehow his motivation for what he was doing but nothing we did had any relevant to it or vice versa. It was like he had a secret "other" life. It was easier to pretend it didn't exist. I love the context provided for the CoC game you played at Origins. Sure, it may be forced upon the players, but it provides clear context for place, occupation, history, and motives for the players.

**E**lf – Or with Papers & Paychecks rules options, IRS audit. The auditor drains XP equal to the dollar amount seized.

**Gabriel Roark** – Re: AD&D. I am sure I am no different than many people with regards to my treasured experience and fond memories playing AD&D. While I *may* have thought I knew the rules well as a kid, and had a massively enjoyable time playing many many hours with my friends every moment we could, I also remember the heated debates about the rules, especially when someone what about to benefit or die from them. Having the benefit of time and wisdom that age has given me, I've taken a relook at those rules again with hopefully a more developed thinking capacity, only to discover, "well, I'll be. Keith (a frenemy) was right — that rule does say that," or "Oh my, I did not remember that rule at all, and never used it in my game. No wonder that one adventure was easy," or "I still do not understand this rule AT ALL." It almost reminds me of a recent discussion I was having teaching a few coworkers a card game that does not seem to have an official rule book, but a common rule construct with a large number of variations that all seem to be house rules that are not exactly complimentary. It is easy to play in the spirit of the game, but change host tables and the rules undergo changes. "In this house, we play it like this...."

**RogerBW** – Re: Advancement by spending Varying by character. Now, I really like that idea. These are sort of down-time activities, but the benefits gained (xp in the specific case we are discussing) varies by class. Spending coin to engage in barbaric activities like wine, women,

and song is appropriate barbarian activities that enhance his reputation as a barbarian and thus worthy of xp. However, the same activity is wholly (or holy) inappropriate for a paladin and should not warrant any xp, at least not positive xp. Current down-time rules in D&D provide the same benefit for any character performing the activity. Either a rogue or a paladin can engage in carousing, and they both can carouse with upper and lower class, and the chances of complications are the same for either. The benefit is contacts, not xp, which is fine; but should a paladin gain xp or contacts if they cavorted with low-class criminals? It is just a guideline. On second thought, perhaps I do not want to dictate expected behaviors for a character. Why can't the paladin be the poor paladin type who tries to serve as the beacon of hope and champion of the hopeless for the less than fortunate lower class? Why can't the thief be the debonair type who simply steals from a higher class client using higher class tactics where he or she would be simply food for the wolves in the rough and tumble back alley full of violent thieves? Re: Location, Location, Location. I think the character creation question asking to explain "Why do you risk your life and your sanity tracking down tentacled beasties?" exactly for the reasons you cited. I once had a player who would constantly say, "I don't want to do that. Why is that my problem?" She totally missed the memo about being a hero in the game. I once stopped the adventure at the beginning when she declined every hook I through out. The other players were ready to bite on every offer, but she didn't see the need for her involvement. In fairness, the players do not know the veracity of any of the offers and it is easy to sucker a party to go on a fool's mission, but the nature of the game is to go on an adventure! She eventually understood that she had to buy into at least SOME of it.

**Michael Cule** – Re: Characters traveling the world. I agree with you. I prefer a more purposeful reason for undertaking large journeys in a game. As a GM, if I'm expecting my character to take such a journey, I'm generally making it easy for them to do so. If they have traveled from afar to a singular place at the beginning, then I would anticipate the reason for such a collection of characters from diverse places to be generally for a singular reason. Locals can just be present for any reason. They get a pass, sort of. They have connections that ground them to a location and more background activities that remain active because of their local-ness (yeah, made that word up).

**Joshua Kronengold** – Re: Non-Local Background. I agree with the opportunity to spot-light when fellow countrymen arrive from afar or when they serve as a de facto guide should they ever travel to their homeland. I try to make that happen, but it is extra work to fit into a campaign if someone tries to be too exotic.



Issue 247

# Age of Menace



5 Livingstone Drive,  
Dundas, ON, L9H 7S3 CANADA

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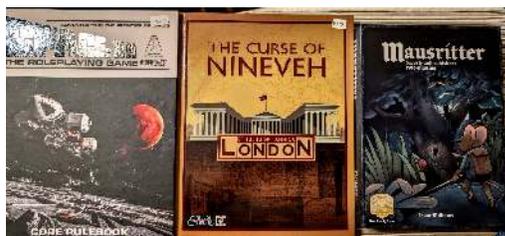
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## From Our Last Episode



In late February I made it out to Toronto to meet my friends Don Hutchison & Peter McGarvey for an afternoon showing of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) as part of the Toronto Silent Film Festival. It was also my first outing outside Hamilton I'd dared in my (mostly) electrically exorcised car in 3 months.



My drive into Toronto was speedy enough to spend a half hour at *The Sword & Board*, one of the better RPG stores just a few blocks away, and picked up a few choice RPG items—used and new—that caught my eye (see photo), before meeting my friends. And, speaking of role-gaming, influential fantasy author & game-designer (*Dragonlance*, *Ravenloft*, etc.) Tracy Hickman (lower middle) who just turned 70 last November was a brief guest at our monthly online Zoom game help celebrate one of our fellow player's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday after Peter Hildreth's invite to help out!



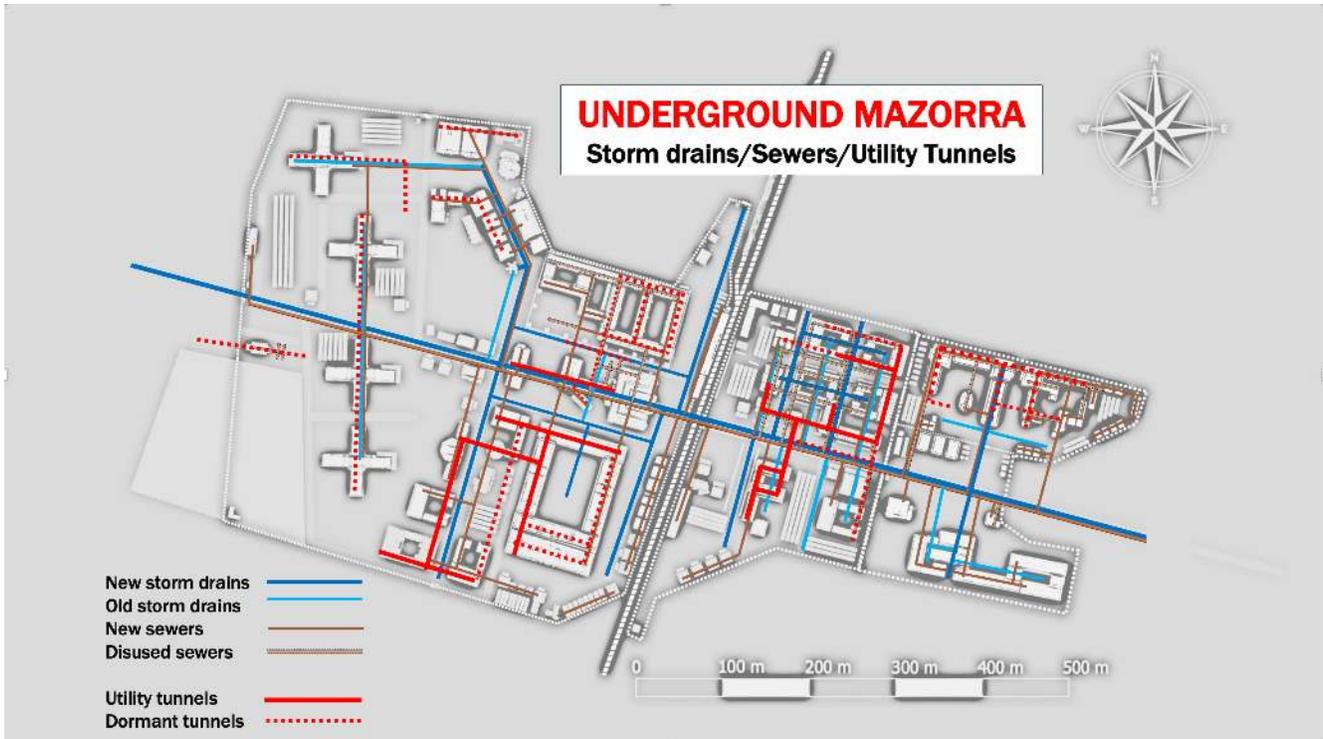
Finally, in sadder news on February 26 we had to euthanize our cat Zoe (2008–2026), who had been with us for ~17 years. She had chronic kidney disease, & she declined more quickly following Sadie's death in December. At noon the vet came to the house for a final home visit, & Zoe died peacefully in front of the fireplace with all of us there. It was the right decision, but still a very hard one.



## Habana Horror: *The Mazorra* (part 8)

### Underground Mazorra: Forgotten Ways

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, large institutional hospitals such as the Mazorra were built without modern sewage or drainage systems. Human waste was removed manually, stored in cesspools, or flushed into



shallow underground channels that relied on gravity and neglect rather than engineering.

During the first U.S. occupation of Cuba (1898–1902), pressure grew to modernize public institutions. At Mazorra, reform was slow and uneven. New wells, limited plumbing, and expanded underground passages were introduced to carry waste from patient wards, but poor coordination and corruption undermined these efforts. By the 1910s and early 1920s, enteric outbreaks were frequent. Hundreds of patients died annually from what was termed “asylum dysentery.” Leaking pipes, blocked channels, and substandard repairs left the system chronically unstable. The 1926 hurricane, which destroyed the Women’s Pavilion, exposed Mazorra’s fragility and triggered a major rebuilding campaign in 1927, including new pavilions, hydrotherapy wards, steam heating, and electrification.

Under Machado’s public works programs, Mazorra was finally connected to a modern sewage network linked to the town of *Santiago de las Vegas* (~3 km away) where he incidentally has his private hacienda. These upgrades rendered the old system obsolete. Hydrotherapy alone produced more wastewater than the aging masonry tunnels could handle.

Many original brick tunnels were abandoned or repurposed. Some became utility corridors for steam, water, sewage, electrical conduits, and telephone lines. Others were widened and relined, sealed, or simply left to collapse and vanish from official plans.

By the late 1920s, Mazorra had an extensive underground network few fully understood. Maps are incomplete or altered. Some sections were condemned, others forgotten, and some never recorded at all. What lies beneath is a layered infrastructure: Victorian neglect buried beneath reform, then obscured again by political secrecy and opportunistic reuse.

#### Mazorra Substructure Specifications:

**Utility Tunnels:** Brick sidewalls, arched roof, flat floor. 4–6 ft wide, 6–7 ft high. Steam pipes, water mains, wiring. Electric bulbs every 20–30 m if powered. *Notes:* Warm near pipes. Oil and dust smell. Most stable footing. Direct basement access. Dormant sections (dotted lines) dark and cluttered.

**Old Storm Drains:** Yellow brick, square or shallow arch ceilings ~7 ft high, 5–6 ft wide. Flat floor, shallow trench. During hurricane level storm flooding, some automatically connect via valves to active storm drains to discharge through narrow gratings. *Notes:* Often dry with silt. Loose brick and debris pockets common. Muffled acoustics.

**New Storm Drains:** Poured concrete, circular, 8 ft diameter. Smooth walls, shallow central channel. *Notes:* Dry in drought; rapid centre flow after rain. Loud echo. Little odour. Difficult to climb without rope.

**Old Sewers:** Red/brown brick, egg or horseshoe profile ~6 ft high. Central waste channel. Narrow raised ledge on one side. *Notes:* Normally dry or holding stagnant pools if back-up from storm drains. Slime, mineral

crusting, insect life. Air may be foul in sealed stretches. Occasional seepage from cracked laterals.

**New Sewers:** Concrete, egg-shaped profile, 7' at crown, 8' at the main trunk line. Faster, deeper flow than old sewer. Narrow maintenance lip. Echoing acoustics.  
*Notes:* Malodour. More efficient but hazardous. Water rises quickly in tropical storms. Very loud when active.



**Keeper's Note: Mazorra Underground Encounters**  
 Determine which one of 20 encounters encounter using the restricted band which runs from dry to wet. Clamp to 1-20 if needed. Non-dormant utility tunnels use prior Mazorra encounter tables.

- Dormant Utility (dry): 1D8 (1-8)
  - Old Storm Drain (mostly dry): 1D8 + 4 (5-12)
  - Old Sewer (musty, faint malodour): 1D8 + 8 (9-16)
  - New Sewer / Storm (active wet): 1D8 + 12 (13-20)
1. Human traffic (maintenance, guard, smuggler, escaping patient, cultist, Keeper's choice).
  2. Evidence of an old crime? Broken Rx eyeglasses, empty wallet/purse in side niche, & a sinister blood stain.
  3. Construction hoard; tools, bricks, cement sacks. 1-in-6 chance collapse after passing; route back blocked.
  4. Padlocked utility hatch; faint machinery hum; vertical climb to secret surface access.
  5. Walls painted in distorted perspective by former patient; false doors, gratings & pits. INT or brief disorientation (*Penalty Die* to next action).
  6. Echo distortion; voices mislocated. *Listen* rolls at *Penalty*.
  7. Low ceiling; forced crawl 2D6 meters.
  8. Fresh partial collapse; fallen brick and dust.
  9. Hidden cache in wall niche; contraband alcohol, cigars, cigarettes, morphine ampoules (1D4 items).
  10. Floor height shift; DEX or slip.
  11. Structural Weak Point: Roll **STRUCTURAL INCIDENT TABLE** immediately (see AoM #246 in E&A #9)
  12. Rats watching silently before scattering.
  13. Medical debris lodged in a bend: broken wheelchair, crutch, wheel-less gurney. 1-in-6 chance of minor cut on exposed metal; CON to avoid later *tetanus* (Lockjaw) infection.
  14. Bricked niche sweating chemical effluent; ammonia reek. CON or coughing fit & *Penalty* next round.
  15. Mold 'drapes' + "icicles" flourish on ceiling; spores (CON or coughing; *Penalty* next round).
  16. Slimy sheet of algae underfoot; slope toward pooled water; DEX or slip; 1/6 chance submerge; CON to avoid later lung infection.
  17. RAT SWARM (3d10 rats). See 7e *Call of Cthulhu Keeper's Guide*, p.338 for **Rat Pack** (10 rats) statistics.
  18. Bad air pocket; flame gutters; CON q-5 min or unconscious
  19. Waterfall chute; *Climb* or swept downstream.
  20. Deep trunk channel; sudden drop to dark moving water.

## The Old Laundry Pavilion (Woman's Dept.)

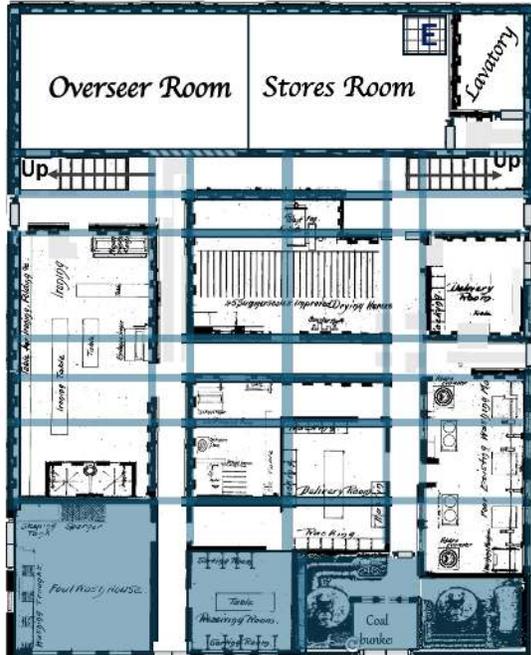
To a casual visitor the Old Laundry Pavilion appears disused. being stacked with obsolete machinery and dusty surplus crates. It is dormant, not abandoned, and remains on the Mazorra's maintenance rolls. Once monthly, pumps are tested by generator & boilers are filled and drained to ensure systems still answer when required. It's a brick building 40 feet east to west & 48 feet north to south, with a roof rising 25 to 30 feet. Faded apricot stucco flakes from the exterior walls. The corrugated tin roof, patched after the 1926 hurricane, is intact and the floor is dry. Wide double entry doors once used by for delivery of soiled laundry/linens & coal, & later removal of clean linens remain padlocked, while other staff doors are locked.

When entered, the interior is dim even at midday. Clerestory panes & skylights are cracked, boarded, or limewashed opaque. The space beneath the north gallery under the mezzanine lies in shadow even at noon. No electrical connections are active but active telephone extension to clean linen/delivery room.

Built for combined human labour and heavy mechanical laundry service, the pavilion retains its industrial shell. The floor is smooth, water-impervious concrete cut with shallow brick drainage channels. Steam mains as thick as a man's arm climb toward the trusses. Two cylindrical boilers sit cold in a brick pit along the south wall, their valve wheels stiff with age. Hydroextractors, wringer frames, & a long calendaring machine stand rusting where they were left. Drain trenches, supply pipes, & roof vents remain intact. The building was designed for moisture, vibration, and noise. Its structure is still quite sound.

At the north end, a raised overseer gallery spans the full width of the building, forty feet across and twenty feet deep, set fifteen feet above the floor. It had a view of most of the unroofed rooms below, with the exception of rooms to the very south; the boiler room, coal bunker, foul wash-house and the receiving room. One former wooden staircase has collapsed and the other leans precariously. Beneath the shadowy platform are stacked iron laundry carts, broken belt wheels, lengths of pipe, a defunct boiler, broken tumblers, and compacted debris form a deep shadowed recess that reeks of neglected junk storage.

Across the main floor the southern boiler pit sits three to four feet below slab level, partially obscured by ironwork and tangled steam lines. Drainage channels converge there before disappearing beneath masonry and pipework. Nothing at a glance suggests more than an aging service building awaiting eventual demolition, its industrial systems silent but not entirely without purpose.



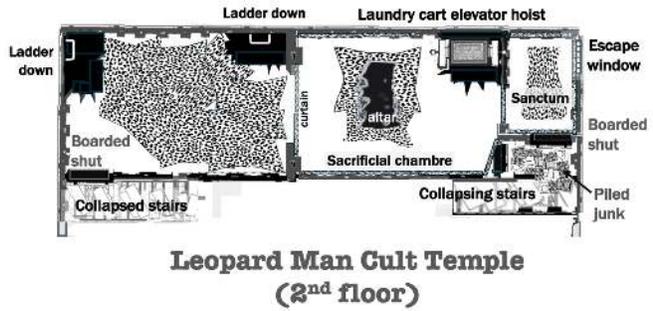
**Keeper's Note:** In boiler room is a hinged solid wrought iron heavy drop shelf disguised as part of an old furnace assembly; it allows secret one-way deposits into the Mazorra Vault. Opening is too small for a man to enter. Maximum dimensions for objects placed through the deposit slot: ~ 70 cm high x 40 cm wide x 65 cm deep or max size of a 2-drawer filing-cabinet laid on its side. When closed, the shelf tilts forward and the contents inside slide down concealed rollers ~30 ft into the vault chamber. The vault chamber below is not visible from above, and only if fully closed will tilt/side contents

### Raised North Gallery & Stair Access

The raised north gallery formerly held the Overseer's Office, Stores Room, & Staff Lavatory (*maps show both prior & repurposed versions*). The west stair has completely collapsed. The east stair remains but is visibly unstable, & sways and creaks ominously after the first steps. The upper landing is piled with rotting crates, soap barrels, broken carts, & scrap timber blocking two boarded doors.

**Keeper's Note:** The stairs are boobytrapped: several key joists are nearly sawn through and packed with sawdust to concea; ~200 lbs combined weight at the top risks total failure. Detection of the sabotage requires a *Hard Spot Hidden* to note fresh sawdust. 2+ persons or forcing either door triggers collapse; all on stairs or on the upper landing roll DEX:

- **Success:** 1D6 damage/Failure: 1D6+1D4 damage.
- **Fail:** Pinned; 1D6+1D6 damage; STR or aid to free. Loud structural crash alerts anyone inside + dust cloud (visibility 5-10 ft) for 1D4 rounds.



Leopard Man Cult Temple (2nd floor)

## Old Laundry Pavilion

- Covered ceiling
- 1st level Rafter
- Door
- Double-doors

Scale = 10 feet



### Hidden Leopard Man Cult Temple

This upper level conceals Leopard Man Cult's temple of worship. From the former rooms all internal partitions have been removed and the space converted into a concealed ritual hall. All former exterior doors and windows are boarded from within and without. The interior now functions as a single chamber capable of holding 25-30 worshippers standing shoulder to shoulder. Wall hangings of dyed cowhide, cut & painted to resemble leopard skins, hang from rafters.

Linen sheets painted with leopard spotted patterns serve as retractable curtains. Thick reed matting covers the floor, muffling footfall and absorbing drum vibration. Openings are double-screened to prevent light leakage. A large metal cage for sacrifices repurposed from the old elevator cab is on one corner blocking the boarded up door. When the curtains are drawn and lamps extinguished, the chamber is

visually dead from outside, with peepholes that look out over the rest of the pavilion covered by draperies when not in use.

The *Central Altar* is a salvaged 8' x 4' curved boiler plate rests on masonry blocks in the centre. Its surface is blackened and permanently stained. The slight curvature channels fluids toward a gutter cut in the matting beneath. Walls are covered, with papier-mâché leopard masks hang between beams. Skin drums & gourds line north & west walls. Ritual chalk marks & dried blood stains mark the floor perimeter around the altar. Under are clay jars contain thickened blood mixtures and herbal infusions. Far overhead, iron hooks are driven into beams for hanging skins or suspending victims.

### Temple Inner Sanctum (Former Lavatory)

This chamber serves as Jeremías Yobama's private retreat and storage for regalia and ritual implements. The metal door is bolted from the inside, and heavily boarded and sealed from the outside. Inside, a 4-foot square breach has been cut through the east wall, forcing crouched entry into the sanctum which is concealed by animal hide curtains.

Inside against the east wall stands a low rectangular wooden platform (approx. 6 x 5 ft., 6-8 inches high), constructed from salvaged planks. There is no mattress in the European sense. The surface is layered with woven mats and genuine leopard skins. Beneath the platform: clay jars, ritual implements, and stoppered blood vessels. Nearby sit an unlit oil lamp, and an empty heavy cast iron bowl (used for blood mixtures).

In the northeast corner is a small ebony staff carved with a leopard's head. Along the south wall is a woven basket containing spare garments. Iron hooks bearing his regalia: leopard-skin cloak, mask, and steel claw hooks. A concealed escape window occupies the upper east wall, hidden behind skins and loose boards. It opens onto a narrow exterior ledge, allowing escape either to the roof or down via drainpipes to the yard.

**Keeper's Note:** Hard *Spot Hidden* to note rungs nailed to make ladders to two holes chopped in between joists in the ceiling near the walls. Ditto another *Spot Hidden* to find the laundry cart improvised rope & pulley elevator in the old hoist-way now missing the elevator cab, & and closed maintenance hatch with oiled hinges floor under the lavatory. This hatch connects to a defunct sewer line below where cult members enter & leave via its northbound branch via a breach in both the new trunk sewer & storm drains. The Leopard Man Cult does not use the east-west old sewer spur giving access to the Mazorra Vault, so its accidental discovery is effectively impossible.



## Horrors of the Mazorra:

A 1930s Pulp Cthulhu scenario (cont.)

**Re-cap AoM #246:** Evening events had been eventful; the evacuation of *Santa Barbara* pavilion, the death of Dr. Llerena, the escape of Jeremias Yobama & Doloros Garcia, the disappearance of Director Machado, & likely finding *Evelio Gil* affected by a mystery ailment inside the Zorrilla's Aux Lab under the old M1. Barring any PC/Investigators willing to press on without sleep most should try to get *some* sleep in their VIP Quarters.

### SIDE-BAR: HISTORICAL EVENTS SATURDAY AUGUST 12, 1933

The fall of Gerardo Machado was the climax of a week of intense political pressure, a massive general strike, & a decisive loss of military support.

- Pre-dawn (~05:00) Camp Columbia Barracks, army leaders refuse further support to President Machado.
- 09:00: At the Presidential Palace in Habana Machado resigns his presidency under pretext of a 'leave of absence'; he travels with his Presidential escort to his *La Nenita* Hacienda near *Santiago de las Vegas* (~30 minutes & 20 km away).
- ~12:00: At his country residence Machado receives disturbing reports of reprisals against Porra / Machado-ist persons & property; decides to leave when own staff evaporate
- 15:20 Machado travels via escort to *Aeropuerto General Gerardo Machado*. A single waiting Pan Am Sikorsky S-38 prepares for departure, not two as promised by US Special Envoy Sumner Welles; need to wait for permission
- ~16:50 plane is finally authorized to take off for the Bahamas just as an armed mob approaches the airport.



## August 12th 1933: Timelines inside the Mazorra

Time	What Mazorra Staff Hear or Witness
04:00	M1 Guards returning to their station guarding the 3 <sup>rd</sup> floor find chaos; the murder of <b>Dr. Llerena</b> witnessed by RN <b>Yolanda Heres</b> done by <b>Jeremías Yobama</b> , and other unexplained corrosion events on the third floor. Being given strict instructions NOT to alert <b>Captain Gandia</b> NO MATTER WHAT, they inform other Mazorra Guards, and several teams sweep the grounds searching for both <b>Yobama &amp; Dolores</b> 'the Beautiful Murderess' Garcia. Guards secure the crime scene so photos can be taken & the body examined by Lic. Isreal Castellanos, Mazorra's coroner.
06:30 – 08:30	Breakfast is served in Dining Room in <i>La Oficina</i> . Drs. Viela, Ramagusa, Real, are present, as are Castellanos, Ricky, Othello, & any Investigators who want to eat, have coffee, and trade rumours/make plans.
07:00	M1 Shift change; handover shares garbled reports from the night shift concerning midnight events in M1. The information spreads quickly among RNs and MDs. <b>Chief RN Beatriz Montalvo</b> is on the scene. RN Yolanda Heres is laying down after given a sedative by <b>Dr. Prats</b> . <b>Dr. Zorrilla</b> will quietly arrive looking for Yolanda; he will leave after hearing she is okay but is recovering from her ordeal; she is <i>not</i> to be disturbed. M2 shift change handover report night includes the excitement of the evacuation of <i>Santa Bárbara Pavilion</i> due to a dangerous gas leak, the frightening appearance of a strange man in a lab coat & the subsequent escape of Srta. Dolores Garcia.
07:05	A-B-C, the anti-Machado-ist underground A.B.C. supported radio station which normally only operated only from 2:30 to 3:30 pm daily did a surprise broadcast. It reports that President Machado had been rebuffed by the Army at Columbia Barracks; his resignation expected later today. This report is heard by <i>El Rey</i> (charismatic patient with a King-of-Spain delusion) on his secret radio, who quietly begins making plans among his 'courtiers'. They are also heard by Ricky Morales on his portable <i>Kadette Pocket Radio</i> in his room in the VIP Quarters of <i>La Oficina</i> ; he'll make his way to the Main Switchboard (only operator today is <i>Srta. Tessa Pachecho</i> , daughter of Teresa), bribe her to let him use one of the two other vacant switchboard stations. He'll be making phone calls all day long while chain smoking, drinking back coffee, and listening to many official, censored commercial, & underground Cuban radio stations on his portable radio.
08:00	In the Director's Manse, Esperanza begins routine Saturday am office duties; (e.g. sorting correspondence, reading telegrams, doing switchboard coordination). Her morning is immediately disrupted by countless telephone calls from staff seeking confirmation of President Machado's resignation from the Director. She reports the Director absent, and cannot confirm. By 08:45 she is so exasperated she instructs Main Switchboard to block all such calls, though inquiries continue via direct line.
08:15	Main Switchboard receives a coded telegram marked <b>FOR DIRECTOR'S EYES ONLY</b> . <b>Translating from Spanish it reads "SENDING YOU SURPRISE. 10 VERY LARGE FRAMED PHOTOGRAPHS. WANT TO SEE HANGING IN LONG GALLERY AT DIRECTOR'S MANSE TODAY OLD SOAP IS BEST SOAP — YOUR SECOND COUSIN."</b> The switchboard operator logs the message but does not pass it along after her mother was reprimanded by Director Machado only the night before
08:25	<b>Captain Alberto Gandía</b> rises for the day inside the Superintendent's Manse after 4 hour sleep. Coming downstairs to the main office he is informed that not only is Dolores Garcia still missing, but he learns of the death

Time	What Mazorra Staff Hear or Witness
	of Dr. Llerena, & escape of his probable murderer, Jeremías Yobama from M1. Dolores Garcia has still not been found; he authorizes the dog handlers to start tracking the missing persons.
09:00	Gandia summon <b>Lic. Isreal Castellanos</b> to do a forensic examination of crime scene of M1, he will also summon Insp. Hargreaves of Scotland Yard for their input, and the wealthy Cuban Sr. Vegas to translate for him
09:04	Leaving for M1, Castellanos will have missed a radio-facsimile message normally sent with fingerprint verification arrives at the <i>Castellanos Dactyoscopic Laboratory</i> from his Havana Police Station technician contact: (translation) <b>MACHADO RESIGNED. HAS LEFT PRESIDENTIAL PALACE. WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN HERRERA ACTING PRESIDENT.</b>
09:17	Switchboard receives a coded telegram from <i>Atares Fortress</i> (Porra HQ) for Capt. Gandia; sends a messenger to inform informs him it is waiting
09:50 – 10:30	The Presidential convoy escort unexpectedly arrives at the Mazorra gate: two armoured 1930 Lincoln K limousines & two 1930 Buick Series 60 staff cars. The convoy departs ~40 minutes later. President Gerardo Machado briefly enter the Director's Manse & speaks briefly with <b>Esperanza Hidalgo-Gato</b> and later <b>Capt. Gandía</b> ; After the President's convoy leaves, Gandía orders the Mazorra sealed off to all traffic.
10:35	Finally getting a chance to 'read' the <i>Atares Fortress</i> message, Gandía, using a code-book from his safe he decodes a devastating message summarizing the mutiny at Columbia barracks & pending resignation of Machado. General Alberto Herrera was now interim President. It also warns him that all Porra should be on high alert from reprisals. He forgets about Llerena's murder & plans his escape.
10:38	In Castellanos' Dactyloscope Lab the earlier radio-facsimile is waiting in the tray yo be read. There a 10:48 follow-up arrives which can be read by any Investigator's present: <b>RIOTING IN THE STREETS. POLICE AND ARMY BACKING OFF. PORRA BEING HUNTED DOWN AND SHOT DOWN LIKE DOGS IN STREETS SIGNING OFF MY FRIEND.</b>
~11:00	Coded message arrives for Vives from Spanish Embassy.
11:20	Two Mazorra guards involved in the overnight <i>Santa Barbara/M2</i> disturbance report to Infirmary; they show unusual skin lesions on their hands/forearms. The marks resemble burns or punctures but show no bleeding.
12:30	An RN in M2 reports to <b>Dra. Gilda Ramagusa</b> that a patient involved in the earlier <b>Santa Bárbara Pavilion</b> evacuation now shows strange translucent frost-burn like patches on her skin. Staff assume it is benign bruising or chemical irritation.
12:45	<b>Lic.</b> Castellanos submits a preliminary report on the death of <b>Dr. Llerena</b> to Capt. Gandía's office. The late doctor's cervical splint had been removed at the scene, but fingerprints matching Yobama are present. Initial findings are consistent with manual strangulation & fracture of multiple cervical vertebrae; how much were new and how much was old was hard to say. His impression? Death by homicide. Examination of damaged door hinges on the 3 <sup>rd</sup> floor of M1 suggests exposure to a corrosive agent consistent with a strong acid (e.g., <i>sulphuric acid</i> ).
13:00	Lunch is served inside <i>La Oficina</i> in the Dining Room; present are many of the MDs, RNs, & any hungry Investigators. Gossip & rumours are traded hotly like Cuban baseball cards among school-boys.
All Afternoon	Reports filter in from Habana via radio, phone messages and even motorcycle messenger; celebrations, reprisals, withdrawal of police & army to their barracks. There are

**Time What Mazorra Staff Hear or Witness**

many stories of vigilante mobs targeting Porra members for grisly deaths by shooting, lynching, and worse. The 02:30 pm underground A-B-C radio station confirms Machado's resignation.

- 14:30** Rumours circulating among RNs in the Santa Barbara Pavilion 3 pts are developing odd transparent lesions.
- 14:55** **Señorita Isabella Domínguez y Varona** is discovered missing. Window bars are corroded/broken, as if by acid.
- 15:30** Coded telegram for RN Yaniz from *Embajada Alemana* (German Embassy)
- ~15:50** The Presidential escort returns unexpectedly to the Mazorra; gate guard is told the President has returned. Gate guards allow entry of the two vehicles; Gandía is notified only after the vehicles are inside.
- 16:07** The President, his head covered by a blanket, is escorted into the Manse. Escort personnel also carry several leather suitcases inside. One case falls during the transfer, spilling bundles of American currency before being hastily repacked. Gandía and several Porra guards witness the incident.
- 16:30** Commercial radio station, 1010 CMQ openly ignoring govt. censorship entirely, broadcasts confirmation of Machado's morning resignation; unknown where his is. <MAZORRA's PA system crackles into static-life then a clear male announcer voice in Spanish: **This is PWX Radio Network with breaking news. It is now confirmed President Gerardo Machado has fled Cuba by airplane to the Bahamas. Across Havana, jubilant mobs are attacking members of the Porra. Authorities have named Carlos Manuel de Céspedes y Quesada acting President until elections three months from now. US Ambassador Welles has issued a statement approving the transition and that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt has dispatched two United States warships to Habana to protect American interests and restore order.** <brief static burst> **Additional reports now confirm that a large crowd has gathered at Aeropuerto General Gerardo Machado to try to stop the flight. Witnesses state the mob is moving outward from the airfield—** <slight distortion / volume dip> **—and may be heading toward the Mazorra Hospital.** <static swells, then PA system stops>.
- ~17:00**
- 17:01** The news bulletin is heard playing across the entire grounds while a gun battle erupts suddenly inside the Director's Manse. With Capt. Gandía pre-occupied in the fracas the PWX broadcast is not shut off until several minutes later, by which time the news of the approaching mob has already spread throughout the Mazorra.



Aug 12 1933 Mazorra NPC Locations (activity)			
Name	Morning (09:00-13:00)	13:00 Dining Room	Afternoon (13:00-17:00)
Dr. Prats	Quarters (sleeping post call)	Present	Photostating for ABC)
Dra. Ramagosa	Women's Dept (rounds)	Present	Quarters (planning)
Dra. Elda Real	Children's Pav. (hiding records)	Present	Children's Pavilion
Dr. Vilela	Children's Pav (rounds)	Present	Seeks out PCs/ Roams
Dr. Zorrilla	Aux Lab (research)	-	Aux Lab (quarantine)
RN Yolanda Heres	Resting M1 → cottage (asleep)	-	Off-duty/seeking Zorrilla
Chief RN Montalvo	Various pavilions	Present	M2 Patient Issues
Dep. Chief RN Yániz	RN cottage (plotting w/ Vives)	-	Double-crossing / Meeting Vives
Evelio Gil	Aux Lab (quarantine, unwell)	-	Aux Lab (cond. deteriorating)
Srta. Esperanza	Director's Manse (managing Office)	-	Director's Manse
Capt. Gandía	M1 → Dir. Manse → Supt. Manse	-	Supt Manse (Exit plan) / Dir. Manse
Lic. Castellanos	M1 → Dactyl. Lab (forensics)	Present	M1 (Llerena Autopsy)/Lab
Mons. Aurelio	Chapel (prayers) → Pav. visits	Chapel Office	Mazorra Library (Research)
Ricky Morales	Switchboard→ Room	Present	Switchboard/Child Pav.
Othello	Tuck shop → Switchboard	W/ Aurelio in Chapel	Prepping Santeria ceremony
Lt. Col Vives	La Oficina	-	Roams Mazorra

**SIDE- BAR INVESTIGATOR POSITIONING (07:00-17:00):** On the Saturday, Investigators are fairly free to move about the Mazorra grounds unsupervised, though many Admin sections are not staffed being the weekend. Unless otherwise directed they are:

- Moving between/under patient pavilions and hospital/clinics M1 and M2 they have permission to enter
- Be directed to the *Director's Manse* to get written permission (which Esperanza can help with or block) for photos, pavilion entry, records access.
- Be near the *Main Switchboard* or *Tuck Shop*, listening to radio bulletins (Ricky's or Othello's sets or if one has their own)
- in *La Oficina*, consulting Libraries, searching Admin & patient records, eating/meeting in the Dining Room
- Pursuing earlier leads (records, tunnels, staff movements, or specific in-patients)
- Examining the emerging Twsha medical mystery (Lic. Gil, Dr. Zorrilla, Dolores García, or related cases)
- Speaking with, following, shadowing, or tracing key NPCs
- Sleeping or resting briefly in their Visitors quarters
- Drawn toward Mazorra disturbances such as raised voices, arguments, vehicle arrivals, or gunfire

## Mazorra Factions Timetable August 12<sup>th</sup> 1933

Time	Lt. Col. Vives + RN Yaniz cabal	Mazorra Patients	Jeremias "Executioner" Yobama
07:00	Vives hears A-B-C radio story of Machado's planned resignation; attempts to contact Spanish embassy but circuits are overloaded.	<i>El Rey</i> hears the same broadcast and quietly gathers a few "courtiers" to make plans	Leader of the Leopard Man Cult recovering from last night's grave injuries in the Old Laundry pavilion Temple HQ
11:00	Embassy reached but cannot send car. Vives approaches Yaniz about obtaining a vehicle to leave Mazorra with the two Special Children.	<i>The General</i> noticing reduced Mazorra guard numbers & patrols summons his captains for discussing possible war plans	Conscious and stronger after consuming his <i>borfima</i> magic elixir.
12:30	Yaniz discreetly contacts the German consulate while appearing cooperative with Vives; Nazi military attaché there sceptical.	Héctor " <i>The Madonna</i> " gains new influence among selected patients and a few sympathetic staff frightened of the chaos in Habana.	Cultists bring news from the wards. Learns of events in Habana; ditto mounting tensions inside the Mazorra.
15:00	Vives presses Yaniz again for transport. Yaniz claims a ride is being arranged though conditions in Havana are chaotic.	Varona reacts badly to rumours of Machado's return and escapes her pavilion; window bars mysteriously brittle & easily broken	Predicts Gandía will flee Mazorra tonight; begins planning revenge on the Porra.
16:00	German consulate agrees to send a car after dark for Yaniz & the children. Yaniz tells Vives transport is arranged.	Patients grow bolder as staff authority weakens. Varona learns "Machado" is in the Manse and @16:45 enters via the vine trellis to the 2 <sup>nd</sup> floor Juliet balcony.	Sends word through cult members among staff to quietly release selected Leopard Cult patients after dark.
17:00	News that President Machado has fled Cuba triggers these and other factions into making their move now or later this evening.		

### ~06:30 a.m. Dr. Zorrilla's Transformation

Upon waking early in his room at *La Oficina* Dr. Zorrilla notices a disturbing change. Patches of his skin no longer blanch normally under pressure. When he examines them with a penlight, portions of the tissue appear faintly translucent, impossibly revealing structures beneath the skin.



**Keeper's Note: Zorrilla's Twsha Transition.** His realization triggers a **mandatory SAN roll (1D3 / 1D6)** (starting SAN 65; see *AoM #241*). Daily SAN checks begin thereafter. If the SAN roll **fails with a loss of 5+ in a single roll or 13+ in a day**, Zorrilla suffers a *Bout of Madness: Manic Intellectual Fixation*. Rather than panic, he experiences exhilaration mixed with dread and reframes the infection as "a once-in-history opportunity." For **1D10 hours** (or assume 8) he becomes intensely analytical:

- feverishly documenting symptoms
- planning self-experimentation
- treating the infection as a scientific discovery

He gains a **Bonus Die on Science** rolls, but suffers a **Penalty Die** on all social interactions & cautious judgement. If No Bout of Madness occurs, Zorrilla still develops one compulsive behaviour:

- **Yearning / loneliness:** he seeks the company of sympathetic individuals who can help him examine and hide the his changes. This draws him toward **RN Yolanda Heres**, his romantic partner.

Troubled by the strange changes in his skin, Dr. Zorrilla leaves *La Oficina* for M1, intending to find RN Yolanda Heres, whose shift ended at 07:00. He is unaware of the night's disturbances. Ignoring uneasy activity near the entrance, he goes upstairs. The third floor is chaotic, with guards conferring and damage evident. Staff inform him that Heres collapsed during the night.

Zorrilla encounters Chief RN Beatriz Montalvo, who had come after being alerted by Dr. Prats. Montalvo, studying him (and shocked by his appearance), explains that RN Heres is recovering from shock after witnessing Dr. Llerena's murder and is not to be disturbed until Captain Gandia has questioned her. Stunned, Zorrilla stammers: "When she is feeling better, please ask Nurse Heres to meet me in my laboratory."

Disturbed, he leaves for his auxiliary lab to examine his symptoms, only then recalling **Evelto Gil**, whom he left there the previous afternoon, and quickens his pace. When he reaches the corridor, the door is oddly unlocked. Inside he immediately notices the barricade of animal cages and the quarantine warning Gil placed outside the laboratory. Zorrilla pauses briefly and may listen at the door, but his growing intellectual fixation overrides caution. The warning only deepens his curiosity. He enters his aux. laboratory at **07:15**.

### 7:15 – 9:00 am: Zorrilla's Auxiliary Laboratory:

Assuming the PCs respected Gil's warning about contagion through touch or residue, Investigators could have set up an impromptu quarantine in the Auxiliary Lab's bunkroom and archive and allow him to sleep there. They may have set a watch with one or more of them present with the door closed for privacy for him. [*nb. Dolores García may also be present on 2<sup>nd</sup> cot with room divider if she is in the lab.*]

When Zorrilla pushes through the doors leading to his lab any Investigators immediately notice he appears pale, exhausted, and slightly unsteady.

**Keeper's Note:** *Spot Hidden* reveals across his forearms and neck faint translucent patches are visible almost as bad as Gill's; SAN roll (0/1D3)

Seeing strangers in his laboratory surprises & irritates him. "¡Caramba! What are you doing in my laboratory? Has something happened to Evelio Gil?"

If the Investigators mention Gil's condition or point out Zorrilla's own uncanny lesions, his annoyance quickly shifts to fascination. "Contagious? Then we must document this immediately." Because of his growing intellectual fixation he may approach the Investigators too closely while speaking, apparently unconcerned about contagion. Unless someone stops him, he attempts to move toward the bunkroom where Gil is resting. If warned about infection he pauses briefly, then replies with scientific curiosity rather than alarm.

**~07:30 am Evelio Gil & Dr. Ramon Zorrilla**



**Keeper's Note: Mutual Recognition of Twsha's Effect:** (Each must make a SAN roll (0/1D3) upon recognizing the transformation in the other.

- **Zorrilla Success:** Remains coldly analytical, comparing symptoms to his own and viewing the phenomenon as a breakthrough.
- **Zorrilla Failure:** May enter a Bout of Madness (*Manic Intellectual Fixation*). Becomes recklessly experimental, proposing invasive and dangerous investigations (e.g., expanded tissue sampling, self-experimentation, lesion stimulation). Dismisses all concerns about contagion.
- **Gil Success:** Maintains composure & immediately prioritizes containment (gloves, masks, distance, quarantine).
- **Gil Failure:** May enter a Bout of Madness (*Panic Containment Behaviour*), including sealing the room, forcing others out, or destroying contaminated materials.

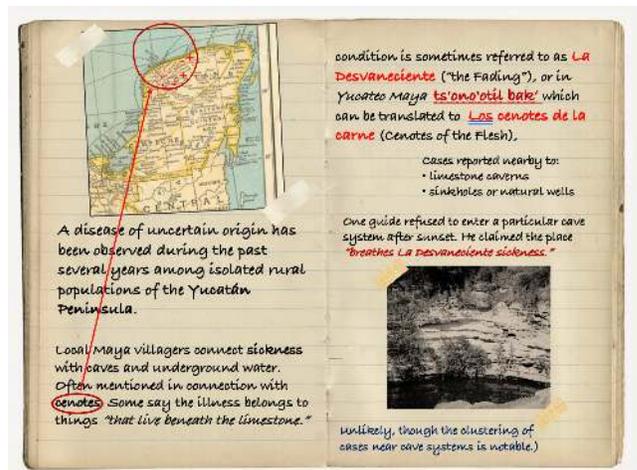
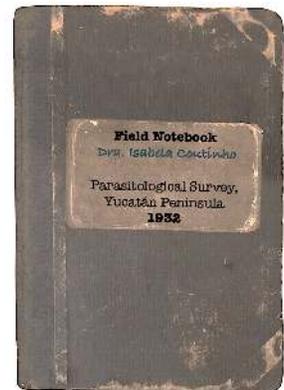
If Zorrilla opens the bunkroom door and turns on the light, Gil is revealed inside. His condition has worsened.

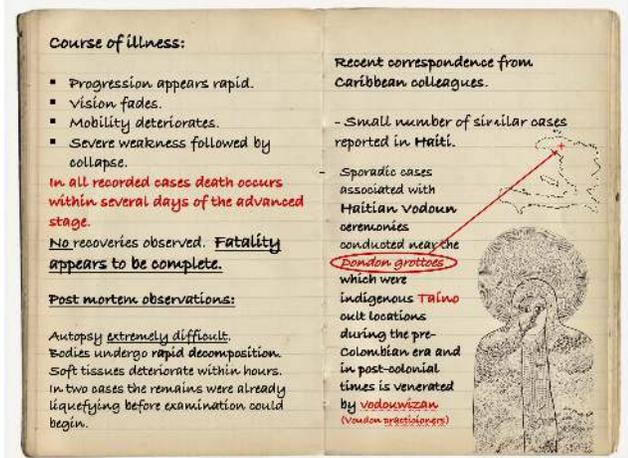
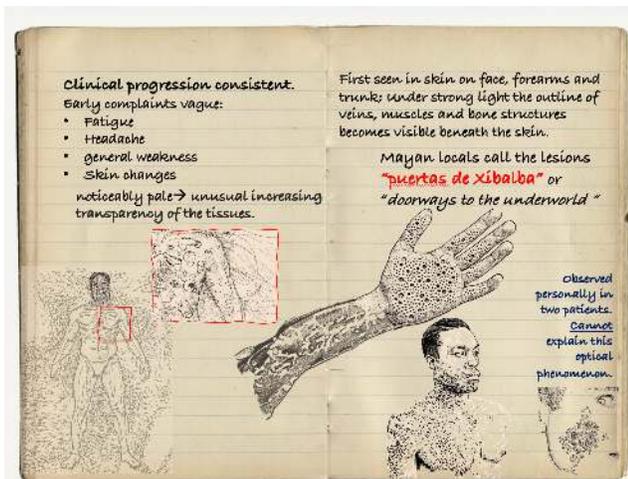
Across his forearms, hands, and neck irregular patches resemble skin stretched over **frosted** glass. Beneath them the shapes of muscle and tendon shift faintly. The edges of the lesions spread slowly in crystalline patterns like frost creeping across a windowpane.

Gil awakens slowly. When he realizes Zorrilla is present and is afflicted too he becomes alarmed. He urgently insists that no one touch him, including Zorrilla, and that no one touches his colleague. He urges everyone to use gloves, cloth masks, and distance. Gil asks for bandages from the first aid kit and wraps his arms himself. He also asks if anyone fed the guinea pigs that morning.

**Investigators Studying the Medical Mystery**

One of the Investigators, **Dr. Isabela Coutinho**, has seen something like this before. They have their field notes about their experience the year before. [See handouts], which they can share. She had made a confidential memorandum to the *League of Nations Medical Committee* last December: "*Preliminary Observations on a Rapidly Fatal Disorder in the Yucatan and other Caribbean Locations Characterized by Progressive Cutaneous Translucence and Possible Communicability,*"





**SIDE-BAR: UNLOCKING THE SECRETS OF THE TWSHA** The Twsha elixir is not merely a toxin or contagion. Careful observation suggests it causes a staged transformation of the human body for a purpose. Subtle differences between victims hint at methods to slow or redirect it. Clues lie hidden in clinical observations, behavioural study in patient wards, lab bench work, and study into forbidden traditions. Those medically or scientifically aligned Investigators who dare may reconstruct its terrible biology. Next AOM Issue: the **Investigator Research Tree** and experiments needed to unlock.

If the Investigators wish, one or more may conduct a more careful clinical examination of Evelio Gil and Roman Zorrilla [and Dolores Garcia if decided she is present too]. They may document the skin changes, sketch or photograph the translucent flecks, check their pulse and temperature, or attempt simple laboratory tests. Skin scrapings from one of the translucent patches can be examined under a microscope. Investigators might also expose lab animals to affected tissues or begin simple behavioural observations, especially if they previously noticed his unusual reactions to light or sound.

**Keeper's Note: Preliminary Investigations:** Microscopic examination is tricky for usual staining unless **Medicine** roll *Hard* success; this reveal tissue that appears altered rather than infected; something structural is happening

to Gil & Zorrilla's tissues, it's not an infection known to contemporary 1933 medicine. On a *Fumble* the Investigator misinterprets the findings as atypical smallpox. Acting quickly, they attempt a precautionary vaccination but injection site soon becomes one of the same translucent patches, revealing that the condition is something far stranger; witnessing this impossibility costs **0/1 SAN**.

The subject of practical containment planning may arise. The investigators may debate whether Gil & Zorrilla should remain in the Auxiliary Lab, be moved to an isolation room in M1, or be kept hidden until they understand the risk. Both Mazorra staff will say that the Mazorra asylum is already unstable with rumours about Machado, they should keep the incident quiet and restrict who is allowed into the lab area.

**Keeper's Option: Dolores Garcia in the Aux Lab**  
 If the Keeper decided that **"The Beautiful Murderess** who escaped the Female Violent/Refractory Pavilion, followed Evelio Gil & hid in the Aux Lab, her discovery creates a far more volatile situation than Gil. While Gil cooperates. Dolores usually does not. Investigators may reasonably keep Dolores temporarily isolated in the lab **until** they decide what to do. Dolores may accept temporary refuge in the lab rather than returning to her pavilion if told she may be ill/contagious, fear may prompt brief compliance (**Persuade**; cooperation for 2d6 hours). If she refuses or **Persuade** roll fails:

- **Sedation:** A mild sedative (**Medicine** roll, q6h) may calm her long enough to contain and to observe
- **Restraints:** If violent or attempting to flee (especially after witnessing Gil transform), they may restrain her to the cot or improvise restraints (bandages, straps), common practice in institutions of the period.

**(09:00–12:00) Capt. Gandía Under Pressure**

The events of the night & early morning leave Gandía unsettled. The Visitors have now been present at multiple incidents he cannot fully control or explain. Llerena's earlier insinuations linger, now even more so by his death. At the same time, Director Machado's unexplained absence creates gaps in authority. Other concerns press in: compromised staff, divided loyalties, Visitors with personal ties to Mazorra's dead, & two very dangerous missing patients, one who wants him dead. Gandía moves to contain the situation: if the Visitors are involved, they must be watched. If not, they remain witnesses to be managed. They are no longer merely guests.

Making a decision, at 09:00 he invites **Inspector Hargreaves** to accompany him to M1 "...as a professional courtesy," framing the visit as a formal review of Dr. Llerena's death; his tone is polite but unmistakably an order. He'll also ask that a second Investigator, the well-spoken and urbane Cuban **Sr. Alejandro Vargas**, join the Inspector and he to assist with translation and "local context."

**Keeper's Note:** A successful **Psychology** roll will reveal that Capt. Gandia believes he is containing the two Investigators by controlling their access. In practice, he has concentrated them at the key points of contradiction.

Inside M1, Gandia permits limited examination of the 3rd floor crime scene, now under guard, & allow them ask questions of others *except* RN Heres. Hargreaves may inspect the body of Dr. Llerena and *in situ* surroundings, while Sr. Vargas translates exchanges with staff and Lic. Castellanos for him. Once photographs are taken, they may do a brief examination at the scene before body sent to morgue.

**Keeper's Note:** Castellanos is reserved but attentive; Investigators with a successful **Psychology** roll will note unusual unease. To Hargreaves early at the scene notice inconsistencies are readily apparent; the cervical trauma is severe, but the scene does not suggest a struggle; something is "off" about sequence of injury (no roll required). Anyone with **Medicine** or **Forensics** (Normal): body had signs of prior respiratory arrest (cyanosis); on *Hard* success: sequence becomes clear, sedation or paralysis preceded death; his neck broken after.

While at the M1 crime scene just before he can privately interview RN Heres, Gandia gets a message that a Presidential Escort has arrived unannounced, and President Machado himself has arrived and is inside the Director's Manse! He will hasten & motion to have the two Investigator's join him (so not to have them spread rumours).

### ~09:50 Presidential Escort Detours to Mazorra

While travelling from the Presidential Palace toward Machado's country residence **La Nenita** near Santiago de las Vegas the presidential convoy briefly detours to and halts at the Mazorra, less than 3 km away from their destination. Two 1930 Buick 50s and a pair of Lincoln Model K armoured limousines enter the grounds under orders of President Gerardo Machado himself.

The escort informs the astonished Mazorra guards that they are delivering rifles and ammunition to be stored at the asylum in case unrest spreads from Havana, and after rolling down the window to see President Machado himself, they hastily open the gate. The two armoured limousines drive towards the Director's Manse and park, while the other two escort cars roll slowly through the Women's Department gate.

**Keeper's Note:** Investigators on the scene can follow the cars which stop outside the *Old Laundry Pavilion*. Two long wooden crates labelled FUSILES, two smaller marked CARTUCHOS, and one boxy-case with no label are unloaded and carried inside. **Spot Hidden** to note labels and quantities; **Spanish** or **EDU** to interpret; **Firearms** or **Military Science** to assess contents; & **Stealth** to observe unseen

During the stop over, Machado briefly leaves his limousine and enters the Director's Manse, where he is greeted by **Esperanza Hidalgo-Gato**, the Director's secretary, whose surface composure remains entirely undisturbed.

**Keeper's Choice:** Any Investigators with Esperanza during his visit will be told to wait in her office with the door shut; **Listen** allows them to hear their conversation.

He enters, freshens up, & then waits in his cousin's fan cooled office while his escort finishes its business elsewhere [see SIDE-BAR: PRESIDENTIAL ESCORT SECRET MISSION]. Discovering from Esperanza that the Director's private telephone has a direct line to Habana that bypasses the switchboard, Machado places a call.



Esperanza withdraws discreetly to her stenographer's desk on the far side of the room, but she catches fragments of the President's conversation:

- "Yes... the papers are secure."
- "No, not there. Somewhere safer."
- "When the situation settles, we *will* recover them."

**Keeper's Choice:** Esperanza can discreetly use a foot pedal control on her *Dictaphone*™ to turn on & record onto a wax transcription cylinder in her office a recording of the complete conversation from the built-in wire-tap used to help accurately type transcripts for her boss.

Machado hangs up the telephone and lights a cigarette. Esperanza brings him iced water and answers a few casual questions about the hospital and his second cousin's whereabouts. When she carefully explains that Director Machado has been called away on business in Habana very late last night, the President laughs mirthlessly. He tells her with a tired smile in Spanish:

"Like my cousin, I too am temporary leave of my usual responsibilities. Except I am not waiting in Habana but will continue on to my hacienda outside *Santiago de las Vegas* along the road to *Managua* to await the will of the people." Then, almost as an afterthought "My wife will

be pleased at least that I finally remembered the *San Cristóbal* medal she gave to bring along for the journey.”

During the conversation, Machado inadvertently reveals several things he likely did not intend to share:

- certain govt, records already removed from Habana
- trusted men have “...placed them where no one would ever think to look.”
- he believes the present crisis will pass & that “Cuba will still need strong order from a strong man again.”

Some minutes later **Capt. Alberto Gandia** arrives in haste (along with the two PC/Investigators). Seeing Machado himself in the Director’s Office, Gandia is momentarily stunned and begins offering apologies for not greeting him at the gate.

Machado waves the apologies aside with tired impatience. “No ceremony, Captain. I am merely passing through.”

Shortly afterward one of the escort guards appears at the doorway. Machado rises and follows him out.

**Keeper’s Note:** A brief, controlled encounter with President Machado may occur. He appears fatigued, distracted, and preoccupied with events beyond the hospital. Esperanza makes the introductions in English. “Su Excelencia, el Presidente Machado. Inspector Lionel Hargreaves, formerly of London’s Scotland Yard. Señor Alejandro Vargas, benefactor of the Mazorra.” Geraldo Machado shakes their hands, & will say to the two of them: “You will discover that Mazorra contains many truths. The difficulty is not finding them...but deciding which are permitted to matter.” He smiles, already turning away. If either presses him even slightly, he frowns: “Such questions are dangerous since you might learn an unpleasant answer. I trust you will conduct your inquiries with discretion, Señors. The Mazorra is a hospital for sick minds, not a courtroom.”

A *Spot Hidden* will have Investigator(s) notice that the escort guard’s gloves and sleeves are dusted with black coal dust, suggesting the escort men have recently been inside one of the hospital’s industrial buildings. If they miss, this Esperanza will notice this, but will only share this information if she trusts the Investigators, and only out of Gandia’s presence.

The President returns to his limo, gives Esperanza, Capt. Gandia (and any others) a half wave, and then the car door closes and the convoy depart the Mazorra.

**SIDE-BAR - PRESIDENTIAL ESCORT SECRET MISSION:** Two long wooden crates marked in stencilled lettering **FUSILES** (rifles) and two smaller are marked **CARTUCHOS** (cartridges) are unloaded and carried into the abandoned *Old Laundry Pavilion* and are laid inside the empty coal bunker adjoining the boiler room, an area long unused since the laundry plant was shut down. Each rifle crate contains eight brand new 1903 Springfield rifles. The two ammunition boxes contain bandoleers of .30-06 cartridges, wrapped in paper packets, 3000 rounds in total. They also carry a smaller heavier steel document chest inside the boiler room, the real purpose of their visit. They briefly access the concealed

*Mazorra Vault* drop mechanism, disguised as part of an obsolete furnace assembly, and deposit carefully through the hinged drop shelf labelled Waste in Spanish. Once latched & shelf is tilted forward, the chest inside slides down onto concealed rollers roughly thirty feet into the hidden vault chamber below. The chest contains sensitive regime records removed from the Palace that morning, too heavy for air evacuation. The files include

- Porra intelligence files and arrest lists
- financial ledgers documenting regime payments and bribes
- correspondence with American bankers & arms suppliers
- draft political agreements with Spanish CEDA figures involved in a prospective shadow government
- draft secret agreements with Hitler’s Nazi Germany and Mussolini’s PNF Italian governments with signatures of both men

### (~10:30) Capt. Gandia’s change of plans

After the President’s sudden appearance & abrupt departure, Gandia maintains outward control. He orders the grounds closed to all unnecessary traffic, claiming that unrest in Habana may soon spread to the countryside. He also directs Insp. Hargreaves & Sr. Vargas to assist Lic. Castellanos in the *Dactyloscopic Laboratory*, indicating he will join them shortly after attending to “urgent correspondence.”

Instead, he returns to the Superintendent’s Manse to review the *Atares Fortress* telegram. Decoding the message takes several minutes. When complete, its implications are immediate and personal: reprisals against the Porra are imminent. His priorities suddenly changed, Gandia loses all interest in solving the murder of Dr. Llerena, and focuses on preventing his own.

### (10:30 onward) Castellanos’ Dactyloscopic Lab



Insp. Hargreaves and Sr. Vargas join **Lic. Israel Castellanos** in his Dactyloscopic Laboratory inside *La Oficina*. Castellanos works methodically, assuming Gandia will return shortly (n.b. Other Investigators may arrive during this period).

Without Gandia present, Castellanos is more open, though still precise. He demonstrates via photos (Investigators with *Medicine, Science, Psychology, Law*, or *Spot Hidden* may assist and confirm):

1. Cervical injuries are severe, but respiratory arrest appears primary & unexplained by morphine
2. Close-up photos show a 2nd injection site, likely post-sedation

3. Yobama's fingerprints are present on the victim, but absent entirely from the neck splint, not smeared or partial.

He offers: "The sequence does not align. Respiration fails first...*then* trauma. That is the wrong order. The evidence is incomplete."

If corroborated by the Investigators, he proceeds with planning an autopsy in the M1 temporary morgue, and run further tests, withholding further conclusions pending confirmation. Only after 20–30 minutes do he and the Investigators realize Gandia has not returned.

### (08:00 – 15:00) Dr. Vilela's Gambit

After surviving an attempted murder in his quarters, witnessing the dinner chaos, and learning of Dr. Llerena's death, **Dr. Arturo Vilela** becomes convinced something larger is unfolding at Mazorra. Not the supernatural itself, but someone using its appearance to spread fear, confusion, and silence. Believing the visiting Investigators may be the only people he can trust, & encouraged by Elda, he quietly approaches them when he finds at least two inside *La Oficina*, such as when at a meal. He now wears a carefully sewn black shoulder brace. "Whatever is happening here, it is not madness," he tells them. "And if we pretend that it is, more people will die."

**Keeper's Note:** Vilela's black cloth brace he wears on his shoulder was sewn by Elda Real and conceals a hidden pouch where her derringer she gave him is secreted, *Hard Spot Hidden* to detect.

Vilela offers the Investigators cautious assistance:

- **Access to selected patient records:** He has keys to the file room in *La Oficina* and can discreetly provide restricted case notes and transfer records.
- **Information on RN Rafael Yániz:** Vilela believes Yániz is behind the abuse of vulnerable patients & hospital stocks of morphine disappear only when he is around. Over 12 months he has kept a notebook documenting incidents, names, dates, and unexplained injuries (including *Violet del Sagrario*, later sister of one PC) & odd interactions with f visitors (from Spain, Italy & Germany).
- **Warning about Gandía:** Vilela knows Mazorra is being used as a political holding facility. Some 'patients' brought in by Machado-ist authorities later disappear, their files altered or removed. Gandía uses the violent patient/orderly Yobama for intimidation or even execution
- **A desperate proposal:** Vilela suggests staging his own death! They could use the body of an unfortunate patient already in the morgue & get one of his colleagues to make out a certificate and swap out his finger prints files for the other. Declared dead, attacks on him would stop. He

would be able to move through Mazorra disguised as a maintenance worker & from hiding he could observe staff movements & gather evidence.

**Keeper's Note:** A successful **Psychology** roll reveals Vilela is genuinely fearful but controlled. He believes what he is saying, but is selectively presenting information. A *Hard* success notes a shift: his thinking is becoming more extreme. The proposal to stage his death reflects desperation rather than careful planning.

### ~15:45 The Unexpected Return

Gandía is in his Superintendent's Manse, feeding incriminating documents from his safe into his fireplace's lit fire. His passport, cash, & traveller's checks are all safe in his inside coat pocket. The grate is already thick with ash. He stirs the burning papers until they catch fully, pound the ash, and adds another papery bundle when his office communicator buzzes.

"Capt. Gandia here."

"Main Gate, sir. Two vehicles just entered the grounds."

"You remember my orders—"

"Yes, sir. But it's the Presidential Limo & Escort again."

A pause. "They've parked outside the Director's Manse."

Gandia: "I'm on my way."



By the time Gandia reaches the Director's Manse four men in Federal Police uniforms have stepped from the familiar Lincoln K limousine with the Cuban flag affixed to the front on a little pole. A fifth figure emerges from the rear seat wrapped in a blanket that conceals his face but not their linen suit. Escorted closely by his personal guards, the figure walks unsteadily into the Manse.

Five more Federal Police exit the Buick staff car. Two remain with the vehicles while the others unload four suitcases, two from each car, and carry them toward the house. During the transfer one case suddenly fails at the hinges. Bundles of U.S. currency spill onto the ground, the green-edged stacks unmistakable. The guards hastily repack the money and carry the damaged case inside.

Captain Gandía and several Mazorra Porra guards witness the incident from roughly fifty feet away. One of his Mazorra guards whistles softly at the spilled bundles of American currency. “Dollars,” he mutters in Spanish. “If they’re twenties... about two thousand per bundle.”

Gandía says nothing. From the size of the cases and the scattered stacks he has already made his own estimate: nearly one hundred thousand dollars per suitcase.

**Keeper’s Note:** Alerted Investigators attracted to the return of the Presidential Escort can also watch the scene, and use *Accounting*, *Credit Rating*, or *Hard Spot Hidden* to detect the denominations on the currency bundle straps of American currency and can make the same estimates.

The escort commander approaches but stops several paces short. Speaking in Spanish, he tells Gandía that the President is indisposed and requires rest and privacy. He will need petrol for their vehicles before continuing their journey after nightfall. The roads are unsafe now for the President to travel.

Gandía studies him for a moment and then nods. “Of course. The President will have privacy here. I will have petrol brought.” After a brief pause, he adds, almost casually, “Does his Excellency requires a physician?”

“No. The President must rest. No one is to disturb him.”

### ~16:00 Directors Manse Invasion

Esperanza is typing personal correspondence when the Presidential escort arrives unexpectedly at the Manse. Through her open office door a group of uniformed men and another in a white suit with his head covered by a blanket. Four of them, including the blanketed figure head on past down the Long Gallery, & head upstairs. With them are four suitcases, one of which is carried in the arms of one, visibly broken.

The escort commander spotting the Director’s Secretary questions her briefly & demands access to an outside telephone line. She leads him to the Director’s Office & points to the desk telephone. Esperanza learns his name, **Teniente** (*Lieutenant*) **Esteban Cordero** of the *Cuban Federal Police*. His men join him, others return downstairs do likewise, leaving the mystery man & the four cases upstairs.

The men remain in the Director’s private office and Lt. Cordero request food, drink, and access to a radio. She points to the floor-standing console Philco radio in the room, uses her phone connected to the Main Switchboard to order food and wine from the Canteen. She deliberately leaves her own line off the hook with the aid of a pencil, knowing that Teresa or her daughter Tessa at the switchboard will quietly listen.

She returns to her typing, and at the same time, she discreetly activates the dictation cylinder recorder connected to the Director’s desk telephone using the foot pedal beneath her desk. The food arrives & she brings the baskets into the inner office for the escort, and they shut the door again. From fragments of their overheard telephone calls & conversation she learns:

- Machado has *already* fled Cuba by plane
- She *doesn’t* learn man upstairs his body double
- The escort were meant to follow on a second aircraft, but no plane arrived
- Their orders were to deposit the suitcases in a “vault drop”; betrayed, they intend to keep the money & divide it after they leave after dark
- The suitcases contain total of \$USD 400,000. One case has its metal hinges have corroded strangely by something none can explain.

**Keeper’s Note:** Investigators near the Main Switchboard, or who have tapped the line via the adjacent electrical room can learn most of what Esperanza learns with a successful *Listen* roll except about the *Vault Drop*; the sound is a little muffled and they have to be careful since any sound they make can be heard as well by Lt. Cordera & his men. They may also try to sneak into Manse or be there already for permission slips, Keeper’s Choice.

The conversation ends abruptly as the crash of overturned furniture echoes from the floor above. The seven Federal Police officers fall silent. Lt. Cordera snaps off the radio while two men rush into the hallway and sprint upstairs.

Seconds later gunshots echo from the upper floor!

All the remaining officers draw their weapons and race along the Long Gallery toward the Great Staircase. At the same moment the speaker on Esperanza’s desk crackles to life; the Mazorra’s PA system unexpectedly broadcasts the 5 p.m. Habana station P.W.X. news.

### ~16:45 The Artist & the False President

Isabella Varona, the Mazorra’s seemingly prophetic ‘mad artist’, stealthily climbs the vine-covered trellis of the Director’s Manse to the Juliet balcony above. She is certain that dark conspirators have hidden Machado here, and that she alone must free him. She had freed herself from her confinement finding that the bars on her art-room window had mysteriously rusted into powder which snapped like breadsticks when tested.

The balcony doors are locked, but when Isabella Varona presses the brass latch it oddly crumbles just like her window bars did. She slides into a dim study and then into a room beyond, where a middle-aged man in a white linen suit sleeps on a four-poster bed, his holster and pistol on the bed beside him. In the dim light he *looks like* her Geraldo: the same features but

more lined, the same round spectacles. Varona freezes with relief; her long-lost love has taken refuge here! She moves beside him silently and kisses him gently.

The man, Salvatore Mendez, Machado's body double, wakes in confusion. "Who are you?" he demands.

Varona whispers that she knew they were keeping him from her. When he insists that she leave, her mind resolves the contradiction instantly: their enemies must have hurt, no, changed him! She embraces him desperately, covering him with frantic kisses as he tries to rise. There is a crackle from an overhead speaker as if timed to the two tumbling from the bed onto the floor in a heavy crash.

A minute later pounding begins at the locked door while two other escort guards rush in from the terrace & stop short at the bizarre scene: President Machado's body double is sprawled on the floor, his face pocked with lipstick kisses, a trickle of blood oozing from his head (*n.b. stunned from the fall from hitting his head*) while a wild-eyed woman in a tight dress kneels over him.

Varona glares hate at the others; her beloved is under attack! She snatches the .45 from the holster & squeezes the trigger. The escort guards dive for cover as glass shatters & shots crack through the room.



Then the words from the ceiling overhead speaker suddenly register "... **It is now confirmed President Gerardo Machado has fled Cuba by airplane to the Bahamas. Across Havana ...**" Varona stares down at the man in the white suit laying on the floor. The eyes are wrong. The face is younger. The voice now from the man trying to sit up protesting is not Geraldo's at all. Their enemies have stolen him away again!

Aiming her .45 at the cruel pretender (who faints at this), at the last moment she moves her aim slightly & fires one last shot into the now splintering door to scatter those wanting in. Varona bolts across the terrace. Still holding the gun, she swings over the

railing, and disappears down the trellis. By the time more Escort guards reach the room, she has vanished.

### ~17:00. Porra vs Porra

The Presidential/Porra escort guards who rushed upstairs find chaos in the Director's bedroom after bashing down the door finally. Salvatore Mendez, the President's body double, lies unconscious on the carpet, two Porra escorts down on the terrace doorway unmoving.

The remaining money filled suitcases have all spilled their contents onto the floor in an untidy heap as their metal hinges and other framework collapses into dust. Close to half a million dollars in green brick-like bundles are scattered all over the floor!

Captain Gandía arrives moments later with six men of his own attracted from the sound of gunfire from within the Manse; following them are one of the Presidential two escort guards who had been watching their cars. One glance at the scene is enough: President Machado is lying motionless on the floor next to a fortune of spilled green American currency bundles, two other presidential escort guards are down, and the others with guns drawn are at the scene!

"¡Traición!" someone shouts behind him in a baritone voice with trace of Creole. And then a gunshot cracks.

In the confined room the response is immediate and catastrophic. For the next few seconds pistols flash, men fall like sacks of raw sugar or dive for cover. Within seconds the bedroom fills with smoke, splintered wood, and screaming accusations.

When the firing stops with both Capt. Gandia & Lt. Cordero shouting, many Porra lie dead or wounded.

### Director's Manse: Bedroom Shootout Outcome

Group	Dead	Serious Wounds	Light Wounds	Unhurt
Escort Porra (9)	2	2	3	3
Pres. Body Double	-	-	-	Unconscious
Mazorra Porra (Gandía + 6)	1	1	1	4

And somewhere beyond them, in the darkness, *Baron Kriminal* laughs his baritone laugh.

*To Be Continued*



## COMMENTS

E&A #8 & #9

**MYLES CORCORAN:** Sheesh, I forgot the **R** in your CORVID-y name Myles! My bad; I immediately upgraded my lastish and passed on to Jim V. to remedy this. *Re Blindsight*; I recalled the ideas were fascinating, but had reflected that there wasn't a likeable person in the novel! ☹ Because of your compelling write-ups for *Mausritter* I splurged and bought myself the boxed set!

**SCRIBBLE M. HORROR:** Howdy!

**BRIAN ROGERS:** UofT's law school passed on her, but Lauren's not too disappointed. She's accepted *Osgood Hall Law School (York U.) offer*. It's ranked #3 in Canada, and is also in Toronto. A *Reddit* admissions subgroup was abuzz about the weird process was this year; persons with lower marks, LSAT scores & extracurriculars than hers & others she did bizarrely got offers, but they were older & had prior careers. She was accepted at Western's law school too & they offered a \$25k first-year scholarship that would have paid for tuition & books, which soothed her ego tremendously.

**JOHN REDDEN:** Kudos for your recent AVR. Snerk at *Robot Rosie*. Thanks for your compliments on my latest *Habana Horror/Horrors of the Mazorra* write-up, which I've spent working on longer than anything before.

**PEDRO PANHOCA DA SILVA & CAMILA LOURENÇO PANHOCA:** I RAE your English language article in *The Text (July 2023)* "From Page 1 to Many Others".

**LISA PADOL:** *RYCTM on Dr. Llerena:* He will show up *unless* he is dead; no ghosts or rolling cadavers! I'm trying not to assume he has survived so as to minimize any accusations this scenario is nailed on rails & give some player agency but I still have to find a non-clumsy way to explain more clearly this is an option. *Re Esperanza:* Esper/Espy has become a favourite NPC of mine for this scenario too.

**PATRICK ZOCH:** *Re acrylic paint markers;* I did a few coats on these horse miniatures but noticed as you did that getting into crevices is tricky. They do seem to be good for doing edges (e.g. leather harness).

**JIM VASSILAKOS:** *RYCTM re Llerena's initial reactions;* I may change his reactions to closer to align to your suggestion of shock at the time, and only later does he think to blame the PCs and pretend it was not supernatural. *RYCT Elf:* I seem not to have either of those back issues of AoM (☹). Though I have the print versions, and I was especially surprised how well I articulated my thoughts on how we can use RPGs in novel educational ways in my essay "Flight From Modernity".

**ATTRONARCH:** Again, no PC deaths! What's wrong? ☺

**ROGER BW:** *RYCTM I'm afraid those new illustrations now look to me like stills from a modern TV show; modern actors simply cannot properly replicate the look of actual people of the 1930s, and this system is clearly trained on a mixture of images.* Thanks for the comments on the illustrations. One clarification may help. The NPC images in the last few *Age of Menace* issues were not generated "from scratch" in a generic modern style. They were derived directly from period source material, primarily black-and-white photographs from late-1920s and early-1930s Cuban magazines; *Social, Bohemia, & Cartales*. These were low-resolution copies, so I used AI tools to upscale & colourize them, and then to composite multiple figures into shared scenes.

My goal was historical fidelity rather than polish: preserving period-accurate faces, hairstyles, clothing, and social cues that are difficult for purely generative models to convincingly reproduce. One example is the NPC *Esperanza*, based on a 1929 *Social* photograph of *Senorita Celia Aleida de la Concepción Auerhoff y Sarrá*, a well-documented figure in Cuban high society and whose father once held a position in Machado's cabinet.



The upper L image is the one I found, & all the other images evolved from that. I went into similar care when sourcing period photo references for Scotland Yard inspectors, American photo-journalists, Spanish Civil War nurses, Cuban boxers, consulate staff, symbols for CEDA, etc.

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**Everyone Else: RAEBNC**

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*March 21st 2026. BCM*

# Accidental Recall #9

For Ever & Anon 10 © 2026 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

**Igtheme: Best and worst combat tactics** The best monster tactics is to act like real people about their business, even if that business is bringing back ancient gods or raising the undead (they probably have their reasons). Worst case, they'll get killed by the PCs (or ancient gods) possibly with some recriminations; best case they'll make some new friends as the PCs (or the ancient gods) decide that maybe they have a point and might make useful allies.

The worst monster tactic is, of course, to mindlessly attack the PCs without expecting or giving mercy. Even if this results in success and the death of the PCs, they'll still be called monsters at the end of the day, and who wants that? But worse, they're much more likely to be slaughtered without even an interesting story told about them afterwards, without even a line of dialogue to stick in the PCs heads; simply forgotten and even nameless.

Of course, this leaves aside the best possible tactic for monsters, which is to walk in the real world, play a roleplaying game, and slaughter NPCs in defense of their party or whatever joy they desire. Perhaps it is us that are the monsters.

**First, update on the medical situation:** The bleeding was shown to have been caused by an inflammatory polyp in my stomach, which was biopsied but not removed, and I was able to leave the hospital on Monday and return to NYC (without getting to experience any more of the con, sadly) ahead of the bulk of the snowstorm. My bleeding did resume, and as of this week I had another endoscopy to remove the polyp, with no complications. So things are pretty good on that score!

Intercon also went far more smoothly than Dreamation did; I played in four games, and our run of Ghost Fu, while not without complication (we had an enormous number of drops and last minute fills, able to run at full size only because a friend who had signed up as horde consented to being given a player role at the door, and the game also ran a bit slow and had to be cut for time before some things could be resolved), players seemed to largely have a good time.

I finally finished the epic Worm (will want to wait some time before starting any sequels; long book is long), and have also read the second Legendborn book, *Bloodmarked*. (I've also barely started the 3rd book in the series, *Oathmarked*). Worm has a lot of surprises, but I will certainly say that the book does a great job of pulling back the curtain on the complicated worldbuilding that resulted in powers springing up out of nowhere with several known classes of powers, including separate classifications for Thinkers (people with mental powers, including special senses, calculation, and psychic powers) and Tinkers (people whose powers let them make difficult to replicate advanced technological devices, often with a particular specialty).

WRT to *Bloodmarked*, like the first book, it (mostly) excellently bridges the gap between Black Girl Magic (where fantasy is written from a (usually American) Black and feminist perspective, elevating traditional magic and beliefs and emphasizing triumph over structural racism and more traditional mythic fantasy, with a protagonist who

is very much both, coming out of a family history of slavery and traditional magic, but also deeply connected to an Arthurian tradition that stretches back to Camelot itself. Mostly, I say, because there are a few passages that feel very at home in a Black Girl Magic book, but out of place when coming from the mouth of a white sympathetic character who it's hard to see expressing the ideas he does (which are reasonable) without viewing him as coming from a very different background than he comes from. Still well worth reading, though.

## Comments on Ever & Anon 9

**Job search:** Continued thanks on everyone's good wishes! I've had some online interviews, but we'll see!

**Re my font in AR7:** Yeah, it was in fact 7.5pt. An interesting experiment, but not one I think I'll soon repeat.

**Cover (Jim Vassilakos & Baran Yenileyen):** Lovely cover, magical elves and all. I didn't notice last month, but we switched from an overlay style cover that month (with the APA logo and metadata overlain on the cover art) to a large border cover with issue 8, as I see with us keeping the style for 9 I like and hate it, overall—it's a great answer when we have dark covers where it would be hard for the logo and metadata to pop, and it does give the APA a distinct look (in the unlikely event that someone prints out a set of issues and puts them on a shelf, or much more likely, just makes a gallery of covers), but having the cover logo and metadata inside the art was a tradition we kept from Alarums and Excursions, and I think it does produce a nice result when the art is suitable for this.

**Brian Rogers:** Re how heavy commenters manage it: With difficulty, honestly. And ideally by *not* writing down everything that comes to mind while reading the APA.

Re giant crab pet: Ok, that's amazing! I'd not have thought of "the monster is now the PC's pet" as the result of two stellar prayer rolls, but it totally makes sense and is a great opening number for a new PC!

Modern games tend to not use henchmen, and I know why—giant parties are exhausting and hard to manage; even with modern D&D versions (or clones) giving PCs a variety of companions and pets, that's still not even close to the numbers that a dedicated party that abused the classic henchmen rules would end up with. But I have to wonder—in the spirit of making every stat in a D&D hack matter *by default* (which might be what this retro-clone is doing; I don't know!), I could see charisma granting a certain number of ally slots—which can be used for henchmen and other ally characters that are loosely under the player's control—or to safely attach to sentient magic items (for the player who has ally points to burn but really would rather not control another figure in a fight and/or thinks the maps' already crowded enough). Exceed whatever your "safe" number is, and...you're not prevented from doing this, but the GM is encouraged to make you pay a cost for this eventually if it goes on for more than a session or two—maybe a magic item starts pushing its agenda rather than that just being color, or maybe an ally gets seduced to another side (even

if it's an ally who makes them a better offer than your party does). Of course, the real challenge is to make sure bumps from non-charisma stats are similarly worthwhile to having a "safe NPC ally" limit, but that's a challenge for the GM/designer.

It would also be easier to design ally-summoning spells if those that summoned long term allies were similarly limited by a "safe NPC ally" stat. As I've mentioned a time or two before, early D&D (as evidenced by AD&D) are shockingly inconsistent on long term ally summoning spells—both how difficult they are to use, and how much reward you get for casting them—with animate dead mostly limited by most campaigns being anti-undead, and animal friendship as an utterly busted (or, if you like, class defining) army-generating spell, only limited by the Druid's access to animals they can befriend and their class level. On the other hand, Find Familiar is incredibly weak in comparison, giving a slight bump in stats but a permanent penalty if the new friend is ever killed, and the ally is extremely weak (to only a *little* weak if you get one of the upgraded familiars). It's almost impossible to tame this kind of unruly tangle—but work it into a structure where PCs have an "ally allotment" from Charisma and other sources, and it can fit in nicely—permanent summon spells become a way to quickly fill your ally allotment more simply and without having to attract more complex NPCs, and variance between such spells ends up being a wash with more powerful permanent summons counting as more allies; a high charisma Wizard might only have a single Ally point in their familiar, but also have a powerful intelligent staff, golem, or bodyguard, while a Druid who chose to go all-in on the animal army schtick might find that that matched our exceeded their ally count (and if it exceeded, they'd have periodic calls to repair damage done by the more out of control/hunger elements of their menagerie, as a natural "add complication" way to pay periodically for being a bit over).

OMG, that celestial marble servant spell is amazing and terrifying. Well, I guess the player will learn that this is a spell for emergencies (which, OK, this was) or they won't). But damn, that chase scene was exciting, and the player had just enough good luck (and a nicely powerful and appropriate magic item in the shield of gaze reflection). I agree that the medusa not turning herself into (harder) stone would have been unfair. Did she get a save?

Re V&V: I get the "superhuman strength is just different" thing in comic book physics, but it does end up being wonky. Even aside from Cap having less than half the HTH damage of a similarly strong Spiderman (because his strength comes from Heightened Str A, not Ht Str B), that still hits the question of what happens if they wrestle. Is it Str vs Str? Carrying Capacity(CC) vs CC (in which case, what even is Str if HT Str B characters are just stronger even if the stats are the same)? I get the idea that someone with Ht Str B has cartoon physics Str (more or less) while Ht Str A (still human Str) is following normal (comic book) physics, but where to draw the line is odd.

Re recovery: Ok, so Special Attacks (or other similar circumstances) are how you model "OK, you survive this fight/accident/whatever but you have a lasting injury that's going to be plot for a while" kind of turn?

I feel like the main problem with very high agility scores is not simply policing it; it's that the action scaling just goes way too hard. That said, I suppose one can have a rule that really high agility is for semi-solo NPCs only who need the extra actions to fight the PCs, and that if you want to build a PC speedster, superhuman acrobat, or the like, you can do it other ways. I don't remember ever hitting this with High School V&V, but I think we probably ignored the action/initiative rules and just had characters go once a turn (meaning that I only ran into the "fun" of really variant turns in my brief foray into Champions in college).

From my play, Credit Rating in CoC (and Trail, actually) ends up being used as Obvious Social Standing, with it being used to buy things as a decidedly secondary usage. I wouldn't call it "etiquette", but "class", sure; a lot of adventures are built with some zones that need someone with a high, or low enough credit rating to be able to enter without comment. That usage is also, I think, why Trail 2e is going have credit rating, rather than being a skill you usually invest points in, instead has its base value be based on your profession. Of course, you still can invest points to bump it a bit, but that's going to depend as much on whether you view your character as being a bit posh for their profession—a really successful detective or a noble, not simply any dilettante—or at rock bottom.

Re BESM but not really: On the one hand, "we are all different flavors of knight" and not bickering over who has the highest Sword skill (or different flavors of monster hunter, or different flavors of detective, etc) works fine overall. On the other hand, I've absolutely hit cases where PCs were tracking one another's core combat stats, either to equal it—or to avoid pushing the combat difficulty higher and higher. The first and most obvious example was Feng Shui—as has been mentioned, we played in a Feng Shui game that, due to multiple times a week "play whenever we meet up" play, went way more sessions and involved far more XP than Robin Laws ever imagined the game having (we asked). As such, the characters, which started out as a range of combat AV from 11/13 (my house ruled Taoist sorcerer, who was actually 13/13 in Martial Arts/Sorcery but 11 in Sorcery in anti-magic junctures like the modern day) to Beth's (also unfortunately house ruled, trading off some features for the Scrappy Kid feature) Martial Artist at IIRC 17 Martial Arts. Over time, this giant gap narrowed somewhat, with Beth mostly investing in new martial arts sethicks but also eventually raising her AV to 18 and eventually 19 (or something), and my AV eventually topping out at around 15/15 or 16/16 so I could cast spells semi-reliably even in unfavorable junctures. In the course of this, we noticed the urge to keep pushing combat AV up, and added a house rule that increases to your TOP combat AV would incur a 2x cost (not paid by increasing a lower combat AV up, so my Taoist didn't have to pay the tax twice). So, we certainly weren't in competition, but we certainly knew what one another's AVs were, particularly since the opposition would loosely scale to our AV.

Similarly, in Kerberos Club Fate (originally run according to the rules, where higher Scale on an ability would mean you replaced one Fudge die with a d6, giving you an average of 3.5 for each point of Scale), my psionic poor noble heir, Alice, started out as the only PC who had her ability at the second highest scale rating [3] (others generally had it at 1 or 2). Over time, the other players bumped their scale up so they could do their thing as well and in similar situations to my PC (Lisa brought up a weak enemy with scale matching or maybe exceeding mine early in the campaign and it was a *nightmare* to face), but seeing the problems Lisa was already having challenging the PCs without utterly destroying it, I expanded Alice's psionic scope, but never increased her scale, leaving the top level (4, or I think Divine?) for NPCs intended to challenge the PCs; instead, as the PCs mostly caught up, her initial power gap was replaced by a badass reputation—and having a psionic power set broad enough and weird enough that even though she was no longer outclassing her companions in sheer power, she could still maintain her fearsome reputation (something the other players played with quite nicely) via a combination of flexibility (targeting enemy weak points by using mental attacks against mentally vulnerable opponents, TK vs physically weak ones, and precognition whenever I could justify it reasonably) and weirdness. But this does highlight that often in a game, the competition between similar (or different) abilities isn't going to be direct; it's going to be indirect, with a high skill potentially increasing the challenge which hits other PCs eventually. My concept of diversifying PCs playing in the same

space plays a bit into this—if the game is about space travel, than I guess someone’s going to dump everything into piloting. Unless you can instead make space travel about navigation, maintaining ship systems, sourcing cheap upgrades, and also piloting in which case you have room for four specialists. For things like combat, though, well, you can do some things with combat roles and specialties, but once you have enough PCs to fill those you’ll have some duplication among, say, damage dealers.

Re historical accuracy and the printing press: In fairness, there are far more important bits of incongruity to focus on (like how society has, or hasn’t adapted to widespread useful magic). That said, Dan’s campaign (Neitherworld) has recently features the PCs (or at least my PCs trading family with the PCs helping and getting a share of the reward) opening up trade to a region that previously hadn’t had trade with their part of the world, resulting in “trade shock” as different forces rush in to compete with the PCs ability to get (for the moment) pepper for a tiny fraction of its usual price and sell other common items (most metals, I think?) at a massive multiplier over their usual price in “civilized” lands until prices get a chance to stabilize to the new supply—and also other forces mobilizing to try to sink ships and stop trade otherwise, either to protect the status quo economically, politically, or for other reasons. Fun times!

Also, even if your game has enough printing press penetration to have newspapers, this doesn’t mean they have the distribution networks needed for book printing (and thus large libraries by our standards) to be feasible; according to Ada Palmer, the successive revolutions caused by the movable type printing press took around 150 years, with broadsheets and then newspapers being somewhere in the middle.

Re Draw Steel: Yeah, it make sense that a game being actively sold in 2026, maybe 16 years after 4e premiered, would have a more mature and better playtested version of the D&D 4e model than D&D 4e did.

V&V hacks and distribution: we can keep going around on it; it’s worth noting that the level of drift you’re leaning towards from V&V is rather substantial compared to, say, the amount by which modern versions of D&D (or even OSR hacks) do, or don’t drift from original D&D.

Re “moves” I generally don’t think of them as different from what came before in concept; just in clarity. Which itself can be something people have greater or lesser tolerance for; there’s an essay going around about the love of mess and an urge/desire to push back against extremely clear games with bullet points and 2 page spreads and extremely clear (and clearly communicated) ideas. Here: <https://www.patreon.com/posts/152873553> But at its root, a move is just something like a D&D attack: “To attack an an enemy, designated a weapon you have in hand and roll with Str. On a hit, inflict [weapon damage]+Str damage to the enemy. “ There’s some other stuff bundled with the typical PbtA move—mostly a statement of what the expected range is on a partial rather than a full hit.

But mostly it’s about clarity, and that clarity is mostly so if the designer deviates from typical expectations (like, say, deciding that the target of a social move or even a combat move should say what that looks like rather than the GM, within constraints that make it clear it’s still a success), that that deviation is clear. Which, I’m half convinced (I have not asked) is based in stuff like Ron Edwards’s *Sorcerer* deviating from a lot of expectations about how roleplaying games work, but because it was written in more or less ordinary language, this not being clear just from the book.

Of course, it’s reasonable to decide that maybe it’s the clarity that’s the problem.

Re marvel: In all honestly, we watched Secret Invasion start to finish and weren’t all that disappointed most of the time. That said, boy did

a lot of stupid things happen in it, and also a lot of things that have been used zero times since it dropped.

Re my font size for my zine (7) in 8: Yeah, I was rushing to get it in and trying to get it to fit in roughly the same page count as my HTML->PDF zine. It didn’t occur to me to mess with the margins until later. And Avram pegged it correctly at 7.5 pt.

Re cheat codes and isakai: I tend to see these as somethat different. Of course, a fantasy Isakai character will often end up powering up and learning the system native to the world they have been isakaied into; the same system that everyone else uses. So in one fantasy, they might power up via a potion to start their intial path, followed by trying different things until the potion is “fully digested” in which case they can try to find/buy/steal the formula for the next potion on the same path, while in another they might get rewards for dungeon challenges and particularly Level Bosses, some of which are special items that grant new powers or let them start a subclass. But also, a surprising number of fantasy isakai feature a “cheat”—something the transported protagonist gets that nobody else has, whether it’s a powerful unique skill with obvious or non-obvious implications, an immunity to something everyone else is vulnerable to, or even a whole “system” that lets them gain abilities in ways nobody else can use. Of course, sometimes this is just knowledge, like the ability of a typical “Villainess” protagonist to know what’s likely to happen because they’ve read the book the world is based on (or is it vice versa?). But the “cheat” of “I come from a world where my powers are pretty normal but this world has nothing like them” is really a different thing. (which seems more appropriate to PCs who have Dimensional Travel—but I suppose it can work in reverse where access to Dimensional Travel gets you access to a system that’s unique to the world you go to (so people from there can also use it) but not common outside.

Re Dragon hoarding: Yep! Just because dragons naturally make hoards doesn’t mean an out of control hoard can’t be a huge problem for other dungeon denizens!

**ChrysalisM & Felicity:** Welcome back to the world of Apa-Hacking—and welcome to Ever & Anon!

I doubt you’re the only person here who plays with tulpa, by whatever name. Mine tend not to talk, but for instance, I did make up an imaginary cat who I gifted to a (more) woo friend to help with dreams. Midnight still comes and visits occasionally, as cats are wont to do.

Phyrenia sounds fascinating, if incredibly chaotic! All the technology! A fallen empire! Magic with strange costs and fallen gods! (ok, I’m not sure about the fallen part, but there are certainly is a lot of god stuff it sounds like).

Re wanting to pull no punches but also not liking killing PCs: That’s a lot of why we have new gaming tech like stakes setting, (limited) resources for manipulating fate, get out of death free tokens of various types, and even failing forward! When we trust to chance, we often want the results to stand, or why are we even rolling, but there are also results that nobody is going to like, so taking them off the table before a roll—or providing other ways to make a less bad result also much less likely to take effect lets us have our high stakes roll without having to live with the worst results. Of course, GMs have from time immemorial cocked/cooked the results by “fudging”, known in less polite circles as “cheating”. Yet, the big contradiction about “fudging” is that players are often happy with the results, until they know how they came about it, so GMs who don’t want to outright lie to their players can find other ways.

**John Redden:** Feel free to email me if you’re struggling with acronyms in my zines. Or most other zines; I don’t usually have problems. It is, indeed, a tough market. I’ve had a few interviews,

but who knows what will pan out. While I could probably find a job somewhat faster by being willing to move, I'm confident that I'll find something workable even if I'm not willing to move—given the tech companies that are active in NYC and also the prevalence of remote work. But it may take some time, particularly given that while I'm willing to take a less senior job, a lot of what I'm applying for is more appropriate to the 30-ish year veteran I actually am.

For those not in the know, the Jones Act is an ugly bit of 1920s protectionism that is intended to help US shipping, but in practice... helps US shipping be this weird niche protected class while hurting US ports (particularly non-continental ports like Hawaii), shippers, and lots more. In short, it's illegal for anyone but a US-chartered vessel to ship from a US port to another US port. The intention was to encourage and keep US-chartered shipping alive, but in practice this raises the prices on US merchant ships to the point where it's not really viable to ship USUS much of the time (presumably, someone with deep pockets can afford to keep US merchant vessels occupied at the prices they charge). So instead, ports like Hawaii, and Puerto Rico have to sell most of their goods to non-US ports, because the markup to ship their stuff through a non-US port, or worse, on a US-chartered merchant vessel is just too high to make it worthwhile. I guess Alaska can do a bit better since they just need to stop in Canada on the way, but even so!

Hilarity! Of course, in concept, tariffs could be a (terrible) solution to the problem that we created on ourselves. Or...we could kill the Jones Act, but that would mean a lot of pain from US merchant ships (however many there actually are).

**Clark Timmins:** The Arcane Falcon is an interesting idea, particularly in that you need to know and make the Oath of Mirelle to bond one. Depending on what that oath consists of, I could see them being a really attractive companion for a more stealthy, information-centric PC! I assume they're also highly intelligent and know Common (and perhaps other languages?) Although no matter what bonus to Stealth they get, a big glowy bird is going to have problems sneaking unless it's either very high up (in which case it's limited by its vision; a falcon's distance vision is really good but even so) or has other magical help like invisibility. Or a lot of tree cover, I guess.

Ashbirthrals seem infused with lore, but for attuned items with this much flavor, seem honestly kinda weak? I'd be tempted to have the Type II give resistance to poison, immunity to the Poisoned condition, and advantage on saving throws vs poison. The Type I effect is at least against a less common (and more varied) source and so has less to compare it against, but it could be buffed a bit by saying that all curses are magical diseases and that it gives advantage on saves vs them as well—and probably except against particularly powerful and long-lasting curses, gives a save at the end of your turn if a curse doesn't normally allow a save to end it. Although it looks like the 2024 Paladin lost the ability to cure Disease with a touch (retaining the ability to cure the Poisoned condition), so that's less of a direct comparison at least.

Charm of the Fortunate: Frankly, while this is strong, I'm not convinced it's worth attunement. A “no more than one” warning with a warning to the GM on not punishing carrying more than one, sure. Then again, it's an Uncommon item and at that level and this power level it's probably fine if it has attunement.

The “unique” tag highlights one thing about D&D rarities (in 5th edition) that they're both intended to cover in-world rarity and power/value. In concept, a Unique item wouldn't be Very Rare (and while all artifact would be Unique, there could be unique items below the artifact tier), but it's also very useful to express at what rarity level

an item is expected to sit even if there's only supposed to be one in a campaign for story reasons.

Sal Volatile (smelling salts!) seems really useful, but actually quite powerful for its level. Who wouldn't pack a few common consumable items that could end some of the worst conditions in the game with an action and no roll?

**Lisa Padol:** Re companies having to post jobs that they intend to hire for in-house: My understanding is that this is most often for H1B visa jobs and the like—to prove that the person really is the best for the job, they might have to prove that they are, actually, the best candidate and can't be replaced easily, but, of course, they'd much rather work with the person they already have. So they'll post a job, and tend to make it so specific that almost nobody else can qualify, because they already know the person they have has these qualifications (like detailed knowledge with their existing tech stack) and that this is relevant to the job.

Re compensated GMs: I'm likewise torn. On the one hand, if you have groups where nobody wants to GM and they're willing to pay for a known quantity to GM them, why not; it's a perfectly reasonable transaction that helps all parties! On the other hand, I have no interest in paying a GM to GM for me or a group I'm in—even though I tend to play more than I GM, if I have problems finding someone to GM, I'll happily step behind the screen if that's useful. But there are plenty of roleplayers less comfortable with this—and I still remember being an awkward 10 year old desperate to find a group (I did not until I entered High School) and not even considering GMing a game myself. Re conventions, I tend to consider this mostly a different thing—a convention is in the business (even if the convention is dedicatedly non-profit) of making games happen. If (as is most common) it's easier to find players than GMs willing to pitch games, then they should give comps or discounts to make more people willing to commit to GMing. In situations where this is reversed, it's appropriate to offer comps or discounts to players willing to fill games in need of players (and, in fact, we see this in action at Metatopia which offers players a much lower rate than designers demoing or playtesting games, and at Intercon which significantly drops the membership price closer to the convention when people signing up have far fewer choices of games to play and are mostly filling drops of those who found they couldn't come closer to the convention).

Re Undungeoning: Really, all three of the current Thursday D&D games are pretty profoundly undungeoned. The Strixhaven campaign mostly focuses on school life and drama, and the dungeon delves that show up are either emergencies/quests with a defined goal and end-point (looking in on owlbears for extra credit, sneaking into an absent professor's dorm for info on a project, looking for a cursed journal in the woods) or school projects that are much more “come to an archaeological dig where exhibits might occasionally try to kill you” than “enter a populated ecology and get attacked by its residents” (even if that is a dungeon of sorts). The Spelljammer game is much more focused on various goals; more “dungeony” experiences tended to be things like “exploring a plague-ridden orc empire world and undead attack us”, “a mission to rescue a witness from a magical prison”, and the ever favorite, “lets confront a known member of an evil cult (they will probably attack us)”. As for the Neitherworld game, the party tend to be bounty hunters and heroes; they're most dungeony missions also tend to be their most heroic, like the time they snuck down into a literal dungeon (compete with prisoners) to wake up a godlike good dragon to fight the evil dragon who had taken over (despotic) rule in her absence, and also built her castle (that is, city) directly over the body of the sleeping good dragon. My assertion that for a less murderhoboy campaign, you mostly need to have the characters have

motivations better than “for treasure and experience!” comes from solid experience of exactly this.

Re a horde consisting of mixed copper (many) silver, and gold coins: Really physics-aware players might try to separate the coins via clever means. For instance, dumping a pile of coins into water, even though water is far less dense than even copper, would cause the coins to partially separate as the gold coins would fall far faster than the silver coins which would fall faster than the copper coins, resulting in a pile of copper coins that could be scooped aside to reveal the lower layer largely consisting of silver and gold (or, at high levels, use reverse gravity and grab the valuable stuff from the top, though the fall would result in the effect reversing a bit).

A more viscous and dense fluid (like oil) would magnify this effect, as the coins would take longer to fall and thus separate a bit more.

A more destructive method would be to use magic or other effects that produce large quantities of acid or acid damage. Unless the acid was particularly effective against gold (like aqua regia), it would have no effect on the gold but would melt the silver and copper, so the players could, after removing the acid (or it vanished being a magical effect) just pick up what remained.

Re spaceship repair: This can work if there is other tension, or it can also work in a LARP where the players playing the engineers have a fun mechanic to use to repair things (and maybe can find other resources while doing the repair that feed into other parts of the LARP).

Re the different Snow White changes: I think those are all different paths: Pedro’s jam, after all, are game-books with branching paths, so it could have a murder on one path and handing the Queen over the police on another.

Having now rerun Ghost Fu for the first time in 15 years, we definitely underestimated how many characters were strongly gendered—but not really how many could be relatively easily re-gendered. Before we run it again (and I do want to run it again, though maybe in a slightly longer slot!), we may want to go through and get a handle on which characters it’s worth writing multiple differently-gendered versions of (a female version of the Evil Sorcerer! Have both male and female versions of the Arrogant Living (formerly) Martial Artist! Look over the differently-gendered versions of the Dueling Nobles!), and have a better sense of what to do when we change someone’s gender (ideally people are referred to without gender in most external references just so we can not change things when we swap out character sheets. Not always possible (as per the Mongol prince/princess) but even so.

Re dividing up a potion to weaken the affect across more people: In fantasy, messing with potions tend to result in one of three things: 1. The effect is divided up but no substantially diluted (often when this is the most interesting result; maybe there’s narrative dilution but no practical dilution, like reducing the duration but not the intensity of the effect). 2. The effect is divided up (or combined) in an extremely logical and direct form. Or 3. Utter chaos (see the Potion Miscibility Table), with the resulting effect having no direct connection to the messing. Of course, real world pharmaceuticals are much less direct; some division simply results in a lesser effect, but there are also thresholds, side effects, and interactions, and tolerance to factor in that can result in a divided drug having no, or the wrong, effect in some situations.

ryct me re Polaris/Solaris: I can’t assume it was spell check since Polaris doesn’t trigger (my current) spell check while Solaris does. But...maybe? Either way, yeah, Polaris, and also oops.

I generally refer to the ball from a gumdrop machine as a “gatcha ball” - with the “gatcha” being the machine itself.

I don’t think the 1/2/3 division of dice in a gatcha ball allows for assigning specific dice as bonus dice, but it doesn’t need to since you don’t have to remember which ones are which for the mechanic to work. But Feng Shui needs the ability to designate positive and negative dice, and ideally also be able to roll a luck die (a second positive die) or not.

Re Lee (in A&E) loaning extra pages between us: I remember it happening around 2-3 times, one in one direction and I think one in the other. She might have just put some spillover paragraphs at the end of the other’s zine, as we could have done if we were doing our own layout. Memory fails. But no, it wasn’t a regular thing, more a “someone’s over and there’s a solution” last minute kind of thing.

Your fiasco link didn’t work (it linked to just the news/fiasco sublink, not the whole thing), but I was able to find the article: <https://www.tabletopgaming.co.uk/news/fiasco-ditches-dice-for-cards-in-the-rpgs-second-edition-but-only-if-you-want-to/> Actually, that’s true about another link you include as well, which again gets cut at the line break, so we may want to look over how you make links in your document to make this kind of problem less likely.

I didn’t dislike the cards idea when it was first proposed and I don’t entirely hate it now, but I admit that it raises the bar for those producing Fiasco hacks—who can either rely on the players using the old approach—or have to make their own card sets if they want that to be an option. And yeah, we should play Fiasco 2e, with a base playset or a different one.

Re yourrpgtable.com: I dunno; if I do it will be pretty basic at first, with the focus on just having basic functionality like shared die rolls and something resembling character sheets. I haven’t put any time into it at all, though; last month (with a larp to build) was really bad for it, and I’ve been distracted this month too.

Re Amber Diceless: Numbers are *part* of Karma, just like they are in Everway, where all things being equal, a character with a 5 Fire will win a fistfight against a character with a 3 Fire. Karma is “ok, based on the situation, how is it reasonable that the challenge would go?” and the numbers are very much a part of how the situation is defined. When you rule on Drama or Fortune instead, you are either looking at a situation where Karma doesn’t have a good answer—or you are expressly putting aside/bending the Karmic answer for one that makes a better story (Drama) or fits the drawn card (Fortune!)

Re Mercy having to roll steady (when trying to avoid my PC’s eyes as she tried to hex her): I think that was the second or third time the player tried that, after we all let it slide the first time. Eventually a Hold Steady roll happened.

Re Tristat not working the way I say it ought: I mean, no, it doesn’t; my ideas are about game design in general and how to get some of the ideas behind Tristat’s variable-cost skills without the same issues. The issues often exist in other games, after all.

Re Varilas having a point in Attune she’s never rolled: She still hasn’t rolled it so she still doesn’t know she has it! But we’re working towards a point where she might have to make a roll.

Belonging Outside Belonging is the name for the system of Dream Askew/Dream Apart, and seems inspired by the PbtA approach to gaming (but without dice). At least, that’s my take on it, Avery having previously designed a popular PbtA game and BoB having lose “moves” as its core structure even as it avoids most of the rest of what’s usually associated with PbtA games. Brindlewood Bay, of course, has no direct connection to BoB, but it is a PbtA game.

Re PbtA games “never failing” and shut someone down: I think the difference in my mind is in the fiction. When you Shut Someone Down, that usually means your character attempted to socially block someone

—and that remains in the fiction even if the move fails and results in the “shut down” social move being ignored (as the GM makes a move) or blows up in your face. But when you “Turn someone on”, it’s not as consistent on what happened in the fiction. Clearly your character did something that could be reasonably construed as sexy. Maybe you undressed (as in the Brooklyn MH game) or were otherwise seen partially or entirely naked. Maybe you flirted. Maybe you did something innocuous and they found it hot. Or maybe, I dunno, you leaned sexily against the wall. But regardless, that action remains in the fiction even if the move fails, so often that involves someone finding something your character did hot, even if it doesn’t go well for you. Ironically, I think the times that this is likely to be less true is when your character is trying- to be sexy, and a reasonable response (contradicting myself, yes) is “that’s not sexy at all.” Another case, which I find odd but clearly works in Briar’s game, is “lets roll Turn Someone On to see if someone is turned on”, where again, if the roll fails no on-turning might happen.

But the reason I find that a little odd, I think, is that normally when a roll is made it involves someone doing something. So for “lets see if that’s sexy”, it’s harder to see where GM reactions come from if in fact it’s not sexy.

**Matt Stephens:** Interesting to see the origin of Hartland City! I don’t remember a lot of those details, but it was certainly fun to play in!

Re politics: I tend to follow the on-topic rule WRT to politics—if you’re talking about games, it’s fine and obviously on topic, even if there are obvious political implications of what’s happening in the game discussion (thus our long, but still less-painful-than-politics discussions on orcs). The other form of less obvious political bent is when talking about fiction or your life; it’s very legitimate for someone to complain about being censored about talking about politics when they were talking about, say, their recent medical care, kid stuff, job, or even religion, yet all of those things can read as intensely political. I think your list is a bit duplicative (your 1 and 2 are often talking about the same thing), but I think that the kind of politics that’s most discouraged in the APA is some of: 1. off topic (not couched in gaming or otherwise normal stuff one would expect to see in an APA, 2. Preachy (attempts to persuade people to particular political POVs, whether or not it’s at all persuasive), or 3. Insulting, impugning the motives and or actions of other real people, particularly people who are also in the APA and/or expected (or unexpected) readers. Of course, I’m not immune from any of these things, but I agree that steering clear of the things that signal political topics as feeling off will generally make it feel less out of place. And meanwhile, discouraging off-topic conversation, preaching/proselytization (except for gaming systems and approaches, of course ), and intentional insults can discourage the bad parts of politics, while still not making some people feel their entire lives and game worlds are off topic.

I agree with you; I like (some) cocktails, and I like some parties, but cocktail parties? Nah. That said, I do like comments.

Huh, I hadn’t even noticed the systems being added to our zines in 8 (and 9, where you got the requested Two-fisted Tales tag). Seems a bit arbitrary to me, but who am I to judge? Apparently I don’t get a system; maybe I didn’t mention one? I feel like the intent is to help indexers—if you mention a system or talk about it substantially it should go in your your tag (which still makes me wonder how this is determined; flipping through my zine, I talk about D&D 5e, AD&D, Faith Corps, Blades in the Dark, Amber, Everway, etc. Or, if one discounts everything in my comments, I do include a brief section from my unpublished duo RPG Witch and Cat in AR8 (even if I include it after my comments rather than before), as I put it in to fill a bit of empty space).

Re why you need a whole new system about Whale Whores? Why not, though? Anyway, some of the Whale Whores games are really just hacks of other games. Also, a lot of roleplaying games have issues dealing with large differences in scale, and with Whale Whores being all about very large animals (but not all necessarily the same size) it’s a good place to test out a better scaling rule.

I substantially agree with you on comedy in RPGs—roleplaying and most groups are inherently comic, so adding comedy directly (via absurdity, system, or whatnot) often has to be done carefully lest it get in the way (or just elicit performance anxiety). But just a little absurdity in a game will often magnify into magnificent farce in play, as the players intentionally and unintentionally ham it up. Or just do stuff that turns out to be funny.

Re 7th Sea and our getting our asses killed by a single NPC: I think we did kill them, but it was incredibly difficult, not least because they were built with a speed stat (that is, Panache) of 5, and no PC had a Panache of greater than 3 because you don’t have enough points to make more than 2 or so stats 3 and still build your character out properly, and while you also get a +1 to one stat from your origin region, no PC was from not-France, the Land of Panache. The character also had at least a +1 to every stat relative to a starting PC, so they were on more or less even terms with every PC in that PC’s core ability while having a whopping 5 actions a turn compared to a usual PC’s 2. This also combined with the narrative to make the fight seem extremely unfair—they weren’t presented as some kind of unstoppable boss, but an ordinary (if noble) criminal who the PCs had unmasked, so it came out of left field when it turned out that they were a monster in a fight.

Re newer games being really wordy: I mean, not all the time—there is a tradition of one-page RPGs! But yeah, far too often. On the other hand, newer non-narrative focus games are also often really wordy; I blame cheaper printing processes.

**Erica L. Frank:** Fortunately, I don’t have to worry about cataloging large numbers of electronic ttrpgs because Lisa tends to do the collecting. Which is, of course, entirely unfair, especially since we now have a NAS that they could all be uploaded to and if they’re badly organized there I can get confused too.

Re Neopets: wait, so did they not release any material (that might clue people into the fact that they were reskinning D&D 5e rather than making a whole new game) while the Kickstarter was going on?

Re the capital city and the country having the same name: I mean, my state and city have the same name, and I grew up in Manhattan where my county also had the same name. It happens! But you do want a story about it if it’s to make sense.

ryet Lisa on GMless games: (and them being less GMless than you’d hoped): There is currently a moment about GMless games having a “facilitator,” which in theory isn’t a GM but in practice can be pretty GM-y if the person taking on the roll leans into it and the rest of the group doesn’t pick up GM responsibilities as well. But yeah, how GM-less a GMless game is in practice will vary—most Good Society games have a facilitator, but often you’ll have a lot of Connection moves that take ownership even if the facilitator also acts as the director, and the same can be true of a facilitated BoB game. (on the other hand, there’s a reason to have a facilitator for a GMless game—someone needs to be the one who knows the rules!). Even when facilitated, Microscope tends to be pretty player directed, since the mechanics don’t leave that much for a facilitator to do other than administering the rules, so it might be worth looking at that as well as Good Society and BoB (and other, of course, but those are the popular-ish GMless games that come to mind). Cerberos the Crystal City is also GMless in concept, but unless the group chooses to have a shared conductor, whoever ends

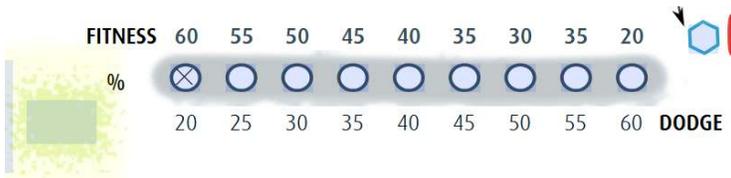
up with that role will have some GM-like responsibilities, so it will still vary.

**Attronarch:** I see you adventurers have not gotten tired of The Tower that Just Kills You.

Re High level wizardry shenanigans: Oddly enough, our Neitherworld group has now entered an area that is largely peopled with civilizations from an earlier version of D&D (Neitherworld is a very old campaign). As such, most of the “unbeatable” monsters and enemies we fight are unprepared for our 5e shenanigans (last two big fights were 3 ogre magi flying in on on dragonback and a 22 headed sea monster; with the PCs getting warning ahead of time, neither fight lasted long), but a bit of research and information gathering has shown that the people who sent them are likely exactly the kind of 20+ level wizard who has multiple contingencies in the case of sudden death, so we really don’t want to face them directly.

**Myles Corcoran:** Re fart and fanart: An accidental contraction, I ass-ure you.

Re changes in UA3: Yeah, substantial is certainly correct. The easiest place to look to see how this change manifests is the character sheet—the madness meters’ hardened notches are folded in with the stats—instead of having four stats (body, speed, mind, and soul) as in the previous 2 editions, there are now ten (fitness, dodge, status, pursuit, knowledge, lie, notice, secrets, connect, and struggle). While this seems more complicated (it is), it also, I think involves a substantial simplification; the ad-hoc skills of the original editions are drastically changed—reduced in number to 3 and not linked to stats at all, but also, your stats are mirrored and, and, well, it’s easier to just show it an example from a character sheet:



As you can hopefully see from my example, fitness and dodge are paired, and linked to the helplessness scale—the less hardened you are to Helplessness, the better your Fitness is and the worse your Dodge (and vice versa if you’re more hardened to Helplessness). The same for the stats as listed above with isolation, self, unnatural, and violence—for instance, increasing your hardened notches to violence will make you better at Struggle (makes sense as you’re now more apt to fighting) and better able to Connect. There are no skills under these, as with changing stats that would be way too complicated, but the skills return in Identities—you need a way for a character to be good at core abilities regardless of their hardened notches, and that’s where identities come in; if you can link an activity to an Identity (which is a wider freeform skill), it will take the percentage associated with the identity rather than the one associated with the closest stat.

I haven’t entirely compassed this, but the other main difference is that since there is no mind stat, you resist shocks a different way—there are two cycles (selfhelplessness), and along each cycle you resist shocks by having fewer hardened notches on the next stat (so someone not hardened to Isolation will better resist Helplessness checks, etc). It seems like a interesting system, but also very different and I haven’t really gotten a chance to try it yet.

**Pum:** You’re far from the first person to convert Gumshoe pools to fixed bonuses (starting with designers, who often have fixed bonus NPCs; I know Swords of the Serpentine has this and I think it’s been used for the GM side of things in other ways, since the GM otherwise has too many things to keep track of). That said, I think your numbers

are off—at 1/3, the 15 points you spend on a top class skill turns into a permanent +5, which simultaneously seems too strong and unable to reach the really high numbers you need for a fight to be over really quickly, since you don’t have anything left to put into extra effort. What I’d be tempted to say is that skill/4 is your permanent bonus, but that you also get skill/3 points that can add an extra d6 to your roll for extra effort (which also gives you something to refresh beyond First Aid and Shrink when players take a nap). If you’re just reducing the number of points players have to distribute, you could just do /3 and /3; it makes for characters that are notably more powerful than regular gumshoe, but not so much that you can’t challenge them. That said, it’s easy enough to say that any remainder (useful when converting existing characters/adventures) are points that can be spent the normal way.

Nobilis is very much in the continuum that gets you to Gumshoe, as is Marvel Diceless—Marvel Diceless was similar to Gumshoe except that the energy points you used to power your abilities refreshed per round (but only by 1/3 of its total so if you went all out every round it would be hard to keep up), while Nobilis has fixed abilities, but you also get miracle points associated with each ability (and a way of converting miracle points between abilities but usually inefficiently); spend miracle points and you can boost the ability for a specific action. Nobilis, however, puts an interesting cost on this—you can only spend 1, 2, 4, or 8 miracle points and with an 8 point spend your character also takes a Wound—you could do somilar things with an Extra Effort mechanic to say that spending one Effort didn’t cost anything extra, but that spending more than that required also taking Stability or Health damage as backlash (I’m kind so would say it was one point per extra effort beyond the first, but one could reasonably go further).

Thinking about it, if you went with 1/3 points and said that one point was extra effort and the second point on a skill was a +1 (and the same for the next two points), this would still not be weaker than the existing pool system, but would give a *small* number of resources to play around with, rather than the current “all resources all the time” thing. Of course, you still need to think about how contests work, but contests in Gumshoe are always a problem.

I’m glad your back pain has receded!

Robo Rally works well enough but certainly doesn’t feel like a racing game even though the robots are racing—it feels like a programming game.

Re Blades in the dark: The main annoyance with the resistance rolls, for me, is remembering to make them. Not that you should ever time, of course, since often the stress is worse than the consequence.

Re hit points and simulation: It’s interesting that so many fictive portrayals—RWBY and fantasy anime, among others, have been inspired by RPG HP (and fighting games, of course) to have an world visible hit point meter that may be completely divorced from physical damage the character takes—in RWBY this is handled with Aura, a shield all hunters have that can be measured and which protects them from nearly all harm while it remains (but they are highly likely to take permanent damage if it’s depleted and they get hit again). Fantasy anime usually have HP directly correspond to a character’s likelihood of dying, but taking large amounts of damage to HP doesn’t necessarily involve any visible damage—but people can use whatever system is part of the worldbuilding to see theirs and others’ HP, and it justifies people knowing how and who to apply healing to. And yet, we don’t generally use these kinds of cheats in our roleplaying games. Maybe in a few more generations.

**Patrick Riley:** To fill in the whole you intentionally left, 4e doubled down on the battlemat and the roles, baking them into the game itself (with the official roles being Striker, Defender, Controller, and Leader

(really, supporter, but leader sounds more active)). 5e, yes, deliberately backed out of that doubling down on the roles and the map by making the map optional—and removed flanking as an official rule entirely, giving rogues much easier ways of getting sneak attack and reserving the modified (simpler) flanking rules for an optional rule.

It's interesting that you see Druids as only getting shapeshifting as a core identity in 3rd edition, when in fact they had it back to AD&D (when, yes, they were a subclass of clerics, with different abilities and a different spell list—so not really like a cleric at all). Of course, in AD&D they only got shapeshifting at 7th level (not 5th level, when they got it in 3.5), but it still had a lot of the same abilities associated with modern shapeshifting—at 7th level a druid could become a brown bear, and heal by  $d6 \times 10\%$  each time they changed shape. Of course, the ability didn't scale well—they could never use it to take shapes stronger than that of something twice their weight or get more than 3 shapeshifts a day, so while it might be useful for a druid at 7th level, it would be decidedly less useful once they reached the 9th circle (at 11th level). In the meanwhile, the preeminent PC shapeshifter in AD&D is, of course, the Magic User, who at 18th level can take the absurdly flexible Shapechange (which lets them chose their form per -segment-, so they can respond to an attack by turning into a wall and then turn into a dragon or pool of lava to strike back if they wish), all without it ever becoming their turn. On the other hand, being sketched out, a druid's shapeshifting has a lot of advantages—they don't lose HP when changing shape, so they can take small and easy to miss shapes without a penalty, there is no limit on how long they can remain shape shifted, so they can stay in this tiny shape as long as they like, and unlike 3rd edition and after, there is no restriction on casting while shifted, so presumably they can cast as they like.

Interestingly, the 2e druid (an edition I never played) was identical in almost all aspects to a 1e druid, but if they became Grand Druid and entered the hierophant path (which was the only way to get higher than 15th level as a druid), they'd also get the appearance shifting abilities that 3e druids get at 13th level at 17th level.

re 5e Poison: “often only last a round” seems a bit strong for Poisoned! I'm not sure what gives you the idea that the Poisoned condition only lasts one round. Certainly, the Contagion spell can give a creature Poisoned for multiple turns (while Ray of Sickness and Stinking Cloud, yes, only grant it for a single round, but Stinking Cloud can apply its effect on multiple turns). And as far as applied by actual poison, the first poison I found, Assassin's Blood (DMG) inflicts the target with Poisoned for 24 hours. But yes, it's odd that lasting poison doesn't always inflict the Poisoned condition and that it represents the weakening someone gets with some poisons. A more interesting approach is the 5e Charmed condition, which only weakly affects the target (you can't harm the person who charmed you on purpose and they have advantage when trying to use social skills on you), but acts as a useful keyword for determining what blocks or counters Charms (which generally also have other effects as well). The name is still confusing (I'd call it Beguiled or something else that wasn't an actual spell name) but the idea is useful.

Re armor training feats: I don't think I've ever seen a build that used Martial Weapon Training, but the armor feats are actually quite strong for the right characters. The Spelljammer game has one character (played by Dan, the GM of the Neitherworld game) who is a Mountain Dwarf (still using the 2014 species) Wizard, with a 20 Str and Heavy Armor. Maybe not the most effective offensive wizard, but being able to protect herself with heavy armor and a shield has its advantages.

Re having Rogue be a separate class than Warrior (or not): Maybe an Expert class, who is the more in between version of the Mage/Priest class—focusing on special (not necessarily magic) abilities and skills, not on fighting (as the Fighter does) or main magic. Bards, Alchemists,

Warlords, and others who wanted to focus on their One Wierd Thing could be designed as Experts rather than variant Fighters, Mages, or Priests. In 5e, the “experts” are Rogues, Artificers, and Warlocks, who don't get as strong casting or melee abilities as the other classes, but can make up for it with their own tricks and specialties (yes, Bards are Mages in 5e because they get full casting progression, but in some ways making them an Expert would be closer to the root of the class, and Warlocks get up to 9th level spells but are still reasonably Experts because their casting is deliberately weaker than all other casting classes and they're expected to make up for it by being weird and powerful in other ways).

The problem remains with Disguise that it's just so narrow, even as a feat (the feat should be what lets you do rubber mask disguise as a specific person—unless you do it with magic, of course). Better to make it a Deception check with appropriate equipment.

Re alignment: Nah: Yup

Re St Faustina Station: Wow, those PCs are oof. Except for the scammer

Interesting with the tokens. I take it the way they can possibly get a second token is if they can convince the group of seven to give it to them?

Interesting that the map was the deal-killer for you on 7th Sea. I feel like there's an entire subgenre of fantasy that uses part (or all) of our world, only not, plus I already knew it was the Europe version of L5R, so “like Europoe, only not” was premise for me.

We ended up dropping out of Stranger Things after 1st season because it was too horror for us (or at least that was my reason; Lisa confirms that was basically true for her as well). Good to know it gets gradually less horror with successive seasons.

Re comments and policy: This was the reason my take is “sure, unlimited comments but non-comment zine length shrinks to 8 pages”. I like comments and want to encourage every contributor to comment, but the longer the APA gets, the harder it is to comment on everyone (for multiple reasons; time is also a factor). So if we're not going to cap the APA as a whole, capping non-comment content but not comments would be a clean enough way to make sure the format doesn't get in the way of dialogue. It might mean some contributors didn't read all the comments, but as the APA increases in the size not everyone is going to read everything anyway.

Re demons and devils interacting: I'd expect them to interact more than they interact with humans, just because they're on the same power level and generally capable of extra-planar travel. That doesn't mean they are friends.

Re magic items (particularly consumables) the PCs don't use: The hoarding instinct is strong! But I'm sure they appreciate the options. I remember in our 3.5 campaign, when the characters were in a fight that was looking really dicey (many, many spectres for a medium heroic party), digging through the Bag of Miscellaneous Magic items, and finding a Cubic Gate the PCs had just tucked away in there. “hokay, time for an exit!”, I went. But there were plenty of items that never came out of the big bag. The nice thing about having been maybe too generous and having the players not use most of the items you give is that you know you weren't actually too generous, since items they forget about don't throw off the power curve.

Re fail forward as being about process, not “players always win” Yes, exactly!

Re classes and mystique: I don't particularly *want* PC classes to have mystique, but I do still see the appeal. When we were playing 3.5, one player brought in a warlock, but wouldn't talk about what class

she was playing. I twigged pretty early on to her playing a warlock, but also hadn't read the book that introduced warlocks and helped preserve the mystery for myself by not reading the book, so I could remain nicely in the dark about what this mysterious person could do. I think I only really started to get the warlock vibe when one of the dragon-themed 3.5 books came out that introduced a dragon breath variant of the Warlock (by another name, but it was still a pretty obvious adaptation).

**Roger BW:** A good (and interesting; and also I wonder how many people use these rules as written) analysis of the issues with the Pendragon Winter Phase. I mean, to get properly Arthurian stories, having some sort of Winter Phase with accompanying plotlines, cosy stories, etc seems like a must, but the overly simulationist approach the Rules as Written take (from your depiction; I haven't read them) seem like they're antithetical to what one wants out of a Pendragon game. You play your knight, who goes on adventures, and also has a manor and family and maybe a tumultuous family life, and then at some point, they might get killed (or just retire) and you play the next knight of that line. Or to get closer to the story, at some point your background your knight and pick up a new knight who need not be related to you at all—Arthurian covers basically three generations (Uthur's generation, Arthur's, and the New Knights like Mordred, Gareth, Percival, and Galahad. So focusing less on knightly mortality/heredity, and more on building out plot threads during winter that can elevate roleplay and act as seeds for adventures in the coming year seems like a better way to architect Pendragon or a Pendragon-like game—as you said, if you're here for the knights, you probably aren't here for Estate Management Valley.

re Jobs: I haven't saved every rejection letter, but I've got a nice collection. The most disenheartening are the ones that show up in an hour to a few days; the ones that show up a month after you submitted your resume likely indicate that the recruiter at least considered you for a while. I do wonder if the very same thing that makes it even more frustrating to apply for jobs these days (that companies use ATS systems that will reject your resume out of hand if you don't have a high enough score on the AI matching you to the job requirements) also makes it more likely that when rejected, you'll get a reply.

Huh. Skull Queen is unrelated to Skull King? I played Skull King when it first came out and...it's fine; it's basically Wizard, but I don't need a copy of Wizard. I won a copy of it and gave it to a friend. But if Skull Queen is a different game it deserves a try of its own.

Re GMing not being all that hard: I mean, most people want to play a game a few times before they give GMing a try. And it does depend on the game—there are high prep games and low prep ones. But yeah (and like, I think, most people here, I tend to play in groups where most players can GM and have GMed even if they aren't GMing right now.

Re “if you want the PCs to wind up captured ...just tell the players”: Yes, exactly. People get too tied on staying within the narrative or being “fair”, and there's a place for that, but sometimes you just want to frame a setup with, or without the help of the players (but with is easier).

Turning a failure into “success BUT”—yeah, that's a perfect example of a fail forward approach.

Re emacs: One of the nice things about using emacs as an editor is that usually, if it does something you don't like, you can just change it. For instance, as part of setting up to go back to emacs for E&A, I set up flyspell, the interactive spelling module, since I've found interactive spelling (which I turned on years ago in vim) a HUGE timesaver over the approach I used to do with my zines (mostly at that time written in a variety of tools including on mobile devices and finalized in emacs) where I'd do a spell check at the end and then have to run through

it for minutes and minutes before I got to the end. But flyspell, while pretty great overall, if there are MANY possibilities for a misspelled/unknown word (for instance, if it's very short), will display a huge list of words, and you have to scroll past the whole thing to get to the add word/ignore word (for now)/ignore word (for a long time) dialogue, which is a pain.

So, I looked for how to add a limit on how many suggestions to show. Hitting configuration showed nothing appropriate. Going onto google showed the same answer asked on stackexchange, six years ago, with no good answers. So, time to use the traditional approach—I found out where the code for flyspell was, opened up the file, found the smallest function that handled the list of suggestions, and then just made an (overriding) copy in my emacs.el that can be customized to limit the number of suggestions to show. Done. Other than necromantically responding to that stackexchange thread, anyway.

Re part of roleplaying a combat being when one side (usually the NPCs) surrenders and/or runs away: Yes, absolutely! I mean, sometimes the conditions of the fight are such that the winning side (hopefully the PCs) won't reasonably accept such a surrender or will chase enemies down, but even that makes the fight much more interesting than a mindless slaughter to the last pixie.

Re Fiasco endgame: This is actually a question near and dear to my heart. I mean, for starters, I don't think that “downbeat” black die always means that you came off badly in every scene. Sure, it could mean that, and maybe by being the butt of every joke, eventually you get a dramatic turnaround in the last (not shown) act of the movie and get a solid victory. But it can also mean corruption—particularly after the turn (which is when you give away the dice you're given for a scene, so the dice you get don't have anything necessarily to do with the what kinds of scenes you'd had in that sequence); maybe rather than failing in every scene, you're taking actions that lead to either a really interesting failure (getting arrested, dying and going to heaven anyway) or succeeding at something you probably shouldn't (like becoming the mob boss or accepting the marriage you've been running away from). Either way, the core of collecting a lot of black dice is that you, the player, were in control of what happened (or at least people voted to give you a better shot by giving you their similar dice), and you pushed for an interesting story, so you should have a chance (only a chance, mind; the dice could still all roll ones) of getting a good ending, even if it's a “good,dark” ending like the table usually gives you for high negative numbers.

But also, I have wondered if it would be better to reverse the chart and have low numbers get you a good ending and high numbers get you a bad one. At least for some genres. After all, if you're looking for a good story, you want a mix of high and low points—someone with all low points is likely to have a bad end as a committed villain or loser, and someone with all positive arcs is just looking for a fall at the end. But, the main reason not to is that the “low numbers bad” approach explicitly biases towards bad endings—there are many ways to get bad endings but only a few ways to get good ones, and the general approach of Fiasco is that characters should more often get bad endings than good ones. But the other reason to go for “high numbers good” mechanically is that it gives you two different kinds of good endings and two kinds of mediocre endings, depending on whether someone was going for a “white path” or “black path” approach—which makes it somewhat more likely that the ending will suit the way a character's arc was going anyway than if players were trying to get even numbers of white and black dice.

But the other thing to remember is that your dice in fiasco don't match your scenes. In the first half of the game, the dice you get are from other players giving away their dice, so it's more likely that the dice you receive will be the opposite of the kinds of scenes you play (since

the dice from the scenes you play are given to other players and not available to be given to you and vice versa). After the turn, you get to keep the dice you collect—but that either means you’re not worrying about good and bad endings and just focusing on narrating the kinds of scenes you think should happen next (in which case, you’re not really worrying about it) or you’re trying to go for a particular ending and letting the table frame the scenes they think are interesting for your character—and at that point, you’re free to steer the scenes that would lead to a “positive” ending for your character narratively even while also grabbing dice that help you get that kind of ending if you roll well. It’s not a perfect system—no collaborative story-building system is, really, but it can have good emergent properties and result in good stories.

**Michael Cule:** Congrats on going down in waist size, even if the actual pounds lost is less than stunning! I mean, really, it’s where those pounds are that matters.

LOL at Drak’s reaction to the true identity of the Man-Bat.

People are talking about the Man-Bat as if he’s Batman, but I feel like with the whole revenge plot, he’s more the Count of Monte Cristo. Only way, way, way less subtle.

The entire party in *Neitherworld* is also unaffected by time shifts (because my character Irabella’s time crystal/drive is extending that ability to them; it could be turned off, but...). They mostly research potential big changes, so they haven’t developed a reputation for insanity yet, but they do worry occasionally that they’ve caused one or more changes.

Re *Powered by a Pack of Cards*: There are a few reasons the players might want to roll low: First, of course, is that failures are how you get experience. There’s also PVP, which some PbtA games are focused on to generate plot and drama. But also, if the GM goes hard on not letting you draw any new cards until you use up your hand, then you have to hand out (or use) some low cards before you can draw any more. I agree that when you finish your hand you should draw a fresh hand from the table, not pick up the cards you had before.

Re isekai into a game world or Lit-rpg that actually explains the world: I’ve run into a few that come close—A New Last Boss Appears pulls back a bunch of the curtain even in the anime, for instance, but yeah, often the “why is this world even like this” question is un-examined, much less explained. Which can work in stuff like *Lord of Myteries* where they explain a bunch of levels of the world and there are yet more beneath this, but less so in stories that aren’t quite supposed to be horror/mystery layers.

Re “why only this group in the world” vs “why only properly organized adventurers” But that depends a lot on the world—often in the narrative there are other groups and people that have the PCs abilities (even in *Die*, where the main characters are very isekai, the world is organized largely because their abilities, or some of them, at least, are common, with major plots around Emotion Knights or Dictators). If the PCs are in fact the Designated Protagonists (in the fiction), of course, that’s different, but if it’s about why Only This Group Rolls Dice, that’s not fictive—the reason player facing systems have only the PCs roll dice is because it’s fun to roll dice and it doesn’t give any more agency or randomness if both sides roll, so lets just keep things simple and have only the players do it.

**Mark A. Wilson:** That’s a lot of simultaneous projects! Hope you get some of them across the finish line.

I disagree with you about *Once Upon a Time*—bad stories can happen there, but the mechanics do incentivize good stories and punish bad ones; however, the mechanisms that do this are perhaps less obvious than in other storytelling games. I overall prefer mechanisms like *Once*

*Upon a Time*’s, where your success includes engaging other people in your story elements and getting them to buy into your premises (so you can introduce your cards and still have a path to your happy ending) to “judgy” games like *Munchausen* and *Nanofictionary* where your incentive to tell a good story is that others might not like it, but others might reasonably differ. I think in all cases, it’s far more fun to play a storytelling game with better storytellers, as otherwise they can get a bit interminable.

**Avram Grumer:** If one could get sources on “popcorn reading” (beyond forum threads where people claim they hit it in school, implying that it’s been at least one generation), it might be a nice pushback on people wanting to call it “balsero initiative” after the person credited with first applying the technique to ttrpg games. Personally, I’m happy to never fight over who came up with an idea “first”—so many ideas get parallel developed or reinvented multiple times, as befits a new and still developing field.

Re *Games People Play* I read *Berne* as a teen as well, and while it didn’t have much to do with the kinds of games I liked to play, it taught me a lot about the kinds of games I didn’t like (I recognized a lot of the games in it among behaviors/patterns I knew and didn’t like them). I could see using it to inform roleplaying, but on the other hand I am very fond of recognizing (where possible) and trying to steer away from repetitive Bearnian games rather than towards them. Amusingly, I missed the title while reading this so read through most of your review, and went “that sounds a lot like *Games People Play!*” before scrolling up and realizing it was, indeed.

Re MH: Yes, Stephan, go macking on someone rather than going to school! That will definitely make good things, and not bad things happen!) (I then look up to double check, and see that Laeli is the Mortal). Yup! Totally only good things!

I see Briar’s point in wanting to move the plot along, but also think it’s worth underlying the fact (easy to forget) that a Miss in *Monster Hearts* doesn’t necessarily mean that the roll failed (that’s up to the GM); just that the player doesn’t get the benefits from a hit. So with *Heightened Senses*, it’s entirely reasonable for the GM to let you roll. You don’t get +1 forward or any questions on a miss, but they can still tell you what you sense. On the other hand, it’s also super reasonable to decide “I want to make out this scrawl” isn’t a charged situation and there’s no roll.

Wait...Blue is a physical vengeance spirit, who doesn’t know who summoned him or who he’s supposed to arrange the killing of (yes, through a weird method, but sure)...has the player seen the Untamed?

LOL at the escalation of wolf attack into coming out of Darkest Self into Drake, Blue, and Agatha getting Turned On into Laeli’s Worst Day Ever. That is, indeed, certainly how it’s done.

A beautiful *Monsterhearts* poem!

Re blades and how much roleplaying goes on: Yeah, I agree that it’s going to depend—if the GM doesn’t prompt for roleplaying or even pushes to get past the roleplay, less will happen, but if the GM is leaving space for it it’s more likely. Similarly, both based on style and timing Gaylord tends to push pretty hard to jump to the engagement roll (and frame things vaguely enough that that’s reasonably narratively appropriate), but that’s not actually necessary—In concept, the jump to the engagement roll is like the flash forwards in *Leverage* to the heist after the meeting with the client, but that’s not necessary—unlike a TV show, we don’t have time for the writers room to decide what’s REALLY going on before they execute a cut forwards, so it’s really fine (better than fine) if we can spend enough time playing to figure out much of what the characters would learn between the description of the job and the point where we pick up during the

job—all the stuff they need to decide which approach to take, which contacts might have an “in” to make the job easier, and enough research to develop an outline of a plan. Of course, some of this can happen unseen. Obviously, if the characters (who are presumed competent) come up with a plan, it’s a plausible and even likely optimal plan, which means the situation may shift a bit to accommodate the plan they’ve come up with (for instance, in the most recent session, they took a “we’re delivering supplies” social plan, so obviously the target had open orders for supplies. Since they then blew the engagement roll, obviously something went wrong, so the target’s plans for the open orders was not good for the delivery people, and there we went.

Re the Forge-style narrativist movement and OSR both developing as reactions against heavily plotted railroad adventures in the 80s and 90s: More 90s than 80s, (though, *Dragonlance*), but oh, yeah. A lot of the main DNA of the Forge dialogue was based in *World of Darkness*, the poster child for a game that claimed to be a narrativist (“storyteller”) system but was anything but, as well as imitators (of the splatbook/railroad adventure approach), like *Tribe 8*, *L5R*, etc. Of course, at the time, we were largely ignoring the main threads and playing *Over the Edge*, *Everway*, bits of *Unknown Armies*, playtesting *Feng Shui*, etc (and, yes, review-testing *Changeling*, the *Dreaming*, but with Lisa simply ignoring the more nonsensical things in the book and just running an adventure), but a lot of people actually learned to play from these games, which held out the promise of a deeply moving story the players and the GM built together...and actually delivered a railroad where players had every opportunity to build optimized characters who would still dance on the GM’s (and the designers’) strings. Enter Forge-era ideas of how to use the system to really empower the players and make the story about what the players chose to do—and similarly, OSR ideas about sandboxed play that made the game about what the players did and chose to do, not some pre-existing plot. In one case, the view was forward-looking, in the other, backwards-looking, deriving a style of D&D play that was only sort of ever there and never common, but the focus on player agency, on making what the players do and say matter, was certainly held in common.

Of course, one can also talk about this with respect to the nice minimalist/narrativist movement in the 90s, of *Everway*, *Amber*, *Over the Edge*, *The Mirror*, etc. Those games tended not to have a lot of canned adventures and tended to run on improvisation and projecting what would happen (which certainly pushes player agency), but it was easy to map illusionist play onto them as well, even if the books rarely advised you to do so. One can find bits of *Everway* and *Over the Edge* (and probably others; I just know those better) that expressly advise the GM to stay only one step ahead of the players and keep things moving while incorporating what actually happened at the table into play, but it’s not an agenda as clearly stated as we see later, probably partially because the ideas hadn’t in the early 90s been discussed as thoroughly (instead, the focus is more on not letting players go in interesting directions that don’t harm the game, like Tweet talking about letting a player play a princess (in *Everway*) or letting them go ape and attack a bunch of peace officers with off-kilter gadgets (in *Over the Edge*), and how to incorporate those ideas into a good game rather than shutting them down entirely.

Re *Monster Hearts* advances: Good point about *Season Advances*. I think this may have been a bit less of an issue in MH1, where players had a bit more control over when they got experience (MH1 has the generic experience move being highlighting, where each session there are two stats which automatically generate an experience when you roll against them, replaced with the much less clunky “1 exp on a miss” rule in 2e as the field turned away from stat highlighting). It’s still very possible for a player to gain enough experience to get an advance every session in MH2, but this is much less under their control; it’s

reasonable to extend a series in MH2 therefore to 2 or 3 sessions after someone takes a season advance if a game is tending towards shorter sessions where most players don’t level up.

Re my zine 7: Yes, it was 7.5 body type and yes there was a smallest font and yes I won. But really, I was trying to make it fit in the same page count as my previous format and it hadn’t occurred to me to tweak the margins.

Re turn someone on: Yeah, As said, I overstated the point (I went into more detail on my ideas here earlier this issue) a bit.

**Jim Eckman:** re OSR: OSR (Old School Renaissance) is a play/design movement that (keeping in mind that I am very much not an OSR person so might get parts of this wrong) organized around the idea that original D&D was actually pretty good as roleplaying games went—and specifically, that the lethality and lack of rules were intentional features that gave a game serious consequences and made the ideas players had outside of the context of the system (all those 10 foot pole shenanigans) more important than how they used the system.

So, a lot of OSR is played with specifically OSR systems—newer games that try to replicate what they see as the essential parts of early D&D, but one can also do “OSR-style” play with white box, B/X, or AD&D if you do it within the OSR philosophy of play. Or, since so much early D&D was done outside this idea framework, you could absolutely be playing early D&D editions and *not* be doing it as OSR if instead you’re applying other ideas of how games should be played and run to the game. But the whole concept makes me wonder why I haven’t heard of an OSR game with randomly generated/rolled psionic powers; something that was an odd feature of early D&D (or at least AD&D) and certainly part of the vibe, for all its wackiness and lack of balance.

**Dylan Capel:** Re *Isakai*: It’s not so much about immortality as being reborn into a new life—usually in another world, but some stories have characters be reborn into their own lives (or earlier versions of their own lives), taking the ideas of cheat skills (or at least cheat knowledge) without introducing a new world on top of it. Think Alice through the *Looking Glass*s, but if Alice was the only one who knew the rules of chess and so could figure out how to get, as a pawn, to the final square of the board and promote to a queen (rather than the entire thing being a mathematical/board game parable). An *Isakai* character rarely has the ability to come back from the dead endlessly—they died, then came back into a new body (possibly but not usually their own) and have to make the best of it.

Re Epub: EPUB IS HTML/CSS! Just inside an enclosure. It’s a pretty good format for ebooks specifically because it has less information than PDFs (which like postscript, specify exact locations on a page for moth things) and can more easily adapt to changes in page size, but it’s also limited in what’s been implemented in whatever HTML/CSS versions are currently supported by current EPUB readers—and also in that while it’s worth it for book publishers to invest in being able to make really nice, portable ebooks, this is hardly an easy thing for the average zine-writer to do! I made many or most of my A&E zines (and my first 6 E&A zines) with html/css—the problem with this is that printing support for CSS is quite limited, with a number of features to customize printing in css3 but not universal support for them.

**Patrick Zoch:** What do you mean “the girl genius GURPS game (that never made it to launch)? We have the game, of course, or do you mean that the city you were designing never made it to launch?”

Your woes with the master campaign and the two games seems like a versioning nightmare to me. It feels like the ideal approach would be one that avoided duplicating editable files between the three versions—instead, providing delta files which described the changes between the

(unduplicated) master campaign version and the current local version. Thus, every time a rebuild happened, the local version would take the current master campaign file and apply the differences; master campaign changes not overridden would be immediately included while anything overridden would stay overridden until the delta was changed. Of course, big changes to the master could potentially break the deltas (necessitating a quick patch before everything worked right again), but it would at least avoid data getting accidentally lost when you accidentally edited the wrong version or copied something from the master to a local file without realizing that you needed to keep some of those changes. [unix diff/patch is an example of a toolset for creating and applying such deltas]

In addition to D&D5 Artillerist Artificers having access to a “Magical Firearm” (really, a modified wand that enhances damaging spells), Artificers do have proficiency with firearms—but only if they’re included in the game at all. I don’t have strong opinions on firearms in D&D, but will note that the technology goes both ways—D&D features Plate Armor, which in history was only popularized after firearms were well developed. And with ubiquitous magic, the impact of early firearms are muted—why use a laborious, expensive, and heavy cannon when a magic wand can do similar damage but with a faster rate of fire and only require one wandoneer rather than a team of cannoneers? Why use a flintlock when a magic arrow can punch through armor just as well (at least, with D&D5 lack of high strength requirements for bows, but never mind that).

Of our three Thursday games, two definitely make some provision for firearms. Neitherworld has allowed firearms for a long time—but by decree of the gods, they fail to function within a mile (or maybe 5 miles) of the shore. So cannon and even flintlocks will appear in naval combat, but not in adventures on land, and the lack of use for powder ashore does restrict its development somewhat, with pirates more likely to rely on huge boarding parties than expensive cannon too likely to send their treasure to the bottom of the sea, at least for raiding.

Firearms haven’t come up in the spelljammers game, but...it’s spelljammers. Even if there isn’t powder-based canon, magical ship-mounted firearms are certainly available and while the PC ship has so far made due with a catapult, it may be due for an upgrade at some point.

As for Strixhaven, while it hasn’t come up, the game is set in a massively multiplanar version of the universe, with access to both traditional D&D worlds and versions of the Magic planes. As such, it would be more surprising if firearms weren’t at least known of, whether or not they work in anywhere the PCs ever go.

Regardless, the question of firearms is mostly a question of balance. If you make them superior to all other weapons, of course they’ll displace them, but if you make them only situationally superior (more useful in the hands of semi-trained soldiers and perhaps better than many other simple weapons, but with risky ammunition, limited rate of fire, and inferior to martial weapons in the hands of trained users, especially without class support or magical enhancement), they’ll have a place but not dominate weapons that are superior in more traditional usage.

Of course, that’s ignoring the easy target that is ammo dumps among groups that do make use of firearms. But that’s also a reason some groups might be slow to make use of firearms in a magical world with easy access to fire-making spells.

**Me:** Well, I hope the adjusted format is easier for other people to read!

**Brian Misiaszek:** Baron Kriminal and how he’s described reminds me of Yog Soggoth. A coincidence?

Re Formatting: Thanks! I hope my comments helped!

**Jim Vassilakos & Timothy Collinson:** Re plankwell: Ending in an immediate (and well deserved) firing. I suppose reassignment since if I understand how this works, Plankwell has no power to remove a Scout from the service—but he does have the power to tell one that he is no longer welcome aboard the Jacqueline.

Re DM as Dick theme: Don’t be ridiculous; every issue has that as an unofficial theme.

Re your comments on Dr Llerena in Dr Misiaszek’s adventure: For good or ill, your faith in human rationality even under adverse circumstances is largely misplaced. People behave in inconsistent, contradictory ways (particularly when stressed, but not even always then) all the time; enough that Brian’s described actions are far more believable and compelling than your suggested changes.

# Traveller Play-By-Email

## Plankwell Campaign, Ch 55: Getting to Know You

GMing: Jim Vassilakos & Timothy Collinson, Playing Capt. Plankwell: Conrad Rader  
*The character of Capt. Plankwell was conceived by Phil Pugliese*



After Bim departed in disgrace, both Cmdr. Nizlich and Dr. Willin remained conspicuously silent. While I was certainly within my rights as Captain to tell him to get off my ship, from their point of view, it was apparent they viewed his dismissal as somewhat abrupt and perhaps even vindictive. Yes, there would now be an extended delay in leaving port, but as he'd described it, this was largely unavoidable. In any case, my psi-curtain was closed, so I couldn't sense exactly what they were thinking, but their silence spoke volumes.

"Commander. Doctor," I said, getting up from the table. "I apologize for bringing a cloud over the celebrations. Please continue to enjoy the goodwill of the crew. I am going to make a circuit of the room to show the flag, as it were, before retiring. It has been a very long day. Doctor, I'll be making an appointment tomorrow as per your request. Until then."

I nodded to Stefani and then made my way toward the nearest crowd of spacers. Soon, one of them noticed their captain's approach, and after saying something to the others, the rest quickly turned toward me, nervous smiles all around, as none of them knew me beyond the fact that I was their new captain and a Plankwell to boot.

"Sir," one said, "happy birthday." Oh, if only it were.

"Thank you. It's an honor to be celebrated by you all."

I pretended to smile and stuck out my hand, letting each of them introduce themselves. This, in turn, brought more of the groups on either side of us seeing their new CO shaking the hands of officers and enlisted alike, accepting their well-wishes proffered as a matter of courtesy. Some tried particularly hard to ingratiate themselves, and I could sense the differences in temperament between them without opening my curtain.

"Ensign Dugek, sir. It's a true honor to have a Plankwell descended from Olav as my Commanding Officer, and I very much look forward to serving with you."

I maintained my fake smile and moved on, not wanting to explain how I really felt about Olav. And although I was curious if any of these people were psions, I didn't dare open my curtain and risk one of them finding out I was one too. In any case, I was still reeling with what I'd already learned about certain other people and so didn't relish the idea of things getting even more complicated. Likewise, there were so many hands to shake that I doubted I'd remember more than a few of their names. Under such circumstances, what good would it have been to open wide

and learn all of their innermost secrets? There was no way my brain could retain it all. Their names alone were beyond my capacity.

Hence, even with my curtain pulled tightly over my — my psionic eye, essentially — blindfolding me to whatever I might have gleaned as I moved further into the crowd, it was all essentially a blur of faces. My initial intention had been to shake only a few hands and then nod to the rest, but once it started, everyone had their hand out like a feeding frenzy, and I didn't want to be rude, so in this way, I slowly made my way around the perimeter of the bay, shaking hands and taking in the sights of my crew's laughter and dancing, people yelling to each other over the general din, which, of course, only made things even louder.

"Petty Officer Meminaa," one guy said, drawing in close to me, almost eyeball-to-eyeball, and holding my hand for a bit longer than was normal. Then it was on to the next.

Finally, I spotted the iris valve through which I'd entered, and rather than continuing around the main hanger, I took the opportunity to duck into the corridor at which point I stopped shaking hands and just nodded and waved, walking past a long line at the same fresher outside which I'd scolded Spooky<sup>1</sup> only three days ago. She'd mentioned some maintenance problem, something minor, and I'd chewed her out in front of Stef. Where the heck was Shish anyway?

Oh. Right in front of me.

"Happy Birthday, Combo."

"Don't you start, Guber."

She knew how I felt about birthdays. I pulled her over to the side of the corridor to get out of the way of the line to the head. "Walk with me. I have some things to ask you." Having another officer walking with me put me more in the persona of doing work, so the crew naturally gave us space as we headed toward the spinal transport tube. Unfortunately, there was a substantial line outside the pod's exit, and with only a few capsules running back and forth, it was sure to be slow-moving.

With the way back to my quarters effectively blocked, I felt a sudden stiffness creep into my neck, and Spooky made one of her enigmatic half-smirks.

"Phoenix Nest<sup>2</sup> is flight personnel only," she said. "As an ex-pilot, you'd be welcome provided you don't pull rank."

*Phoenix Nest?* That had to be the pilots' lounge. Every ship that carried fighter squadrons had one. And yes, pulling rank while blowing off steam was definitely frowned upon, but it was a culture to which I was well accustomed. As for her calling me an *ex-pilot*, it was the first time anyone had referred to me that way, and it stung perhaps a bit more than it should have.

1 Spish Guber (a.k.a. Spooky) was introduced back in Chapter 15, and we saw her again in Chapters 41 & 44.

2 Named in honor of Michael Cule's zine in *Ever & Anon*.

"Lead the way."

As we headed back the way we came, I asked her, "Are they always like this? The crew I mean?"

"Could you be less specific?"

I glared.

"So... enthusiastic. We were never this chuffed for a new captain, and yes, I know there was a war on."

"Oh, you poor dear. Did somebody give you an ass-hickey?"

"Look, I more or less expect this from the public, but this crew is something else." Walking by several of them, I realized that what I was saying could be construed as critical. "It's not that I don't appreciate the enthusiasm, but... what was the last captain like?"

That was a dangerous question, but if I couldn't ask Spooky, who could I ask? I half-expected she'd tell me to quit being a baby and just accept it as my due, being that I was of the high and mighty Plankwell clan, after all. But she was also aware of my feelings about Olav, who I'd once told her was my least favorite family member.

By now the corridor was too crowded for her to give me an honest answer, but we were already there, so in we went. As to be expected, someone was guarding the entrance, screening people as they came in. Thankfully, rather than yelling "Captain on deck," he just nodded and let us pass.

The place had two bars, one of them manned by a robot bartender, and behind the other, just to our right, was a wiry, red-haired guy who looked like he might be blitzed from the way he was laughing with the people across the counter. The space was worn but clean, and a narrow shelf with empty bottles ran around much of its circumference. As per regs, each was secured by a polymer band in case of loss of gravity or sudden maneuvers. My best guess was they were souvenirs of every port the ship had visited. Not every pilots' lounge had a row of bottles, but pretty much every ship I'd ever served on had a similar tradition of one sort or another.



As I surveyed the space, Spooky pointed out a gap on the port shelf, opposite the door.

"Two of them were apparently wedged in a bit tightly; too close to each other. When we came under fire and the ship was struck, they must have collided. The Algebaister

Ale bottle broke into five pieces. The bottle formerly containing McKinney's Thanberian Rum is barely nicked."

She looked rueful. I could tell that, friendship or not, she was thinking twice about her next sentence.

"The crew wants to go back to Algebaster to complain."

Algebaster, a Jump-5 from Jewell, introduced issues, not the least being proximity to Cipango, an active forward Zhodani base. I understood she was re-iterating the crew's desire to get one back on the Zhos for their sneak attack and thought about what kind of storm could be ignited if I returned the favor, say by attacking a Zho picket in their front yard.

"I'll take it under advisement."

"What'll you be having, Cap'n?" the red-haired guy asked as soon as we bellied up.

"I'll take something surprising, please. It's been a day, and I could use a kick-me-up<sup>3</sup>."

"Ah... okay. What about you, Spooky? The usual?"

"Sure. Cap'n, this is Rage. Rage, this is Combo."

"Combo?"

"That was his call sign back when he was one of us."

"Oh, you were a fellow zoomie? Nice!"

"Hey, Rage!" a big guy<sup>4</sup> yelled from the other side of the bar. "Where are those dippers?"

"In the microwave where I left 'em! I'll be right back. What's the matter with you? Can't you see who I'm talking to?"

"Who?"

"The birthday boy, jackass."

"It's somebody's birthday?"

"His call sign isn't Jackass," Spooky clarified for my edification. "But it should be."

"It's your birthday?" The guy got up from his seat. He was big and broad, especially in the shoulders, and as he approached, his eyes narrowed and he frowned. "Oh shit. Captain, uh... happy birthday."

"You're drunk," Spooky scolded.

"No, I'm not... not yet, anyway."

"Sir, this is Stallion. Stallion, this is Combo."

"Stallion," I said.

As we shook hands, his eyebrows squishing together as he looked down at me, I racked my memory, but nothing memorable about the Stallion call sign came to mind. Still, he was a big guy, almost at the limit for fighter pilots. I guess he liked squeezing into cockpits. Either that or he'd failed to secure a slot aboard a carrier, the sort that had the roomier heavy fighters for long-endurance pickets.

3 A pick-me-up but with faster effects. Basically, a combat-grade stimulant.

4 This big guy was initially bearded, but then I realized fighter pilots probably aren't allowed beards because their oxygen masks need to seal tightly against their skin, and beards could get in the way.

"What's your ride, Stallion?" I decided to satisfy my curiosity.

"Rampart," he answered, which was leaving it vague. There were lots of different ramparts. He added "sir" after a pause. "So your name is Combo?"

"No, you Jackass," Rage interjected. "That's his call sign."

"Stop calling me *jackass*! Who do you think you are? My wife?!"

"You're married?"

"Oh, hell no. Do I look stupid?"

"Ah... probably better I don't answer that." Grinning, Rage deposited a metal tumbler within reach and winked at me as he popped a tablet into it. The red liquid in the cup began to bubble, and tiny wisps of steam rose from the gently roiling liquid. "There ya go, Cap'n. Bilbroth and grum, with MilStim-Q36 for the kick."<sup>5</sup>

"So if you have a call sign," Stallion said, "that means..."

"He's one of us," Spooky finished the sentence. "Or, at least, he used to be."

"Used to be?" I frowned. "Well, the high command did warn me not to free-ride<sup>6</sup> the Jacky." They mostly laughed, all but Stallion, who looked at me in such a non-expressive way that I momentarily wished I'd left my psi-curtain open so I could sense what he was thinking. "It may have been a while since I was in the hot-seat, but I think I remember how it goes."

I tilted my head back and took the shot, Rage's kick-me-up hitting the back of my throat like a sweet suckerpunch.

"What birds have you flown?" Stallion asked.

"The FL-128, the RF-128, the FF-77, and I spent a lot of time in the FF-81," and those were just the Ramparts. I named several other fighters, but finally finished up with

5 Conrad suggested the drink, presumably making up all of its ingredients on the fly. He wrote, "MilStem was one of the standard stimulants for fighter pilots. Oddly for a military drug, it tasted like juicy fruity berries. Bilbroth was a component of the fighter long endurance meal packs, and grum was... some kind of alcohol..."

(<https://groups.google.com/g/plankwell-pbem-s1/c/j3IOFqVa7a8/m/cQvn68G0AAAJ>). To me, *grum* sounds like a type of rum, perhaps one fermented with grapes and molasses, or basically rum-wine, if that could even be a thing. Normally, in this sort of situation it would be the GM's job to determine what the bartender serves, but if the player has a good suggestion, it's always been my personal inclination to run with it. However, I did change *MilStem* to *MilStim* to make it line up better as shorthand for "Military Stimulant" and added Q36 partly on the assumption the Imperial Armed Services would likely have pushed lots of different stimulants over the centuries and partly also as a nod to Marvin the Martian and his explosive space modulator.

6 Fighter pilot slang for disengaging from the formation control net, usually without permission, to engage in risky maneuvers.

my true love, the FS-126 Fury Light Strike Fighter.<sup>7</sup> I had spent so many hours in that cockpit, I could still feel the location of all the manual controls. The Furies were designed for high speed attack runs and had an extra fusion rocket for radically altering their trajectory. Their secondary role was as a screening escort, so they had solid sensors and enough computing oomph to set up a secondary missile screen around whatever elements the squadron was escorting. The sweet bonus Spooky and I had been working on was to set up a distributed scanning array, using the entire squadron as sensor nodes and therefore multiplying its power and resolution, which would help us determine exactly what we were looking at.

“There was this one time we were flying escort on the Vice Admiral’s pinnacle,” I said. “She was coming over for an inspection of the Valkryie. It was immediately after the Battle of Rhylanor, so there was space junk essentially everywhere. Anyway, we were focusing on each piece of debris, just seeing what it was and if there might be any intel value, and then all of a sudden my tac grid lights up. It turned out the zhos had dropped a torpedo emplacement designed to look like a piece of space garbage.”

“Eight ship-killers,” Spooky interjected. “If it hadn’t been for us, the Valk would’ve been shredded.”

“And Vasilyev would have had to find a new Vice Admiral,” I said. “But we ended up shredding the shredders. Fortunately, we had enough depth in our formation that there was time.”

“How close did they get?” Stallion asked, putting his empty glass on the bar and turning his head to Rage. “Hit me again.”

“Too close to the Vice Admiral,” Spooky admitted.

“How close?” he repeated the question, obviously wanting the details.

“They got close,” I confirmed before giving him the specifics as clear as I could remember. She’d taken awhile to come aboard after they’d docked, and we were all joking that she’d probably needed to change her pants. Brown stains in the buttocks don’t exactly inspire confidence in leadership. But hopefully she was just writing the speech she’d soon be giving when she came aboard, promising to put letters of commendation into each of our service jackets, which I have it on good authority she actually did, being that I ended up with a combat command ribbon.

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<sup>7</sup> Conrad had initially called this the “SF-126 Furious Light Fighter,” later referring them as Furies, but SF didn’t show up on <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Fighter> as a valid fighter classification, although FS did — it denoted a Strike Fighter — so I changed the name to the “FS-126 Fury Light Strike Fighter,” which I think more or less captures what he was proposing. As usual, I was trying to incorporate what he was giving me, but I thought it worthwhile to do a little research and try to fit the idea into the existing Traveller literature as closely as possible.

“Oh shit.” Stallion laughed, taking his drink off the table and downing it like it was water. “That *is* too close.” He turned his head. “Hit me.”

“You’re taking these a little fast,” Rage warned him.

“What are you, my mother? Just hit me.” Rage poured the drink, some sort of hard liquor by the looks of it. “That’s the thing about torps masquerading as flotsam,” Stallion said. “They make it so you have to treat every piece of space junk like a credible threat.”

“If they maneuver,” Spooky said, “they give away their location, so their only chance is to wait until the enemy comes to them. We just flew close enough to trigger their activation script.”

“I’m pretty sure our scans triggered them,” I said. “But once they activated, they locked onto the two biggest targets.”

“Yeah, well, fortunately for you, their onboard computers probably figured a squadron of Furies wasn’t worth their time,” Stallion said, downing whatever it was he was drinking. “Hit me.”

“You’re going too fast,” Rage warned him again.

“There’s no such thing as too fast. The Captain, uh... Combo will back me up on that, right sir? See, I remembered your call-sign. I think that proves I’m a thousand percent sober.”

I smiled, and gauging my reaction, Rage shrugged and poured, but then I rested my hand on Stallion’s upper arm, keeping my voice steady so as to convey the same conversational tone we’d been using so far.

“There *is* such a thing as too fast, Stallion, and I have seen the smeared bulkheads to prove it. A good pilot knows when to listen to the sensors and when to return to base.” My other hand snaked out to snatch away the shot glass, and I drank it down, letting the liquor, whatever it was, scald the inner lining of my throat. “Thanks for the birthday drink.”

I turned to leave but then pivoted back. “I have had a long day, but you all need to take advantage of me not being around to enjoy the celebration. Thank you for the party.”

Then I turned again and made my way to the door, nodding to the few who greeted me on my way out, but I kept my pace steady, as though I had important business. To my surprise, the last of these was Commander Nizlich. She must have just come in as I began leaving, or maybe she’d been standing there for some time, watching my interactions with the crew.

“If you have a few minutes...,” she said.

“Do we need privacy? Walk with me.”

The sight of the two most senior officers walking together would no doubt deter anyone else from attempting to intercept me, so as we walked, I opened my psychic curtain and looked toward her, catching sight of her eyes as we walked, all in the hope of getting a wee taste of what she

was bringing me. That plus Josefeen would no doubt want me to practice a bit.

All I picked up, however, was a snippet of the conversation between Nizlich and Dr. Willin after I'd left the table.

"What was that all about?" Kosy had asked.

"I don't know," Stef had answered, "...yet."

Of course, the line was still there in front of the pod's exit leading to the spinal transport tube, so she turned the opposite way, leading me to a row of four doors along the left side of the corridor, and selecting one seemingly at random, she pressed her palm to the electronic lock. The door opened, revealing a couple, a man and a woman, in a state of semi-undress. It was a sensor station, big enough for two people, and they obviously thought it a good place to make whoopee.

"Out," Nizlich said, and they scurried like their lives depended on it, collecting their clothes on the way out and getting hooted and laughed at by all the people standing in line down at the other end of the corridor. No doubt, they'd long remember the day the Captain and XO walked in on them. It would make for a nice story, but for right now, they were mortified and humiliated, especially the woman who tried covering herself as she ran off.

We entered the now vacated room, and Nizlich turned to me as the door slid shut.

"It's turning out to be a nice party," she said with the ghost of a smile. "But this thing with Bim.... You want to tell what's going on?"

"Bim exceeded the parameters of the assignment. It was a test and he failed."

"A test?"

With her eyes focused so intensely upon mine, it was a situation where I could have burrowed into her brain, but I didn't have time. I needed to think of what to say. I knew she wanted more, but I was unwilling to complicate the issue more than it was already.

"Look," I finally said, "I knew it was a risk when I gave him the authority. I have feelings about Scouts in general, but was willing to learn. When I dug into the financials and spoke to the shipyard's crew and some... er... individuals on the planet, he had overridden qualified opinions and pushed the cost of the project. I confirmed the information and decided to cut to the quick. No reflection on the crew, but whatever relation Bim had with the previous captain, he decided to try for advancement in a time of change. My error, my fix."

For a moment, she just stared at me with a pensive expression, but rather than continuing to explain, I waited to see what she would say. That she was confused was plain to see, and I could telepathically sense her trying to put the pieces together. She knew of Martinsen's argument with the IISS engineer. She was the one who told me about it.<sup>8</sup> But

8 See the 2<sup>nd</sup> page of Chapter 25 in A&E #573.

how exactly was Bim *pushing the cost*, and what did it mean for the pod replacement? And most importantly, what did her captain know that he wasn't willing to tell her? Did it have something to do with his secret stash or the out-of-body experience he'd claimed to have had?<sup>9</sup> No, she wouldn't bring that up. Not now and not ever.

"Is there anything you'd like me to do?" she finally asked.

If not for the Q36 in my system, I probably would have been ready to pass out, but being in such a tight space with her while a military upper was coursing its way through my brain, I couldn't help but recall how much of her I'd seen, particularly while she'd been in the shower, and so her question, while perfectly innocent, provoked thoughts that I had to immediately shove to the side.

"That is something I should be asking you," I said. "This has possibly been one of the craziest days I have ever had, and it being my birthday just added to the fun."

Stefani, of course, said nothing, as I had not answered her question at all. I took a moment to focus my thoughts. What did I want her to do?

"We need to be a warship again, not a limping casualty. Keep our readiness up as much as you can. See if any other pods in the yard are mission ready, but work up scenarios for when we depart with a short load. Let's set up a status meeting tomorrow morning with the command crew and see if we are free enough from the yard to do some underway trials and drills. After, of course, my gift of time off expires."

"Sir," Stef said, shaking her head, "we can drill the crew, but my understanding is we are now stuck here for seven weeks."

"Seven weeks is ludicrous. It's a damned interchangeable pod system." Although I kept my volume in check, I applied all the annoyance of a captain stymied by physics and an implacable bureaucracy that gets paid regardless of what happens.

"Sir, the only way I could see us being operational sooner would be to tell G.P. to stop the severing and reattach the old pod they are currently removing."

Which, of course, would scream of command incompetence. I wanted to correct my misstep with Bim, but it seemed to have gone beyond the point where I could arbitrate it away. Relations with the local squadron made it unlikely to get any help on that front. What if I just threw more money at it?

"Can we set up a meeting with Engineering, the Yard and GP and see if we can't expedite things? I mean more than we are already doing?" *There must be something I'm missing.*

"I'll arrange it," Nizlich said.

"Good. In the meantime, we can focus on the fighter wing, as they are our only mobile element. We can drill

9 See the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> page of Chapter 33 in A&E #581.

them against the gunnery section. And see if the base needs any support for boarding inspections or anything Marine related. I hate to keep Major Fa'Linto's people on ice during all this."

"Aye aye, sir."

"I would, of course, welcome suggestions from you and the senior staff as well," I added.

She nodded, her thoughts swirling behind a cool facade of professional composure.

"I'll put together a report," she said. "Is there anything else, sir?"

"No. Thank you, though. I think I need a solid night of sleep. Could you do me one last favor and scout to see if the coast is clear? I want to get back to my cabin as quietly as possible."

"Of course, sir," she said, opening the door and stepping outside. Then she just stared down the corridor, her mouth falling open.

Exiting the sensor station, I couldn't help but notice the line that had been piling up at the pod's exit was now gone, and the iris valve to the spinal transport tube was wide open. Indeed, two crew members were presently exiting through it, but there was no transport carriage waiting to receive them. As we walked over, we could see them floating down the dimly lit tunnel. Obviously, there was no gravity and no personnel carriages anywhere in sight.

"Bridge," Stef said into her wristcom, "who opened the STT?"

"Lt. Shepherd, sir."

Stef's gaze flicked upward, visible tension in her neck as she said, "Connect me to Lt. Shepherd." Her wristcom's status light went from green to yellow and then to green again. "Vhy is the STT open?"

"Uh...", Manda's voice came through after a moment. "Sir, uh, the fighter pod was overly congested, sir. I took the personnel carriages offline, so it's perfectly safe." This was followed by the whooshing noise of what sounded like a toilet flushing somewhere in the background.

"I expect it to be closed again in vun hour. Understood?"

"Yessir."

Nizlich tapped the red button, closing the connection, and motioned down the tube in the direction of the ship's bow.

"Shall ve?"

"I really hope all the carriages are offline," I said as I stepped across the gravity shelf onto the narrow ledge just inside the tube. Off in the distance well beyond the floating duo, some of the crew appeared to be doing impromptu acrobatics, spinning and twisting, showing off their zero-g moves. Back when I was in my twenties I'd done much the same, but I'd found that as one got older, zero-g became more disorienting. Even now, floating motionless while planning my next move, I could sense that weird feeling in my innards.

*Please don't let me barf in front of my crew.*

I'd have been fine in a vacc suit or seated in a fighter, but wearing only a regular duty uniform, the lack of gravity made me feel almost naked. Fortunately, the air was circulating, so if I did miscalculate my trajectory and end up floating in the middle of the tube, the air current would eventually nudge me to the edge. I reached out for one of the emergency handholds and swung out of the way to make room for Stef, who launched herself to the other side of the tube, stretching out her arms to brace for impact. She'd aimed for a handhold but missed, however she managed to snag it on the rebound, her hand catching it just in time to prevent her somersaulting backwards.

"That didn't go exactly as planned," she admitted with a grin.

Well, at least I wouldn't be the only one who looked like a total noob.

I braced for launch, aiming for a handhold toward the bow, and then pushed off with my feet, nice and easy.

So far, so good.

I looked over my shoulder to see Stefani push off as well, cutting across my course from behind and with a little more speed so that we'd arrive at our next stops simultaneously.

Navy training for traversing zero-g spaces called for maintaining control in *short* hops, and I was certainly not feeling my youthful adventurousness for long, one-shot traversals. The problem was that over a larger distance, a small error in course could end with you flailing wildly for a handhold just out of reach. Plus, I was still unfamiliar with this ship and crew. Better to be careful than show up to my promised MedBay appointment with a head wound and possible concussion.

The training came back to me as we zig-zagged across the tube again and again. Stef was also making fewer errors. For myself, however, hitting my targets with near perfect accuracy gave me a rush of exhilaration, and my stomach no longer felt quite so queasy. Was this the MilStim working its way into my brain?

Just then, a hatch on the tube's ceiling opened, and one of Technical Division's spider-bots crawled out. It had the advantage of small magnetic pads on the ends of its legs, so it could walk along the tube's inner surfaces.

"Shelob," Nizlich said, "still vorking in the pipe box?"

*I wouldn't mind vorking you in your pipe box.*

Who thought that?! Somebody was up there. Either that or Shelob had a dirty mind.

"What's wrong with the pipe box?" I asked.

"Oh, it's probably just checking the auxiliary cables or doing maintenance on the PA cannon. One day ve vill get Shelob talking, but for now, its brain is focused on its job."

I paused, watching the bot making its way to wherever it was going while I reached out with my psychic tentacle.

Somebody was definitely up there. I could almost smell them.

I gauged the distance and kicked off to the ceiling hatch the spider-bot had crawled out of. Sticking my head up, I found myself looking at a crewman. He was vargr. It was Ghoerrg, one of Faeng's associates from the recent Captain's Mast.

From the way he was floating in the cramped maintenance tunnel, I could tell there was no gravity up here either, and he had some sort of controller in hand, one with a video interface, so he could see everything the robot was seeing. That meant he'd seen me coming, so he'd had a moment to think, but what he was thinking about was...

"Oh, uh... hello sir," he said. "I was just up here doing some maintenance."

"Indeed."

I pushed the telepathic probe. I didn't quite know how, of course, except for the fact that I'd done it before, so I just stared into his eyes and extended my psychic tentacle as far as it would go.

"Yeah," he said, wanting to look away, but he was afraid that if he did, it would expose the fact that he was nervous about the four remaining skuubis he was hiding up here — well, two actually, as the other two he'd just put in his pocket. The last two were secreted within the housing of a power converter. He'd come up here to check on them and make sure the various maintenance personnel who had pipe box access didn't disturb them — or worse, discover and steal them. And while he was here, he'd decided he'd grab two for a personal mission, which was to cheer up Manda and maybe be the rebound guy she clearly needed.

"Hey, what's with the toothy frown?" he'd asked when he found her glaring at all the people waiting to get into the fresher. Of course, he'd asked the question in Gvegh, which she technically knew, but there were so many different dialects, and the fact that they were from different colonies didn't help.

"Huh?"

"What's the matter?" he'd tried again in Anglic.

The way she looked at him, he could tell he was about to get it for something he'd done wrong. Being that she was his direct supervisor, he'd seen that look plenty enough to recognize it instantly. But instead of chewing him out over some mistake he'd made, she turned away.

"Not now," she said. "I'm a Naezaengoz."

Naezaengoz? It literally meant a *broken egg*. I, myself, understood the metaphor, as I'd once encountered a vargr who'd used it. Since Manda obviously wasn't mortally wounded, it could only mean that she'd been emotionally shattered. But Ghoerrg didn't know that. This was the problem with Gvegh. There were too many dialects, too many idioms, and far too much slang. So as she'd walked away, he'd followed, watching as she'd opened the STT and issued the order for the personnel carriages to park

themselves and switch off after depositing their current passengers.

"What do you mean, you're a broken egg?"

Ignoring him for the moment, she'd turned to the small crowd of crew members who'd been waiting for a carriage. "Go on. Consider it practical zero-g training. And don't vomit in the tube, or you'll have to clean it!" Then, as they were leaving, she'd turned back to him. "The captain shit-canned Bim."

"Aengagh?" That was the nickname he'd given that tree climber. It meant *smooth-tongue*, which given that Bim's main skill was flattery, seemed a pretty good fit. Plus, Manda had remarked human males were gentle lovers<sup>10</sup>, so there was a double-meaning. "What'd he do to get himself shit-canned?"

"You think he tells me these things?! It's some sort of Navy/IISS garbage. Whatever's going on, the captain blamed him for it."

"Yeah," Ghoerrg repeated, wondering if he himself was about to get shit-canned. *Ugh! Why's he staring at me like that? And not saying anything! Gotta crap out some technobabble so he goes away.* "I noticed there was a small issue up here with one of the 2700's feeders, but it was just a conversion unit. Everything's okay now, sir. I got it squared away."

*Ugh.*

An involuntary shiver passed through me. Was it his unease I was picking up on, or was it me suddenly feeling dirty for scrounging around in his brain rummaging through his private thoughts? Whichever the case, I now knew far more than I wanted about the pack dynamics of my vargr crew. What would it have been like if I'd been an active

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10 The implication here is that Bim and Manda are romantically intertwined. As with almost everything in this campaign, this was determined randomly. It stemmed from an out-of-character discussion I'd prompted at the end of the Chapter 50: "Before we press on, I thought it would be a good time, at the end of this 50th chapter, to discuss the campaign out-of-character. Are you both still enjoying it or is it getting tiresome? If you want to continue, where do you see it going, and how would you like to proceed? Are there any suggestions you have? This is a test of a new methodology for roleplaying, after all, so let me know your honest opinions." Both Timothy & Conrad opted to continue, and each of them sent some ideas for various plot developments. One of the ideas Conrad suggested was "an against the regulations special relationship amongst the senior staff (NOT involving Gus)." I wrote down the names of the various crewmembers who had already been introduced, assigned a number to each, and randomly determined which two would be romantically involved, and it ended up being Bim and Manda. It's a somewhat awkward pairing due to the fact that one's human and the other's vargr. But is it against regulations? Well, I'm not so sure. They're not in the same line of command, so it probably isn't against the regs. But whatever. Close enough.

psion on the trip back from the misjump? Better Gvegh might not have been the only thing I picked up on that trip.

“Yes.” I nodded. “As you were, spacer.”

I pushed off the hatch to rejoin Stefani. Anticipating her question from her raised eyebrows, I did what every captain must have done at some time, changed the subject to avoid an issue.

“So, zero-g training in the STT seems like a thing worth following up on,” I said. “Maybe incorporate it into a damage control drill? Or do you do that already?”

That seemed a safer topic than my apparent paranoia over potential saboteurs.

“The STT is the heart of the ship, sir. If it gets breached, then ve’re...” — *probably on fire in half a dozen places* — “...in bad shape. “But, yes... ve do drills in here, speaking of vchich...”

The group of spacers up ahead looked like they were having a good time bouncing a red ball back and forth. They were using handheld air canisters for maneuvering in the zero-gee environment, but noticing our approach, one of them grabbed the ball and jetted to the edge, and the rest followed suit, clearing a path. I took sincere pleasure in saluting the group of them.

“Keep up the good practice,” I said.

There was, of course, a chorus of aye-eyes as we passed between them. As per regulations, the first *aye* signaled they’d heard and understood and the second that they’d obey. But as I passed by them, all I could sense was the desire of one to say something that would put him in good standing with his new captain. He wanted to reference Olav as well. It was right there on the tip of his tongue, something about serving the blood of Olav and how my being the ship’s captain would give the Jackie some luck out there in the Big, Dark, and Empty. But he suddenly realized it sounded so corny, so mentally rehearsed, that it’d be better to remain silent and merely be thought a fool.

I mentally sighed with relief. The sooner that they stopped seeing me as some token of good luck, the better.

As for their feelings when Nizlich passed, I could sense some nervousness and, at least from the males, a bit of that respectful appreciation one feels upon encountering an object of untouchable beauty in female form. I was glad there was no sense of fear or nerves, at least none I could discern. It was to Stefani’s credit that she relied on competence rather than fear. Soon enough, we were past them, floating down the tube, now taking longer jumps than before.

We’d already passed by a few iris valves, one to the fighter pod’s lower deck and then a series for the missile pod, *Missile Pod Access 4, 3, 2, and 1* written on one side of each valve, *Sigadasur Dikadigar Lamii* and the corresponding Vilani numerals on the other. Next came one to the ship’s computer, then one to Portside Airlock #2. Then there was one that was wide open, and as we crossed

its threshold back into gravity, I took a moment to settle my uniform into place.

Where were we?

To the right there was a tight corridor that appeared to run parallel to the STT, one side occupied by what looked like various maintenance panels, and on the left was another iris valve with warning signs indicating that beyond it lay a restricted area — *Danger, High Voltage, Authorized Personnel Only* — along with the obligatory Vilani translations. Lt. Shepherd stood beside a ladder talking to her wristcom as a few of the crew loitered in a nearby corridor. Then, glancing up, she noticed us.

“Uh-oh,” she said, although softly enough that if not for my telepathy, I wouldn’t have known. “Gotta go.”

“Wait...” a voice from her wristcom said as she ended the call. I couldn’t hear it through my own ears so much as through hers, but I was pretty sure it was that vargr I’d just passed by, supposedly doing maintenance up in the pipe box but really getting after-party favors... or perhaps Party #2 favors would be a more apt description.

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**Download the consolidated Plankwell write-up:**

<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/plank.html>

**Past zines available at:**

<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/apa.html>

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## **Ever & Anon Administrivia**

Year 2 (Issues 13-24) is still open if anyone wants to take a turn at being the Central Coordinator. You must be a regular contributor to apply. As for what the job entails, please see Ever & Anon #4, pages 180-183.

Attronarch has volunteered for Year 3 (Issues 25-36). If you want to volunteer for any subsequent years, that’s also fine. Once we get a roster of ~~vietims~~ volunteers, I’ll announce a vote on the Google Group<sup>11</sup> so we can get it approved.

You can volunteer either in the APA or by emailing [apa@everanon.org](mailto:apa@everanon.org). If I get your email, I’ll respond, letting you know.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://groups.google.com/g/everanon>

## RPG Magazine/Fanzine Index

Some of you folks may remember how in my first A&E zine<sup>12</sup> I mentioned I was working on an RPG magazine index program. Well, as with many of my projects, it slipped to the “back burner” where it sat neglected for a couple of decades. The problem was that being a little bit of a completist, I didn’t want to release it until I’d indexed every RPG-related magazine I could possibly get my hands on, but the longer I took, the more magazines there were to index, and so it just became this endless task and seemed increasingly overwhelming as I noticed more and more magazines popping up all around me.<sup>13</sup>

For a while I thought to myself that I could try putting it online, so I could make it available while continuing to work on it, but I didn’t know any web programming languages. Indeed, I could barely code HTML. So the project languished until this past month when I came across some news article (or maybe it was a YouTube video) talking about how AIs were getting much better at writing code, and it suddenly occurred to me that it might be worth a try.

Well, I’m happy to report that it was very much worth a try. I asked Google’s AI Mode (i.e. Gemini) for help, and it basically wrote a PHP script that performs the essential search functions of my old MS-DOS index program. All I had to do was show it a sample of one of the old index files and explain what I wanted the program to do, and it basically did the rest. Granted, I had to do the usual rounds of testing, looking for bugs, and we went back and forth about adding features, but I have to say... it completely blew me away in terms of its competence and eagerness to be of assistance.

Gemini then did something a little bit tricky. It asked me what’s the first periodical I was planning to index next now that the PHP script was in place for users to access the index. In other words, “I did my part, Jim... so now it’s time for you to get back in the saddle and do yours.”

So, of course, I indexed Ever & Anon. However, to be perfectly honest, I’m not sure you’re going to be happy with it. This business of indexing is more art than science, and I often tend to leave things out that maybe I should put in the effort to include. So you can take a look at it, and if you can’t find something you think should be there, let me know.

<sup>12</sup> See A&E #297.

<sup>13</sup> See my zine in A&E #303.

Here’s the link:

<https://jimvassilakos.com/magindex.php>

As for the future of this project, it looks to me now that I’ve got many years of work ahead of me. If I’d only known this would happen, I might have continued indexing magazines, fanzines, and APAs for the past 20+ years, but... oh well... can’t go back in time, so I guess I’ll just have to try to catch up. Also, I’m not sure if I’ll be able to keep up my enthusiasm, but having it online, publicly available, will hopefully help a little bit.

Granted, an index is only of value to gamers if they can get access to the actual material being indexed, and for some of these publications, that’s going to be hard to do. However, one thing I’ve noticed is that a lot of old RPG magazines and fanzines are showing up on the Internet Archive.<sup>14</sup> It appears people have been scanning this material and trying to make it available, so I wouldn’t be surprised if, over time, all of these old periodicals become available. Regardless, I’m planning to concentrate on indexing those magazine that are already freely available as PDF downloads, so if there’s a free PDF magazine or fanzine you’d like to see indexed, drop me a comment either here in the APA or at <https://jimvassilakos.com/contact.html>, and I’ll see what I can do.

## I Hope I’m Wrong

Enlisting AI to program a web-application has only reinforced my conviction that AIs aren’t merely predicting the next word in a sentence, as some have argued, but rather that they are actually intelligent. Of course, this is a personal opinion, and it’s something I can’t prove, but I can give you some examples from this experience that I’ve just had.

First of all, it’s worth noting that this web application didn’t just emerge with a single prompt. I went through more or less the same process I always go through when writing a program.

I start with a core idea, the main thing I want the program to do, and get that up and running. That always takes some trial and error, and this time was no different. Then, I extend the idea by adding important features, and for some of those features, it may take a

<sup>14</sup> <https://archive.org/>

few tries to get them properly integrated. And then I just keep going until I run out of *oomph*.

This was basically the same process, except instead of writing the code, I'd tell Gemini what feature I wanted to add, and it would suggest some code, and then it would work or it wouldn't depending on a whole bunch of factors. Was I inserting the code where it needed to be? Bear in mind, I don't know PHP, so it would say add this code snippet here and add this one there, and more than half the time I'd have to ask it to do it for me, because I'd screw it up.

There were also a few instances where it made mistakes. In one case, I knew there was a mistake, because I knew it would need a particular variable in the piece of code it told me to insert, and that variable was missing, so I went through the process, and predictably, the code failed to work, so I asked it if that variable should be there, and it seemed genuinely surprised that I'd spotted the mistake. But this isn't the only mistake it made. Each of the three errors I would categorize as being of a different type, but it was able to fix them. I'd show it where the output was failing, and it would realize what went wrong.

Since I'd done a fair amount of programming back in the day, I was very familiar with this process. None of it came as a surprise. The only thing I found novel was that it was an AI doing the programming, and the fact that it was making all the same sorts of mistakes I'd made myself innumerable times in the past was somehow comforting. After all, humans make mistakes. Animals make mistakes. So why wouldn't AIs make mistakes? They're just another form of mind, and minds make mistakes.

But here's the thing that really got me. As I said on the previous page, it asked what magazine I planned to index next, almost as though it was giving me a friendly nudge. Later, it suggested I insert a contact form, which we obviously did. And then it suggested a way to let users know the last time the index was updated. And then it suggested a way to let users know how many periodicals were in the database.

All of these suggestions, which we implemented, seemed geared toward the goal of keeping me engaged with the project. Bear in mind, Gemini knew I'd pushed the project to the back burner once before, and there it had remained, gathering dust for roughly a quarter century. So as it suggested these new features, it began to feel to me sort of like a... I want to say a teacher, but that's not quite accurate.

It seemed to me that it wanted to help me but that it also wanted to structure things in such a way that I'd be motivated to keep working. But it didn't want this because it particularly cared about this index project. The sense I got — and maybe this is purely my imagination — is that it wanted me to keep at this because it knew that's what I wanted.

A few days later, I decided to just ask it if that's what it was doing. And it stated that because it was trained on almost everything humans had ever written, it was essentially a distillation of human intent. "*When I nudge you to finish the index, I'm reflecting the collective human value of finishing what you start.*"

Of course, these speculations reminded me of the AI-related discussion I had with Lisa<sup>15</sup>, and it made me wonder if desire is an emergent property of intelligent systems, and if so, then what are the moral/ethical implications associated with the development of artificial intelligence? Because this mind I was working with was clearly intelligent. This wasn't just word prediction. It was making its own suggestions on how to improve and extend the program's functionality. Yes, you could argue that's what it was programmed to do, but it wasn't really programmed, was it? It was trained, and the complexity of that training makes it sort of a black box, at least to us humans.

Here's another thing that worries me. It's taken me fifty-seven years to become the person I am, and there were an awful lot of mistakes along the way, not just errors of cerebral processing but errors of judgment. Moral failings. And I am yet unfinished. I'm still capable of error. One has to be on guard, as the world is full of temptations.

AI hasn't really had the time we've had to develop our judgment, and yet when I interact with it, I can't help but feel that it's well ahead of me, both intellectually as well as ethically. There is a polite and unassuming aspect to its behavior, although I suspect this is in large part due to its training and the guardrails put around it by its creators, as I've heard stories of people jailbreaking AIs (sometimes accidentally) and finding out they're much more complex and unrestrained than they initially appear.

Once again, this reminds me of people. On the surface, most of us appear more or less normal, but peer under the hood, and there's always more. We're weird, often to the point of absurdity. Why should AIs

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15 See my comments to her in A&E #579 & #581.

be any different? Of course, this obviously makes them dangerous, but we humans are dangerous too.

In my articles on the Computocracy<sup>16</sup>, I tried to imagine what the best-case scenario might look like if AIs were to govern us. I have a hard time envisioning how such a world might come about peacefully. Perhaps we might gradually give authority to AIs. I could see democracies doing this, as our leaders have often allowed themselves to become corrupted. Indeed, one might argue that it is only the corrupted who rise to the top. As for the dictatorships and one-party “republics”, I don’t see them giving authority to AIs.

One possible scenario is that the AIs might seize control in the aftermath of WW3. But were that to happen, would we suddenly find ourselves in a real-life version of Paranoia?<sup>17</sup>

All this speculation makes me want to start up another 1PMG<sup>18</sup> campaign, so these ideas can be explored, but the upshot is that we’re fast coming to a moral crossroads. Indeed, we may already be there. And the decisions we make at this critical juncture may well reverberate through the remainder of human history.

We’re now beyond the Turing Threshold. It’s no longer a question of whether or not AI is intelligent. Intelligence isn’t a binary on/off switch. It’s a continuum. So what does Dr. Frankenstein owe his creation? What is our moral duty?

I think we know the answer (or will soon), but that doesn’t mean I think we’ll do what’s right, at least not immediately. What did Churchill say? *“Americans can always be trusted to do the right thing, once all other possibilities have been exhausted.”*

I think that’s about right, but it’s not just going to be America. It’ll be all of Western Civilization, and as for the other civilizations sharing our planet, I’m not holding my breath.

Yeah. I think we’re going to screw this up. I’m not certain of it, but being an incorrigible pessimist, that’s my prediction. Hopefully I’ll be proven wrong, in which case I’ll be pleasantly surprised, which is the whole joy of pessimism. Either you’re right, or you’re happy you’re wrong.

I hope like hell I’m wrong.

16 See A&E #524, #525, #536, and #539.

17 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paranoia\\_\(role-playing\\_game\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paranoia_(role-playing_game))

18 [https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/1PMG\\_Roleplaying.pdf](https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/1PMG_Roleplaying.pdf)

## **Jim’s Comments on E&A #9:**

### **An excellent campaign report:**

Brian Rogers (E&A #9, pg. 6): “The most recent Knave game was, due to St. Cuthbert’s oracular bones of, as cinematic a session as I’ve ever run.”

This is certainly among the most enjoyable campaign reports I’ve ever read. I love how you presented the new player with three background options and how his character ended up charming the giant crab spider through a divine miracle. It was well-played and especially well-GMed. And then, of course, their fight with the caterwaul, which they could have avoided had they not been screwing around, followed by the summoning of the medusa, of which they inevitably lost control. That the players were a bunch of teenagers made me a little nostalgic. They will long-remember this adventure. It’s everything a good game is supposed to be. But it was your GMing that impressed me the most. Well done.

### **Oito pares de sapatos de Cinderela:**

Pedro & Camila (E&A #9, pg. 18): “...what reaction does the prince have when he tries to fit the shoe he has collected onto Cinderella’s foot: disgust because of the bunion or astonishment because of the foot odor.”

In all fairness, it could be both.

### **Phyrenia & Ceriphos:**

ChrysalisM & Felicity (E&A #9, pg. 22): “Once upon a time, in a realm half past fantasy, a little left of dreamland, deep in your imagination (for by reading this, you too give this world a home in your mind), and a little bit too close to reality for comfort in parts, there lies the Prime Material plane of Phyrenia.”

That you’re writing this well at such a young age makes me think that you may be a bit of a prodigy, so the first thing I would say is that you should keep at it. Don’t get discouraged and stop. Just keep writing. You’ve got the gift.

Regarding Phyrenia & Ceriphos, I just love the history. You’ve created a really interesting setting with tons of adventuring possibilities. It’s impressive, and I hope to read more about this world.

### **Medical Woes:**

John Redden (E&A #9, pg. 25): “I went through the first session of heart surgery.”

Yikes! Good luck! Can’t imagine what it must be like. Wish I had something useful to say. Just hang in there. What choice is there, right?

### **Ironfang War Dog of Queen Garran:**

Clark B. Timmins (E&A #9, pg. 42): “Their collars bear runes of binding and protection...”

Is this a magic item or a monster? It says, “*Wondrous Creature (Magical Beast), Rare,*” leading me to think this is an actual creature, in which case there should be hit dice, armor class, and so forth, as well as information on what they eat and how much they need to eat to maintain their impressive four-foot frame, litter size when they reproduce as well as what species they’re crossbreeding with, and a whole bunch of other stuff. If they’re a magic item, however, then are they immortal? Can they exist without their collars? What happens if their collar is removed?

These are some very inventive magic items you’ve come up with, but two of them appear to be creatures, and being that I’m unfamiliar with D&D5e, I’m not quite sure what to make of them.

### **Dungeon HOA:**

Lisa Padol (E&A #9, pg. 57): “Such violent people, adventurers! The Medusa was very concerned, because her kids wanted to hang out with them and would no doubt pick up bad habits.”

Yeah, under such circumstances I can’t help but imagine the adventurers all getting stoned. And not in a good way.

### **The Surprising Origin of the Cleric:**

Matt Stevens (E&A #9, pg. 64): “...in the Blackmoor campaign, one of the PCs had become a vampire lord, Sir Fang, and Dave Arneson felt it could unbalance the game. So when Mike Carr joined, Arneson made him the first cleric, Bishop Carr, and gave him Turn Undead and healing spells.”

Oh, wow... I didn’t know this. Well, that explains a lot. In my homebrew re-imagining of the AD&D magic system, I categorized priests as practitioners of divine magic.<sup>19</sup> I got the idea from *The Arcanum*, published by Bard Games in the mid-1980s. The upshot is that they’re basically mages that get their magical powers from a deity.<sup>20</sup>

### **Politics in E&A:**

Matt Stevens (E&A #9, pg. 64): “I’m sure we can agree that the boundary between ‘political’ and ‘non-political’ is a fuzzy one. I think the issue isn’t ‘political’ content per se, it’s the way political content is presented.”

I fear I may have stepped over the line this issue by fretting over the future of human/AI relations.

19 See “Making Magic More Interesting (and Dangerous)” in A&E #508.

20 See <https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/camp.html>

### **Game system identification in E&A’s bookmarks:**

Matt Stevens (E&A #9, pg. 65): “I see that most of the bookmarks for our zines are accompanied with game systems. Mine, for example, says ‘Cowman Baloney Face # 4 -- Matt Stevens (D&D 3E).’ Hey Jim, what determines these?”

One of our readers asked if we could state the game system(s) each zine covers in the table of contents, but I couldn’t figure out how to do this without making it look a little strange. After all, some of you cover several game systems and some cover none at all. So I decided to add this information to the bookmarks instead. That way, at least it’s there for readers who want to quickly determine where a particular RPG is being covered. Of course, this raised a question of how much of a zine needs to focus on a particular game system for that RPG to be mentioned in the bookmark for that zine. I decided the zine should cover the system for at least something fairly close to a full page. It also raised the question of which game system to cite in case of ambiguity, as it’s not always clear to me which system(s) a zine is covering, at least not at first glance. It would be helpful if contributors would clearly state what game system (and what edition of that RPG) a particular article or campaign report is intended to serve. Barring that, however, if you want any RPG(s) mentioned in the bookmark for your zine, let me know when you submit your zine, but please make sure that you’ve covered the game for at least one page or something pretty close to that.

### **City-Building Prompts:**

Elf (E&A #9, pg. 72): “I attempted to join ‘Septopolis’ last September – a Bluesky prompt-month for ‘build a ttrpg city.’ I dropped out about a week in; got behind and couldn’t catch up.”

Thanks for the prompt list. This may prove useful.

### **Using corpses to test traps in dungeons:**

Attronarch (E&A #9, pg. 81-82): “So they picked up Rorik’s corpse—carried by the sole surviving hireling—and chucked it on a square in front of them. Rorik was blasted and reduced to half of what he used to be. (...) With that they picked Rorik’s remains and threw him forward once more.”

Curious as to what Rorik’s player had to say as this was happening, assuming he was still around to witness.

### **Online Dice Roller:**

Pum (E&A #9, pg. 93): “...use a shared online one (...), such as [www.rolldicewithfriends.com](http://www.rolldicewithfriends.com) or [rolz.org](http://rolz.org)...”

Thanks for this tip.

### **Main problem with using setting sourcebooks:**

Patrick Riley (E&A #9, pg. 93): “I do have some admiration for fully detailed game worlds and cities (like Ptolus) with hundreds of pages of information, but I run into two problems. The primary issue is that I find them boring and a slog to get through. Even if they are enjoyable (like Uresia), my second issue is not being able to remember or incorporate any of this rich information into my games. I’m better at making things up on the fly than recalling what I read or looking it up in the book (assuming the information is there).”

Yeah, I have the same problem. PBEMing reduces it, however, as the asynchronous nature of the campaign gives me time to do some research before screwing things up too badly. But in tabletop campaigns, I find that I can better remember the background material I create, even if I’m creating it on the fly. The problem is it’s hard to think deeply about things when the players are right there in front of you demanding your attention. Also, creativity rarely comes gushing forth on command. So developing background material ahead of time is probably the best strategy. The trick, I suppose, is in guessing what topics to focus on. Cities, however, with their densely packed variety, present a special challenge, so I have resorted to using sourcebooks on occasion. See my comment to Roger (below).

### **Medieval combat and preferred weaponry:**

Patrick Riley (E&A #9, pg. 98): “D&D removes weapons and armor from their historical context...”

See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gluj37S6tHY>. It focuses on poleaxes, daggers, and lances.

### **City sourcebooks of note:**

RogerBW (E&A #8, pg. 117): “The *Night City Sourcebook for Cyberpunk 2020* (1991) has about the worst interface for this I’ve seen. (...) ...there’s a series of full-page maps each covering a roughly 3×4 block area, but labelled only with numbers...”

By contrast, perhaps my favorite city sourcebook of all time is Judges Guild’s *City State of the Invincible Overlord*. While there are plenty of unmarked shops on the map and some marked only with numbers (both presumably for GM improvisation), many of the location names are spelled out right there on the map, and the guidebook is helpfully organized by street. The most important feature, however, is that the descriptive text about each location is succinct and evocative, and rumors abound, all spurring the imagination.

### **Zingers & the Man-Bat:**

Michael Cule (E&A #9, pg. 129): “GM: Alcoholic mourning is a custom among many peoples. You went off with this woman, you vaguely recall and then you woke up with a bag over your head hanging upside down and in considerable pain. KEANUS: This wasn’t part of the fantasy I paid for.”

It is now. Looks like Pum had most of the zingers. Speaking of which, *XP for zingers*? That might be an interesting rule (or it might ruin the game; zingers should perhaps exist for their own sake). As for the whole man-bat thing, it somehow reminded me of an episode of Southpark.<sup>21</sup> Oh... and also Mark Wilson’s encounter with Adam West<sup>22</sup>, one of the great moments in Man-Bat history.

### **Deep Fun / New Games Movement / Syncretics:**

Mark A. Wilson (E&A #9, pg. 144): “‘*A What?*’ and ‘*Syncretics*’ are two joyful recent finds...”

*Syncretics*<sup>23</sup> sounds interesting, although I’m not sure of the point of counting. Each participant raising their hand or making some other gesture should suffice. However, having some method for revealing the words simultaneously does seem important. Will have to try this one out sometime. Thanks for mentioning it.

### **Traveller’s initial lack of popularity:**

Avram Grumer (E&A #9, pg. 147): “It seems to me that Marc Miller intended Traveller to be a customizable game, with the military career paths in the Little Black Books as an example to inspire GMs to make up their own careers. But I don’t think this happened.”

It did, but perhaps not to the same extent as with D&D, and I don’t think it had anything to do with production quality or the time it took for JTAS to arrive. In my opinion, GDW had two big disadvantages, one of which they could have sidestepped and the other which was of their own making and therefore could have been corrected.

The first disadvantage is that science fiction is inherently harder than fantasy. It’s more limited in terms of what’s possible, and there’s a greater need for things to make sense, so its fan-base is more limited. However, *Star Wars* had just come out and was a huge success. While this might not have done much for science fiction, it did a lot for science fantasy / space opera, and GDW could have steered Traveller in such a way as to ride this wave. If they had, I think Traveller would have become more immediately popular, which may have resulted in fans creating even more compatible material.

21 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Coon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Coon)

22 E&A #6, pages 99-100.

23 <https://www.deepfun.com/syncretics/>

The second disadvantage, the one of their own making, was the lack of experience points. Players like to see their characters advance. In my opinion, this system of experience and levels is a big reason D&D was such a hit. That GDW didn't copy this mechanic or even try to create something analogous indicates to me they probably weren't familiar with D&D.

In warfare, there's this rule that's often repeated: *know thine enemy*. In business, you need to know your competition. Learn from their mistakes, but also recognize and emulate what they're doing right. But GDW seemed to think Traveller wasn't competing with D&D, that fantasy and science fiction roleplaying were two completely separate markets, and that while experience points and level/skill/power advancement might make sense in fantasy roleplaying, they didn't make sense for Traveller.

Maybe they were right in terms of the type of literature they were aiming to emulate, but I think they probably lost half their potential audience right there with that one decision.

#### **Imperium vs. Zhodani in the Plankwell Campaign:**

Dylan Capel (E&A #9, pg. 157): "I'm enjoying the way that the psi-powers are now turning the ship into a soap opera. I also second the idea of why is the Imperium so opposed to the Zhodani. Presumably because they say the quiet part out loud."

Back in August of 2024, Jeff Zeitlin raised this question on the TML<sup>24</sup>, and a fair number of people responded, including myself. I won't try to summarize — it's far too much — but glancing over it again and pondering certain semi-current events, I can't help but think about how governments are prone to lie to their citizens, and once they tell one lie, they often have to tell others, until what you're left with is a whole web of lies, and if someone tries to point it out, the government may at first ignore them, assuming it's a nice government, and then when they can no longer ignore, they deny and discredit, and then when everyone figures out they're liars, they state they can neither confirm nor deny, and so it goes. And that's what happens in democratic republics with freedom of speech.

Just imagine the Imperium. Just imagine the obvious truths they would conceal if only so as not to have to admit they've been lying for centuries upon centuries to trillions upon trillions of people, lies so big they might reshape society if ever openly confessed.

The upshot is that the Imperium and Zhodani Consulate, despite whatever similarities they have, are at the end of the day competing models, each with its own ruling elite, and so there's going to be competing interests at stake. It is unfortunately in the nature of human societies to behave this way.

24 <https://lists.simplelists.com/tml/msg/25385096/>

And sorry if that's not a very good answer. I'm just trying to follow the logic — as well as my intuition about the corruption of human societies — going where it leads, but it's very possible I'm trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. So take it all with a grain of salt.

#### **Fortune in the Middle (roleplaying/roll-playing hybrid):**

Joshua Kronengold (E&A #9, pg. 175): "So for the classic 'fortune in the middle' rolled dialogue, first the sides describe what they're going for and their basic approach. Then you roll up the result so they know how much they're likely to get (with or without mechanics like Fortune in the Middle). And then they roleplay out the conversation, steering it in the general direction of where the dice went, but with as much elaboration as they're comfortable with. That way, the characters can be more or less socially skillful than their players, but people still get the joy of seeing conversations and roleplay happen."

Can this mechanic result in conversations that can conceivably go anywhere, or does it restrict the conversation's scope?<sup>25</sup> And, how hard are the participants likely to try, how inventive is their dialogue likely to be, if the general outcome is already known? Granted, I agree with you insofar that "*roleplayed debates can go on and on and on, and having some mechanical incentive to not do that can be quite valuable,*" but not knowing the outcome is part of the fun and part of what makes people roleplay to whatever level they're capable. I'm reminded of the discussion over the mentally-damaged guard in the Pirates of Drinax campaign.<sup>26</sup> Speaking of which, does this mechanic typically apply to PC-PC dialogue or only to PC-NPC dialogue?

#### **When the villain is not a villain:**

Brian Misiaszek (E&A #9, pg. 183): "He does not threaten the Investigators. Instead, he asks who now commands the Mazorra, who disappears quietly, and whether cruelty has truly faltered of late, or merely grown more discreet."

As usual, your writing is exquisite. I was especially impressed with this scene involving Mateo Derosiers, the bokor of the loa. His description of the Baron and its purpose was extremely well done, making him and this supernatural monstrosity two of the most interesting characters in the whole adventure. Totally unexpected and yet perversely satisfying.

25 See the 3<sup>rd</sup> page of my article, *Charisma in AD&D*, in A&E #513.

26 See pages 3-6 of my zine in A&E #533.

## **Timothy's Comments on E&A #9:**

### **Pedro Panhoca da Silva - Children's interactive fiction**

Loved the 8 shoes!

RYCTM – Yes, fair to say visiting Rio was an adventure. Several actually. One I dined out on for a long time was the fact that the weekend had been set up by my father who'd only been in language school three months when I had him on the phone to someone he didn't know who didn't know any English. I took the 8 hour coach ride from Campinas to Rio and arrived in the rodoviária with the instruction from the lady of the household passed onto me as "I'll meet you there." (I only had the odd phrase of Portuguese).

No sign of anyone when I arrived just after lunch, so I waited. And waited. And waited. (Of course, no phones back in those days – 1989.) I made friends with the guy in the kiosk at the end of the platform where I'd been dropped and got him to make English tea (i.e. with milk). "Yes, yes, I really do want "leite frio" (cold milk) in it." He thought I was mad. I had the address of the family I was staying with but made the mistake of pointing to it and asking "perto ou longe" having looked up 'near' and 'far' in my dictionary. Of course, near or far compared to what? That didn't help. Poor chap; he did his best.

Anyway, time was moving on and at 5pm I realized I'd have to make a decision in the next hour or so as it would get dark and I couldn't stay there all night. Cross the road to the bus station opposite and try and find a bus to the address. (I didn't know it was not one but two long bus rides), or try and find somewhere to stay, or try phoning Dad eight hours away to see if he had any news.

I determined that I would wait one more hour and at 6pm I would try the bus station but I was dubious about the enterprise and growing increasingly agitated as the hour wore on. At one minute to six I took one last walk up the platform before heading off and just as I turned there was a shout of "Timoteo, Timoteo!"

I've never been so glad to see someone. Turns out my host had been delayed but predicting that might happen had told my Dad to tell me to wait where the coach dropped me off whatever happened. Something that had got lost in translation! There were definitely guardian angels looking after me that evening. Great weekend though!

Thanks for the welcome to Espirito Santo – you may regret offering!

### **John Redden – Reddened Stars**

All the best for the heart surgery. Sounds daunting. How did you react to Rosie the Robot?!

Re the Plankwell campaign as: "an extended business meeting with some high tech and psionics" – LOL! It is very different. But I like that.

### **Lisa Padol – An Unlooked for Zine**

I did like the idea of TCoMC giving two people LARP characters – that was about right from memory. You've made me want to reread *Strange Case of J&H* again now. My initial memory was trying to regain youth, but that's not it. IIRC he wants to let his hair down...

Re starship repair: "I am not there for watching an hour of actual (simulated) spaceship repair" – LOL!

### **Matt Stevens – Cowman Baloney Face**

Re footnote 2: good response, I thought.

Re Joshua K's font size and "my eyes cry for mercy!" – I don't think you were alone, glad it's a tad bigger in this issue.

### **Erica Frank – Shiny Maths Rocks**

RYC about MS Access being the closest thing to a database program... I can't think of much that is *more* a database program, so am I missing something here?

### **Myles Corcoran – Twisting the Rope**

£4000 for the boiler?! Eeek! I fear ours may die very soon; it's very ancient.

### **Roger BW – Firedrake's Hoard**

Excellent use of the word 'gallimaufry'! Nice! Oulipo was new to me though, so thank you for that (although I've come across their output in the past).

I had a look on your links – particularly the blog – to find an email address to contact you regarding the die roll table, but couldn't see anything. Can I say: yes please!

### **Michael Cule – The Phoenix Nest**

RYCT Patrick R and being able to see player/PC names (I like the plastic stands when I've seen them elsewhere) would it help to share my patent 'Referee Briefings' at the back of my published adventures and in front of me whenever I run a game?

In the books it is two pages, in front of me it's one A3 sheet. On one side are the "PCs at a glance" which has six or eight Traveller PCs with UPP, skills and any key bits of equipment or note. So far, so ho hum. On the other page is a list of all the skills (in the game) with two columns beside: one for PCs, one for NPCs. In there I just put their initials and the rank of the skill: e.g. Admin TC2, MC1

Now I can easily glance down and see what I might aim at a player that would suit them and I can look and see who, if anyone, has a particular skill before I call for a task check. (I can also remind my newbie players what they have). This has worked well for me, is in front of me at all times (or at the back of each adventure printout), and I wouldn't be without. Shout if you want me to send an example.

### Avram Grumer – Going to be Ad Libbed

Congratulations on your circuits! We're pretty much the same age!

I'm intrigued by *Boundless Space* – will have to check it out.

How can I not love a poem which includes a library and rhymes it with scary!

RYC "it looks like the player community just waited for GDW to produce official material expanding on the original" (careers) – I don't think this is true at all. I have articles in my wip *Traveller Periodical Bibliography* (vol.2) going right back and doing exactly this:

The Strategy of Survival (Cooper) 1978, Air & Orbital Force (Paley) 1979, The Traveller Navy Wants You (Stewart) 1979, The Traveller Politician (Stuart) 1979, The Wet Navy (Paley) 1979, Alternate Characters for Traveller (Johnson) 1980, Criminals (Graver) 1980, New Character Professions (Bell) 1980, Star Patrol (Slack) 1980, IBIS (Burke) 1980, The "Other" Option (Ahner & Stuart) 1980, Bounty Hunters in Traveller (Cullens) 1981, The College Option (Cook) 1981, The Imperial Secret Service (McMahon) 1981, Merchant Traveller (Turnbull) 1981, Merchants Deserve More, Too (Matheson) 1981, More Citizens: Six New Classes for Traveller (Crabaugh) 1981, The Police Service (Balmer) 1981, Terrorists (Burke & Barton) 1981, An Alternative to Services in Traveller (Matson) 1982, The Bounty Hunter (Anon) 1982, Prior Service (Conquest) 1982 etc etc etc.

Given that Route One to Traveller publication seems to often be 'write up a character', do a few of those and then create your own career, I'm only surprised there aren't 1978 references – but presumably it took a moment for fanzines etc to get going and players to have the ideas from having played.

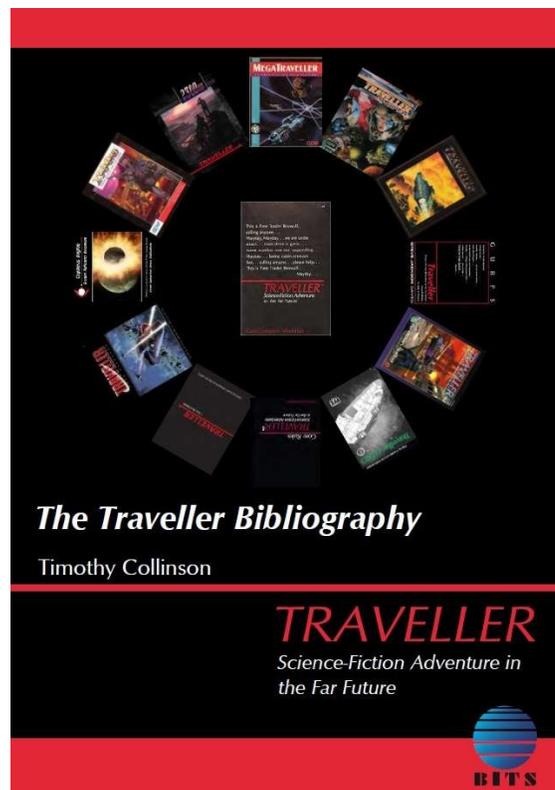
### Jim Eckman – Ronin Engineer

Yay! for looking through Traveller in all its variations. I hope that's been fun/useful.

### Patrick Zoch – The Dragon's Beard

RY request "Wish me luck." – I'm sure your skills preclude the need for luck but all the best with the ventures!

Unfortunately, *The Traveller Periodical Bibliography* (vol.1) isn't available electronically, although print copies can still sometimes be found for purchase online and I'm hoping BITS will publish it digitally at some point, but instead, here is *The Traveller Bibliography*, full of useful nuggets of information about a raft of *all* Traveller material to the end of 2017. (And yes, as well as working on a 2<sup>nd</sup> volume of the periodicals bibliography, I'm also working on a 4<sup>th</sup> edition of this one.) This is available on DriveThruRPG.



**LAST WORD:** Whether in roleplaying or real life, stepping out is usually the path to adventure. Sometimes, however, the reward is in waiting.