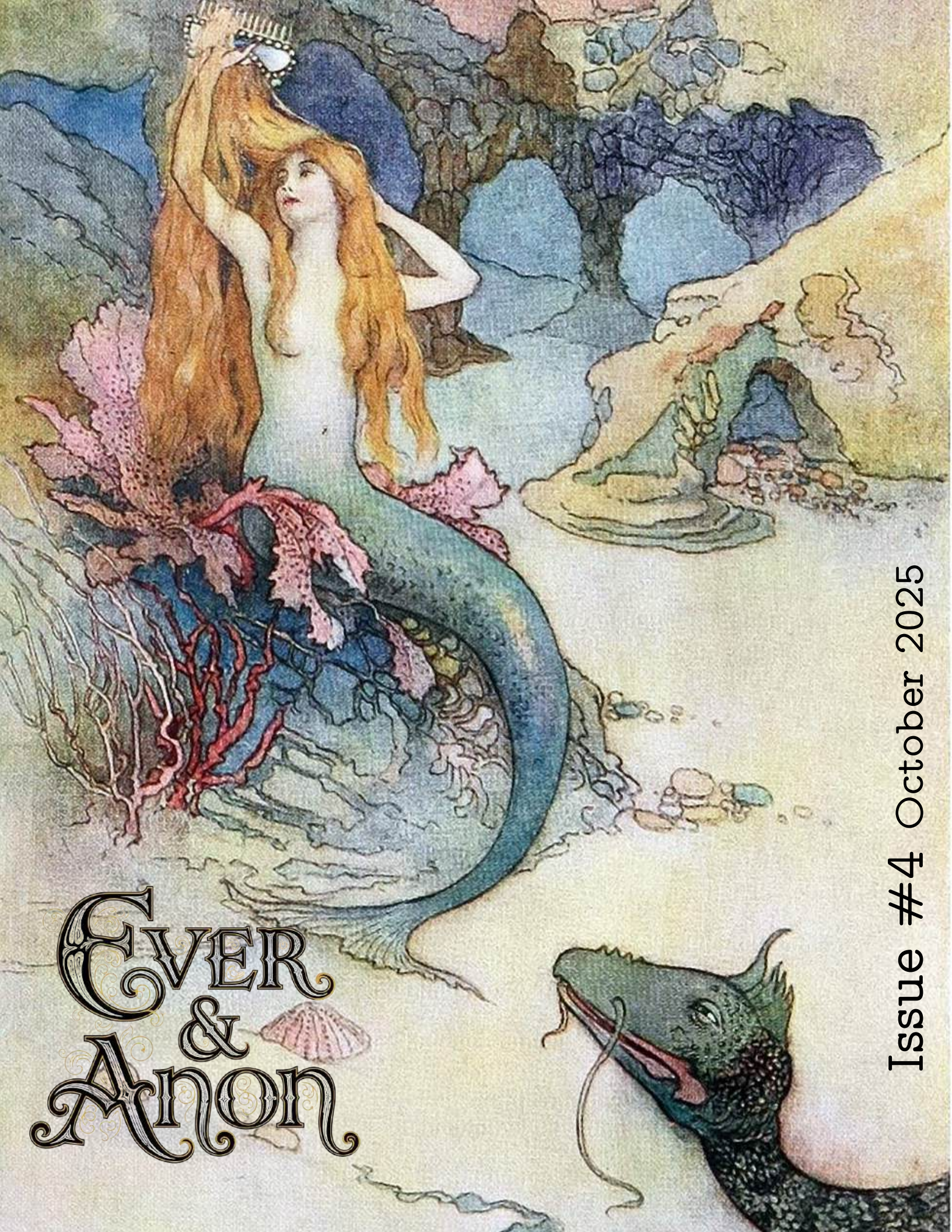




EVER & Anon

Issue #4 October 2025

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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 unpublish your zine once it has been published.

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

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

Issue #5 – October 21st: What media (novels, film, anime, etc.) have inspired you vis-à-vis RPGs?

Issue #6 – November 21st: Game conventions: the good, the bad, and the weird.

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

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

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

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 #4 (ver. 1) – October 2025

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This issue’s IgTheme is: *What are your favorite RPGs to play, run, or just read?*

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](#).

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

Q: And everyone is doing all this for free?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Q: Who is Lee Gold?

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

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

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

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

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

I Want YOU!

to join our flippant fellowship



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

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

Abbreviations & Acronyms You Need to Know:

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

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

DENIZENS OF THE LIBRARY #3

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

All About Me

Today is the day our daughter heads back to school, so it's a melancholy time. She's doing great there and it's not like we don't hear from her regularly, but it will still be another shock to have her not here. It also means my wife's school-dependent work schedule will be ramping up, which means lots of lovely new stories of "things 8 year old kids say in the woods"; always bewildering. The high school is doing well with our special needs son; we had fears that he would be with a whole new team, but there are some familiar faces of people who he saw in elementary school and have since moved up.

It's an off month for the *Swords of the Serpentine* game, but I need to sit down and write up what happened last month as this is a game that rewards extensive notes so I can admire the brilliance of what nonsense I made up last game and not forget it in the 2 months 'tween games.

My D&D 3E PBEM is ticking forward at PBEM speed, and we are finding more and more evidence that the dragon-worshipping lizardfolk, a shaman of which we bumped into in adventure 2, have flooded and then raided a dwarvish citadel near us. We are learning this hundreds of feet underground heading for said community. This is, as they say, sub-optimal.

Inside the Library

We were fortunate enough to get in a final session of the proper *Denizens of the Library* before Onyx and Rob Bank's players went off to college. The final fight with Oolay'ah-ben-Ethrah-mah-Lanoorah, scion of Loviatar, usurper of the Sept, former ally of the Denizens, and the big bad in *House in the Frozen Lands* from **Dragon Magazine** #110 (June of 1986). I've been carrying this adventure for 29 years, I am tickled pink that my decision 2 years ago to use this module as the front and end pieces for the Adventurer levels in *Denizens* paid off.

The final battle paid out as well as I could have hoped, with a final conflict between Onyx and Oolay'ah that had been brimming since the two first met in session 3, with the Sept leader coming to have a grudging respect for the Centaur's magical skills, which were the things that let the PCs catch her before her master plan could come to fruition. When the campaign started most PCs

took a negative relationship with the Orc Lord, so much of the campaign revolves that Icons eventual attack on the empire: thwarting his fifth columnists, breaking up his alliance with the Yuan-Ti in the Forbidden City so he couldn't use it as a staging area, and now stopping the mad schemes of Oolay'ah who, if she had desecrated the Temple of Ptah in the Scholia, her attempts to re-consecrate it to Loviatar and the Gods of Darkness¹ would have failed and left the Empire weakened against the growing Orc horde.

Conveniently, two continuing players have younger siblings who will be replacing the departing two, and the vote from the three maintainers is that we at least try *Draw Steel*; if it doesn't work out, we will move back to *13th Age*. I dropped \$10 for ***The Delian Tomb***, *Draw Steel*'s new-player on-boarding adventure and I'm happy with it. It breaks things out to explain the somewhat complex PC rules to the new players and director: the character sheet is built in a "you get these powers in encounter 1, these in 2, 3 & 4 until after 4 you've got a full character" with those encounters tailored to match complexity for the Director so no one is overwhelmed. (If it doesn't work out, I'll run a short espionage or politics but while I convert *The Red Hand of Doom* from 3E to *13th Age*.)

Added: we had the first session of the *Draw Steel* game at the library yesterday, but due to miscommunication one of the players was late and two others couldn't make it. ***The Delian Tomb*** is working as advertised, but due to the timing issues we only got through the "you need to save the blacksmith's daughter" and the first fight before we called it for the day. The three players included one who was one of the more passive players last time but now as the older sibling she is taking more initiative as a way to chide her brother. Selecting from the pregens we have a Wode Elf Troubadour, a Human Tactician, and an Orcish Conduit (which is their divinely empowered healer class). Everyone so far is comfortable with that but I know that once everyone gets the rules figured out they are going to want changes: you can play a human fighter anywhere: you can only play a 4-armed psychic extraterrestrial tactician in *Draw Steel*. (Plus the odds of the girl who played Sol the oh so edgy Drow not wanting to play a Devil if the option is in front of her are nil).

¹ This is a bit *13th Age* lore-y here but the setting eschews a formal pantheon but does have Light and Dark gods, both of

whom want the Empire to survive because it's useful for fighting demons, but they have very different ways to do so.

Stating up Regrets 3: Zippo

Third from Jon Morris' *League of Regrettable Superheroes* is Zippo.² Private investigator Joe Blair developed a belt and wheels contraption that let him travel up to 65 mph, and the carborundum steel wheels could be used as cutting tools. He used his inventions to close his cases and fight crime. He's also ridiculous. I mean, look at this:



Statting this guy up was much harder than it ought to have been, but that's because I kept getting in my own way. See, his contraption lets him travel fast but doesn't give him true super speed – no reflexes boost – so I was in a quandary: *V&V*'s Heightened Speed comes with the reflexes boost. So, do I make them a Vehicle? A Speed Bonus³ device? That can't get to 65 mph without multiple rolls. I was considering Speed Bonus x3 or some other nonsense when I looked at that picture and remembered being 12, drawing my PC's cybernetic hand schematics with claws and of course none of it would work but I loved it. That's when I realized:

² The Zippo was created by Pierce Rice and is in the public domain, image comes from <https://pdsh.fandom.com/wiki/Zippo>

Zippo has Heightened Speed. Just do it. 12-year-old me would have lovingly drawn that compressed air wheels madness if I'd rolled a Heightened Speed device.

So, he has a Heightened Speed device, with a 24 on the d100 check to see how fast it makes him. That adds 240" to his ground movement rate, and +8 to his initiative tests. He also has a Natural Weaponry Device, which I see as giving him the best score at +3 to hit, +6 on damage, with the 20% chance of bonus ability. I like the idea that the Natural Weaponry is the side effect of his velocity – his speed makes him hard to dodge and lets him hit you hard! – and the bonus power is when he deploys the cutting teeth of the wheels; something he would never use on flesh, but he's good at targeting gear so kicks to shear guns in half etc. are viable.

We could finish here: with athletic stats he'll reach 60-65 mph *and* make a decent 2-fisted detective (Not 711, but not bad). But let's consult the oracular bones of St. Cuthbert. (rolls d6 from new bought-on-vacation dice) 5. That means he rolls 7 abilities & 1 weakness. His first two are listed above, but we get 5 more rolls, taken on the skills table (he doesn't have other devices/abilities). Heightened Attack x2, Heightened Expertise (1 attack), Heightened Charisma +9, Heightened Endurance +14, and the weakness Prejudice. I can have either 5 abilities or 6 with a weaknesses.

There's no way I'm keeping Prejudice, the Spider-Man "the people on your side don't like you" problem. Zippo just feels too happy for that (look at that outfit? Is that the outfit of a hero on the run from the law?) Likewise, I don't see him as a super-good, persuasive hero: ok yes, he does invent a device and immediately uses it to fight crime, but this is just my instinct: two abilities need to go, and the charisma bonus fits least.

I'm torn on keeping *both* Heightened Attacks. It's a weird power in *V&V*, giving +1 damage per level attained; all but useless early on, too powerful at high levels, and very narrow in its utility. Usually, I modify it to either mirror Heightened Expertise (+4 on either one attack, a small group, or all) or have it increase other things each level (making training twice as effective or showing that a power increases on its own). For him, I see an inveterate tinkerer with his gear. Still, I'll drop one of them so the numbers don't go crazy.

What we have left is Heightened Speed Device (+240", +8 initiative, but see below), Natural Weaponry Device (+3 to hit, +6 on damage, special attacks against objects require only 1 roll to hit, not two), Heightened Expertise

³ Speed bonus is one of *V&V*'s weakest powers, giving you small bonus for one movement type. The trick is realizing you can pick movement types *you don't have*: super-jumping, or air walking, or tunneling, or parkour, etc.

Skill (+4 to hit with 'unarmed'⁴), Heightened Endurance Skill (+14; he's a Phillip Marlow style PI who can take a beating (or crash his contraption) and get back up), and Heightened Attack (+1 effect with his contraption; every level increases the Heightened Speed roll by 1 point, adds +1 to his special attack damage *and* he gets +1 inventing point/+5% on inventing; at 1st level this already pays dividends, for +250" & +9 initiative).

He has the Knowledge Areas of Law Enforcement & Transportation (he knows how to build wheeled vehicles but also how transport systems work and Central City's transit logistics). 12 Strength, 24 Endurance, 14 Agility, 13 Intelligence & 11 Charisma; I expect that last to go up as Zippo is a good person trying to do good... that there's no Charisma penalty for rewards means Zippo can fight crime while closing cases to make rent. Now that's vertical integration!

Again, we didn't *need* abilities past the first two for a fun PC, but the five-ability version has more nuance: Joe Blair has a steady gig as a PI, is good with his fists, runs marathons, and can take a punch, but is also a tinkerer obsessed with his compressed air personal transport (the CAPT, though he does call it 'his contraption'). With the CAPT he always acts twice a round, will usually act first, hits 4 times in 6 (more if he uses his speed to change facing), does 1d6+7 damage with a blow, and can usually sheer through steel with his wheels.

Yes, but how do you play it?

Zippo can be a solo hero: it's easy to see him headline a book, or as an 8-page backup another hero's title, where he can mix detective work with speed shenanigans. But more than our prior two regrettables, he's also a good team player. He's a bit of techie able to invent solutions involving CAPT tech but he won't overshadow other science-heroes. He's an OK detective who can take the lead there if needed. He's fast, but not so fast that you get the "super speed is the only power" problem that sometimes crops up, and with his special attack to cut things you can do a lot of super-speed shenanigans (he's very much like Go-Go from *Big Hero 6*). Unlike 711, he *could* join the Justice League, likely as a second- or third-tier member until he has a lot of levels under his wheels.

Regretting what I said to you

Several people commented last issue worried that the Eye is never in danger since they are in Astral Form. This is understandable if you didn't spend your childhood memorizing the V&V rules. Astral Projection not only has built in issues (magical and some tech barriers block or contain them; they die if they don't get back to their bodies in an hour, it's exhausting to use) but it's only a defense type that reduces the chance to be hit, not an invulnerability to the physical world. Yes, it reduces that chance to 0 for common attacks, but that's before modifications, and a roll of 1 always hits⁵. It isn't as good vs. energy attacks either, so flames, electricity, etc. are much worse than normal against him, but not useless.

Everyone is correct that in the hands of the wrong player the Eye would quickly lose its charms, but I know from experience it can work: I ran a few sessions of a V&V game where Karen's PC-Based-On-Her was Dragonfly, a librarian who found a magical text that let her send our her faerie-appearing astral form with a stunning gaze, and she worked fine with the other super-types in play. The Eye warns that caution should be your by-word!



⁴ I've seen some GMs insist that you pull this down to Punch or Kick rather than all unarmed, but 'Martial Arts Weapons' is the classic small group and that includes kicks and punches in the 2.0 example of play; plus doing it like this doesn't penalize him when making his signature 'kick to cut through enemy gear' attack when he still needs to usually punch people.

⁵ There are arguments between the players and designers as to when facing, weapons, accuracy, or experience mods are applied vis a vis the defense table;

officially its after, but that's silly, as it means Zippo with his +8 to hit from agility, natural weaponry and ht. expertise has a 40% chance to hit The Eye in his astral form. I end up splitting the difference, applying experience modification from the level vs. level table after defenses.

⁶ Yes, that does appear to be Zippo fighting a giant rat. Or maybe he shrank. You can see the compressed air from his contraption!. Image at <https://comicvine.gamespot.com/zippo/4005-29739/>

Under the Giant's Shadow

There seems to be some interest in my modifications to the D&D B/X rules, so here goes. First, many of these are tailored to the setting, which is a world where giants have descended from the mountains (and clouds!) to smash the human kingdoms of the North Vale, with the edict that no stone shall rest upon stone. 25 years later a group of human refugees and their dwarven allies are sneaking back under the giant's shadow (the perpetual cloud cover over the North Vale) to recover treasures buried in the closest of the lost cities. They do this for wealth, for lost magic, or with the dream of someday taking back some part of their lost heritage.

Ages ago, the gods of the dwarves went mad, giving their followers the gift of Eternal Growth. The dwarves that remain are apostates; those that stayed faithful grew to orcs, ogres, giants; the 'gift' carries an ever-expansionist and violent mindset and those that survive become cloud & storm giants of great magic and cunning.

I designed the frame with a few things in mind: first, it leaves no moral quandary about looting the dungeon; You're not killing things and taking their stuff, you're killing things and taking YOUR STUFF. The giants stole this from you, go take it back. Second, because we are in B/X Dwarf is a class and there are no dwarf clerics; fine, dwarves worship no gods. (Elves *also* don't have clerics, but that's because the gods are the stars in the sky and there's a nebula occluding one third of the night sky; people believe elves have outlived their gods).

The final standard PC race, Halfling, was re-imagined as any sort of non-elf faerie of smaller than human size, all of them having the same basic advantages with new chrome. Our one halfling PC was a satyr with a modest dexterity but exceptional strength and charisma.

Finally, I had to build a new race because I was running this game at the request of one of my age peer players whose 2 kids had asked to learn to play RPGs. Her younger son was 10, obsessed with cats, wanted to play a cat, and we settled on mom playing a wizard and son being her familiar. So I cobbled together a 'familiar' class which is kinda a thief/magic-user cross the way that a halfling is a thief/fighter cross. (Don't tell kids they can't play the character they want; just make it work.)

I also redesigned alignment to be close to 13th Age Icons; it was literally 'what political power are you aligned with?'

The Player Characters

So we had our Magic-User who was determined to find her master's master's spellbooks, her Familiar, the Rogue and spy she had hired to gather intelligence on what the lost city was like before the fall⁷, another Rogue insane enough to come along for just a share of the profits⁸, two dwarves she had recruited from the dwarf city of Amathyst Spire (which is under the human refugee camp of the same name, ask the dwarves how happy they are about that) which overlooks the ruins of Galmagia, their target city. One of those dwarves is on a guild-quest to recover lost clockwork designs, the other a personal quest to learn human and elf magic and the party leader has promised him that an artifact allowing this is in her master's master's chambers (which may or may not be true). On the last day the satyr bartender of the Axe & Thistle tavern let slip that he had just assumed since they had discussed it all in front of him that he was invited.

- Aethra Chatoyant [Magic-User 1 – Apprentice of famous master / Honorary elf-sister]
- Ayleton the Cat [Familiar 1 – Animal familiar / Ship cat of unknown port]
- Oland [Rogue 1 – Spy / Graverobber]
- Dungar [Dwarf 1 – Dwarf-raised / Magic-hunter]
- Brömm [Dwarf 1 – Dwarf-raised / Bonded clockwork guildsdwarf]
- Azric [Rogue 1 – Assassin / leatherworker]
- Richard Stockworth [Halfling 1 – Satyr / Tavern-keeper & cook]

So you can already see some rules mods here. I asked each player to give me a professional and a personal key word for their character, which game them +1 bonuses on tests inside their penumbras, and their class keyword goes up with level (+2 at 5th, +3 at 9th). This is similar to how I've always handled *V&V* knowledge areas, or *AD&D*'s careers, and more recently 13th Age's backgrounds. It's a fast way to personalize PCs in a high trust environment. You'll note that the dwarves have the dwarf-raised professional background, which gives the bonus to all the dwarf craft & culture stuff, and Richard has Satyr background for Satyr stuff added to/ Halfling.

Around session 6 Azric the Assassin got mauled and then breathed on by a baby dragon, spelling his doom⁹. The player brought in Jisethea, a cleric of the eagle-headed god of foresight and magic; her divinity had sent her via omens to Amathyst Spire to join Athera's quest, and we finally had a cleric in the party.

⁷ Played by her other son.

⁸ Unknown to the wizard this is an assassin (still just a Thief class) looking for someone who had been exiled Under the Giants Shadow to complete a

lucrative assignment, a situation this character's player secretly told me was her motivation.

⁹ Good new for the guy he was supposed to kill, who the players hadn't met up with yet! Yes, I did append her request for this target to someone I already had set up as exiled into the lost city; he has it coming.

Core Mechanics Changes

The main changes are as follows:

Ability Names: Intelligence became Erudition (it's not how smart you are, it's how well read you are) and Wisdom became Divine Favor (how much do the gods favor you) to more closely link name and function.

Saving Throws: I tweaked the names a bit so it was clearer what threat went where (Death, Disintegration, or Poison; Wands, Traps, or Lightning Bolts; Paralysis, Petrification, or Polymorph; Dragon Breath, Cave-in or Fireball; Fear, Charm, or Spells¹⁰) and simplified targets.

X in Six Chance: wherever possible I changed rules to an X in 6 chance, difficulty adjudicated in the moment, high rolls are better, add the better of your attribute or class bonus or personal bonus.¹¹ About 66% of the time¹² we were using the d6 outside of combat, and was basically any uncontested roll when they had time to think. If they were rushed but no one was working against them it was a d12. In combat it was a d20. I would set targets of 5, 7, 9 and 11 on the d12 and 8, 11, 14, 17, or 20 on the d20 because those corresponded to the x in 6 percentages. This means the more pressured they are, the less their bonuses helped. When they had time their +1 bonus was 15%; when attacked it was +5%

Armor Class: I kept it so all monsters had AC 8, 11, 14, 17, or 20, corresponding to a 4 in 6 to 0 in 6 (on a 20) chance, and lots of them didn't have attack bonuses. For PCs being unarmored = AC 8, Leather = 11, chain = 14, and plate = 17. Magical dwarven plate would be 20. Dexterity would modify AC and shields increased your effective dexterity for AC by +2 rather than give you another bonus. Dungan in his plate and shield was AC 18, and he was hit at most 1 time in 6. This made him very effective in combat, but not invulnerable.

Hit Points: Monsters got 4 HP & did 3 damage per level. PCs had HP based on class so players could relay on a 'roughly how many hits can I take before the next might kill me'. Magic-users & rogues could take 1, clerics 2, fighters 3. But clerics and fighters are also hit much less frequently with their superior armor. Under 1 HP you have been hit with a fight ending blow; you are out of this fight, and at the end of it make a save vs. Death. Fail, you're dead; succeed you are sore wounded but alive, can move at half speed, can't attack or cast spells. If someone used a background to help you before the end of the fight you got 2 tries. This was a good balance.

Racial Bonuses: Each of the races had some power that was mechanically useful in a dungeon. Dwarves always knew their route & room dimensions, so they barely had to map. Elves could always spot secret doors and glamours. Halflings were highly resistant to surprise. Humans? They are social animals with bonuses to recruit and retain followers. In a game where the threats are diegetic and don't care about the strength of your party (though I did keep most of the monsters on each level at level; that's the design) having a larger stronger party is a huge benefit. The players resisted this for a long time because they didn't want word to get out in Amethyst Spire for fear of competition – they were the first to try this insanity – but when they met some horse nomads under the Giant's Shadow and Oland recruited 3 of them they realized just how powerful this ability was. Each of the human classes got tweaks to this ability, to make mercenary companies, thieves guilds or religious sects.

I suppose here is where I talk about how the x in 6 design helped with followers. For combat capable followers, since ACs were all on the x in 6 style (lightly armored equals 11 AC which is hit on 3 in 6), the players could roll for their followers with a d6, and the score was both their attack number *and their damage*. Oland could just roll 3d6 and we would know how many hit and their damage. (non-combat followers would roll d4s and would suck in combat to make up for whatever other skills they were hired for, but no one ever used those). Since all followers have 3 HP per level and all monsters did 3 damage per level it was more tracking hits. I really wanted the point where the smaller party of heroes would have an equal number of henchmen without it slowing down play.

Fighters (and Dwarves and Elves): I love the flexible attack mechanics from 13th Age where what you roll on the d20 determines special features of your attack so I implemented some here. A roll of 7 or less (a 2 in 6 chance) means you likely missed but you can pick one of a few defensive or strategic benefits: learn the enemy, set up an ally attack, improve an ally AC, or rally your troops. On a roll of 17+ (1 in 6 chance, more or less) you gain a bonus based on the how they were fighting (one handed, two handed, two weapon, weapon and shield, ranged), which a short list of options for each type. This made fighters think about what they carried and differentiated the weapons a bit more, and gave them more flexibility. In the end, the game effect was little more than the x2 damage on a roll of 20, but with a lot more color.

¹⁰ Don't Die, Dodge, Resist Change, Jump Clear, Don't Mess With My Head!

¹¹ For most cases this is a +1 as only 2 characters had 15+ on any of their 3d6 in order scores: Richard had a 16 Charisma and the new cleric a shocking 18 Divine Favor. She is already operating with as high a cleric bonus as she's

going to get, since it's the best score, not all scores. The only place that's not true is combat, but the level bonus there is on a different scale than the background bonus, based on class.

¹² (or I suppose, 4 in 6)

Fighters also got enhancements on the normal human bonuses: better at recruiting, retaining, and rallying the people under their command. Our two Dwarves didn't have that, but both of them loved knowing that they likely had a 1 in 6 chance of failing to do anything in a round, as only rolls between 8 and whatever they needed to hit (usually 9-12 with their attack bonuses), and they quickly learned the tactical nuances of who goes when when their side had initiative to maximize their abilities. As I said it took a bit for people to lean into having henchmen, so the dwarves really felt they were getting the better deal with their racial underground advantages.

Magic-Users: I rewrote the spell lists so there were a dozen 0 level cantrips where Magic Users started with 3 which were the lesser benefits, and then made sure the spells gained in levels 1-4 were directly dungeon related. Spells of level 5-8 are outdoor related, as the game was designed to shift there. I also boosted the power of a lot of them under the idea that any time a magic-user cast a spell it should radically alter the conditions of play. A Magic Missile now always hit for 9 damage, enough to one shot a 2nd level monster, could be silent or loud (preserving surprise or forcing a morale check) and be cast in advance if you knew the fight was coming (and fire before the first initiative; Aethra cast hers sparingly, but to terrifying effect). This might be the magic-users one spell in the delve, so it had better be worth it!

Magic-Users get spells per level as per normal, but each spell also has a reversal; if you are at least 1 level higher than you need to cast the spell, you can at time of casting reverse it. If you were 2nd level, Magic Missile could be reversed to Shield, for example. Given enough time and personal energy (i.e. the PC takes damage) spells could be made into runes with longer lasting or permanent effects. This increased flexibility of the class without changing the number of castings per delve. Aethra was very strategic with her spell use, sometimes spending a delve without casting a 1st level spell, which was perfect.

Finally, Magic-users could skip both a) normal rumor collection (hitting bars and talking to people with their Charisma bonus) to 'hit the books' with their Erudition bonus. Oh yeah, I had instituted a rumor collection roll where a 7+ on a d12 netted good intel rather than the usual randomness, since the heart of OSR play is having meaningful information for decisions.

And b) the normal recruiting process to instead summon and bind creatures to follow them. This let them pick the die (d4 to d12) they rolled for it, but with an unknown-to-the-player number of times they could roll 7+ before their binding snapped. Aethra's player decided she really didn't need the risk, yet, of a d10 summoned fey beast.

Rogues: Yes, I changed the name, because I wanted to get across the breadth of the class socially; they should have the option to be *charming* rogues. They got twice as many chances to collect rumors between delves, got increased ability to profit from selling & buying loot and gear (but if they messed up on their low-cost gear it may be cut rate gear and fail when they use it!), and they could use their class rather than charisma bonus for social tests if it was better. Their class bonus applied not only to sneaking and trap removal, but often used one die code lower: if it was on a d6 they could just do it; d12 became d6, d20 to d12, and otherwise impossible was on d20...though it likely needed a 20+! I wanted to push the idea that every class can be sneaky but that rogues do have advantages.

As with all B/X D&D. Rogues had the same HP as the magic-user, but leveled up twice as fast: Oland had a 13 Constitution, so for a bit while he was 2nd level and the dwarves were still first he had equal HP to them.

In a fight the rogue gets to play with initiative, which is standard B/X each side rolls per round to act as a unit. They get to roll independently for initiative, and if they roll better than the party and the monsters they can go first, but otherwise they go with the party (an order of Rogues, Monsters, Party, and if this is the first round of combat the rogue that jumps has surprise). When the rogue has surprise they get +4 to hit and do double (or triple or quadruple at higher levels) damage. When the rogue has the initiative, they can use Dexterity rather than Strength for attacks, can split their attacks across multiple foes as long as each is at +1 to hit, or can press their opponent to drop its AC by 3 for the rest of the party. When they don't have initiative, they can try skip their attack to reposition for a backstab, skip their attack to get +6 AC if the monsters go win initiative next round, or try to seize initiative by attacking the most powerful foe before the monsters act; if they hit the rest of the party acts; if they fail they are at -3 AC for the monsters action. The whole design was to showcase the rogue as a fast, unpredictable combatant.

The two rogues generally enjoyed this, but played very differently. Azric always repositioning to backstab or pressing opponents for the fighters to take them out. Oland would leap forward, once or twice tried to seize initiative, and at 2nd level started splitting his attacks; he most often got the support bonuses from the fighters on their low rolls, so he got a good reputation as warrior. This helped him when he hired his three nomadic horse-clan spearmen as retainers. Oddly Oland also got getting spirit-infused magic items (including Azric in a grappling hook!) and was eventually named Oland Seven-Souls

Halflings, Familiars & Clerics: Next month!

Comments on E&A 3

Roger BW: I have always adored the GURPS Atomic Horror period. Have fun with that! I want to love *Brindlenwood Bay*, but the communal conviction mechanic keeps throwing off my brain. I think I'll stick with *Gumshoe*.

John Redden: re Andor: My daughter and I watched season 1 this summer and are saving season 2 for Christmas break; I have seen the first half of it and while I understand why they did the 3 episodes = 1 year thing it's not doing the comprehensibility any favors. I too enjoyed Scalzi's Interdependency series. REYC on the Denizens campaign design: Thanks! It lets me jump various sub genres (court intrigue, military espionage, 'adventures', messing around in cities, etc.) pretty easily.

Attonarch: leaving the corpses behind to rot does not strike me as the smartest play, but it doesn't seem to have come up to bite them. That was brutal! (Elvis wiggling his hips? really?) well, so much for that group! Your rotating cast of 26+ players is fascinating. I wish I had the bandwidth. re kids errors: they certainly make more *unexpected* errors. I have been surprised in the *Knave* game that once it was clear that treasure got XP and killing things didn't the urge to get into fights dropped. Except against the ogres, who have 100-800 coins each in their sacks and are the best of both worlds. Of course, they had to triple-team them and hit them with magic, but there was real value there. Their actively hunting ogres is what led to the ogre-goblin war in the mushroom cave.

Gabriel Roark: "The earth elemental steps on his head, just to make sure." I had previously run a game for my daughter and her friends from 2019 (I comment on it in my last few Subplot Kudzus) coming to a tentative close in 2024 when the kids graduated. Intensely satisfying and I never knew what they would do next. Tying the 13th Age groups back together was pretty seamless; both had finished what they had been doing so a montage scene of everyone converging on the jungle village outside the Forbidden City was all it took. The kids all mostly got along with each other, well enough to play together. I'm very curious as to your thoughts on my B/X homebrew. RE healing: While my B/X rules do have HP being 100% your ability to evade a serious wound, they can only recover 1/2 their lost HP in a campsite; they have to be in a designated place of safety (for right now that's back at town, but the horse nomad camp also worked) before they could get back remaining HP or any spells. If they are actually wounded (<0 HP), recovery is weeks. re Infravision: the older I get the less I want to deal with non-standard vision. It's too much of a pain! Re the Froggers XP woes: we had always played with the

version where they could get 1 XP away from the next level up before training. This stopped PCs from needing to exactly hit their level marks. Of course shortly after that the more narrative minded DMs dropped training.

Michael Cule: I find the *13th Age* system works for me, but it looks like *2E* is going to take out all the parts of *1E* I adore because they *don't* allow for in-the-moment player optimization, and it also looks like they are ditching the "some classes are easier than others to onramp people" design. This is what happens with 2nd Edition playtests being dominated by self-selected highly on-line, highly rules-focused players.

Clark Tiimmins: I love the old pulp stories. But isn't one of those just an invisible stalker?

Avram Grumer: "solid and platonic" Ha! Your relationship with social media and reason for coming here mirror my own! Re Masks: I love the concept behind this but haven't had a chance to play any *PbtA*, and my player groups would probably prefer something more generic. I'm very happy it exists, though. The sad trombone riff made my wife crack up when she heard it

Myles Corcoran: you're a good flag mate. Re Mausritter: Ooooh mice, be careful dealing with faeries! re the 5k: I did not enjoy. I completed but I shan't be doing that sort of thing again. Re *13th Age*: Few of the kids are tactical enough to really make use of all their powers; I suspect those are mostly happy to be there and the encounter balancing that makes each encounter feel scary but then be survived is the biggest draw. Numina's player is very passive, so it's hard to tell what's going to happen with their older sibling gone and their younger sibling joining. When she does show initiative it's to steal stuff or break rules: just as well Trickery is one of her domains. The kids came up with the evil Duolingo owls. I can't take credit. re pressing of resource management: it can be an issue, which is one reason I use the 'one month passes' as you refresh, and each of you can do one thing during that month. In the last refresh one of the PCs focused on wiping out the limited number of the invasive birds the villain had used as a spy network, for example. They can advance their things but it's not as granular as in play. I very much want to try *Draw Steel's* mechanic for this, where finishing an encounter gives you a Victory, which makes you more powerful for following encounters, but when you take a respite to get recoveries back your victories convert to experience: you want to push on to increase your badassosity, but you need to rest to recover. Again, the players control the pacing but if they stop and rest after every encounter they likely lose access to their best powers. re dice size equals risk: that's pretty damn elegant. RE "I don't want what I want": story of my special needs dad life, dude.

re wizard spellcasting: this was the balance I was very happy with in the B/X hack I discuss this issue. I also found that when I ran my homebrew Hobbit telling the wizards they had 6 uses of magic FOR THE WHOLE 6 SESSION CAMPAIGN, but each would completely upend their current problem gave just the right balance. re loner supers in team games: everyone has to sign on to the "we are going to make this injured person part of our found family" story arc and not "I get to be the loner badass, and the 'loner badass' archetype gets to be twice as powerful as everyone else so I can do things alone" that so many players seem to want.

Mitch Hyde: LOL at "Worth a try, especially since I used a similar 'kiss the statue' bit in my 13th Age game, but the statues poisoned fangs would bite down; save or fall into a hallucinatory frenzy.... After the paladin tried it the party bard took to calling him Prince Romeo. Loving the artwork, BTW. This write up is so indicative of the OSR style that I saw in my own games: several sessions where the PCs get no treasure but learn more about the dungeon environment, fleeing from fights. It is amazing how much the game play of the video games inspired by D&D looped back into expectations of D&D play and changed that dynamic.

Patrick Riley: The rifts are a remarkably clever idea to get any adventure module you're borrowing from into play. May steal. Re being perfectly happy with just humans: *Knave* defaults to this because the minimalist rules don't mention race at all. Only when players asked "hey can I be a" did I cobble something together for the summer, and the school year *Knave* game is still 100% human - no one ever asked... aside from the very first player who had the 5E books and asked about playing a Gensii Dao... and then abandoned it immediately and has crafted a proper pulp human hero over the last year. re having your displacer beast hate you: I'm not sure 🙄. I ended up playing the Beast as being surly to everyone, but Sol's player liked the idea of him being pissed that he wasn't back in the Underdark and was instead stuck with this elf. She was also 100% about her shapeshifting and often forgot the Beast was there. Re Monks: So my favorite thing about the Monk is that several OSR gamers spent years trying to figure out the symbolism of the class's various level titles, only to have one of the TSR staff admit they were Mahjong tiles.

Patrick Zoch: allow me to recommend volunteering to run games at the local library! REYC on the Eye: This seriously has me thinking about compiling a freezine of these heroes after a year, since the ideas and art are in public domain. *Gumshoe* for supers is an aberration for me, as V&V is my first true love, and could easily run the Eye in that if I wanted to.

Mark Nemeth: having the climax be not fighting sometimes is 100% the right thing to do. As for exploding dice, let the suckers explode.

Brian Misiaszek: when are you publishing your Cuba Cthulhu source book? Children remain an external biological clock that you can't lie to yourself about. That may slow down once she's more settled.

Lisa Padol: I find *13th Age* pretty easy to run but have been kicking around with it since 2018. The basic dice mechanic is d20 fantasy. The lack of skill system as opposed to backgrounds converts complexity to in the moment decisions. The monster rules and encounter design system make sense, are scalable, and remove a lot of bandwidth issues during play. I love the non-diegetic recovery rules for not allowing the PCs to start every fight at 100% power. Yes the PCs have a lot of fiddly bits but generally I can leave those to the players as the encounter design balances it pretty well. I can't imagine that you'd have too much trouble with it - it's vastly simpler than 3E or what I played of 5E. re SotS: well the Night Chalice has ONE BIG MYSTERY (who killed 90% of their guild, why, what are they doing next, and how can the PCs get revenge?) and then a lot of smaller mysteries and problems. Every month of game time there's a new PITA thing that could cut into their guild cash flow that they have to deal with: so far that's been violence from the group trying to take their operations, someone stealing bespoke smuggled goods from their unguarded-because-everyone-is-dead warehouse, someone planning a heist at a high stakes card game in their gambling hall ("we don't care that you did it, we care that we didn't get a cut"), and so on. Those might not be mysteries, but they might be with the mystery of "who took our shit, and do we have to kill them", which is not exactly Agatha Christie. re Kai studying Heraldry: Nope! the player was VERY INSISTANT that it was cartography and vexillology. re Night Chalice vs. Blades in the Dark: I've never read BitD, so I can't say. I just know that the mechanic of letting them control the timing of refreshes but those advance the timeline works better than any other option in Gumshoe. The idea that Gumshoe needs special rules for a one to one game is something that infuriates me with how precisely balanced current game systems are. I have run any number of older games with just one player, or lots of them, and they work fine. Current designs if you have too few or too many the engine breaks down. Bothersome. re Turtling: I don't know if I originated it, but I know I used it. As for that Heroquest game, I had the same problems on my "you're the first people out of your Kaer" Earthdawn game - tag it on the map and move on, if we die here this was for nothing - made sense but wasn't what I had planned for.

Joshua Kronengold: re not having effective responses to the 13-year-old bully was maddening. I was not sorry when I was able to move him to the other game, nor when I heard he won't be returning to that this year. yeah, the trapped nobles tomb is so easily justifiable since it... <waves arms at real world>. I was very happy with the rationale in Under the Giant's Shadow as to why there was a vast underground space full of things you can loot being flattened cities.

Mark A. Wilson: the job loss sucks but "Awwwww" on the cohabitation. We are M:I Purists in our family, so when the trailers show up at the theater my daughter hisses "You haven't earned the right to use that theme music!" The realization that rather than MI:2 I could have an infinitely better time watching *Darkman* and *Notorious* back-to-back to get the same experience - never mind how the movies emphasis on their impossible set piece actions scenes undercuts the whole point of M:I - kills it for us. re weapon specialization in 5.5E: if it was anything like the 13th Age 2E it was overly high self selection of high crunch players in the playtest. Of course, the same thing happened in WEG Star Wars 2E, so this is not a new problem. I can't remember where I saw it now (it might have been Mastering Dungeons, or an OSR Blog...) arguing that Greyhawk is just tonally wrong for 5.5: the world is built as heavily humanocentric with a constant near boil of war everywhere using land-owning lords commanding masses of troops to control the fate of nations... and none of that fits the tone of how D&D is currently played. It needs a setting built from the jump to include all the myriad races the kids these days want to play, focused on small unit heroism. Alice is Missing sounds fascinating!

Everyone else RAEBNC

Read Reviews to Fill Space:

Dungeon Crawler Carl Books 3-6: Seriously, these are addicting. I gave up on waiting for the library to get them for me and got the e-books (which long time readers know I NEVER, well now almost never do). I don't want to say too much about them for fear of spoilers but some warnings: they can get crude and gory at times and that never goes away through the series. (For all of that, there is no sex in the books so far; it's all from Carl's POV and he's too tightly wound for that to come up.) The series is building in complexity the same way that *Girl Genius* does, where it feels like every bit adds more characters and more complications, piles upon piles, that gets hard to keep track of; I really hope he sticks to the 10 book plan and brings things to a close. It commits to the LitRPG bit where the game rules and environment

are known to the characters and have massive bearing on the plot. If none of those are your thing, stay clear. Otherwise, give the first couple books a spin – the first is solid, the second gets much deeper into the character development and showcases the strengths of the series, which just keeps getting better through book 6, which falters a bit. I am waiting on 7 until 8 comes out.

The Sphinx Wore and Orchid by Marian Cox: Cox was a moneyless millionairess in the Gilded Age, married at 16 to a much older wealthy man who was part of the 100 families of society. She wrote several books around World War I to rave reviews and critical acclaim before her eclipsing her husband met with reprisal from him and she vanished from the public eye. This is her 1967 tell-all memoir that I found in the 'Town' section of our local library because one of her manor homes was here (as opposed to the block they owned on Madison Ave) and she donated an inscribed copy to the town library. Fascinating stuff from someone with an amazing life.

The Apparitionists: A Tale of Phantoms, Fraud, Photography, and the Man Who Captured Lincoln's Ghost by Peter Manseau: whew that title is a mouthful, but this is an interesting read on the origins and legal controversies of spirit photography in the back half of the 19th century. That the spiritualist movement ran simultaneous with photography and the telegraph opens up a wonderful venue for the *Mage: the Ascension* game I keep threatening to run... Once I modify the setting to the different timeframe and to clean up all the bits I don't like and suddenly it's too much work. But this book really makes me want to consider it.

Archie by Mark Waid and others: again, I'm well behind the times here but the decision to take a supers comic veteran like Mark Waid and give him the reboot button to the immortal Archie series in 2015 was audacious, but damned if it didn't pay off. The book is readily available in compilations and it is full of heart, wit, and romance. I had wondered how they would get the Archie/Betty/Veronica triangle to work, and I don't know that they would pull it off forever but for the 30 issues I've read it all makes sense. The visual humor and returning gags through the series are also top notch.

Monster Island Tales by James L Cambias: Just reread collection of two short stories looking at alternate trips to Skull Island and other ways that they could've played out, one with a distinct mythos connection. Quick, fun reads.

Goodnight Captain Fasaad, wherever you are.

BUMBLING Through DUNGEONS

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As the previous E&A sent, I was let go from my job. It was at a small digital marketing startup and we'd just lost two large clients in a week to forces outside of our control. At five full-time employees, we were always one large client loss away from having to make some tough decisions, and so two was a death knell for all but the two company founders.

Readers will remember that my girlfriend experienced a similar setback last month, and so it's unfortunate timing. This does not fling us into dire straits - we take care of our finances and have ample time to find a good next fit, not simply a port in a storm - but it's never fun to be forced into such a transition.

I do not waste time in job searching. I'm already in full swing, with an interview this week as I write this (9/10) and dozens of applications sent. An unfortunate hiccup overall, but it should not last long.

Media

Babylon (2022) is furiously overwrought, both visually and thematically. Despite some electric performances and scenes (with ample R-rated gratuity, mind), the whole thing is too disjointed, lurching, lengthy, and tonally scattershot to be more than the sum of its parts.

A Hail Mary attempt to coalesce the whole into something coherent and larger in the movie's final shots is probably the most disconcerting and forced of the bunch, meaning it has the opposite trajectory that I'd want for a movie to leave a positive lasting impression. As it is, I'll think about it for a few days, and then forget it forever.

Despite having been a big comic book nerd in a former life (in the 2000s mostly), I find myself struggling to care about superhero films these days, even those that are supposedly the "good ones." *Fantastic Four* was competent but left me wanting, for instance, and others have followed suit recently.

Having watched and enjoyed the *Cobra Kai* TV series in recent years (short version: it's campy but heartfelt and

entertaining), the recent *Karate Kid: Legends* movie - which brings together the Ralph Macchio and Jackie Chan Karate Kid film universes - was of interest. The movie is again heartfelt, which saves it from a somewhat expected plot structure. Watch it as comfort food viewing, so to speak, and it works well enough.

IgTheme: Favorite RPGs to Play, Run & Read

With most of my experience running D&D, this is the perfunctory, boring answer to that question. As I've mentioned before, homebrew sandbox adventures are my preferred style to run. More interesting - I hope - are my responses to the question about reading.

It's an open secret in RPGs that a lot of sales are to people who are simply going to read the books, not run or play them. This is fine, even if it occasionally creates "audience schisms" where a publisher has to serve different audience. This can create, for instance, adventure books that read more like novels but are nightmarish to run easily.

That said, I have two to offer up as excellent reading material: *Numenera* and *Mouse Guard*.

The latter is based on a comic book series, which itself is excellent reading. I own the 2e game book and some related materials, and it's lovely and quaintly evocative.

Numenera is multiple books of setting and adventure, and is a kitchen-sink sci-fi setting. But the glue that binds it is fascinating to me. Previous civilizations, stretched across aeons, predate the game's setting, and in their wake they left unfathomably arcane technologies, artifacts, structures and glimpses into their societies. Some weren't human, some potentially weren't even comprehensible to the human psyche. It's doubtful that the Earth of the present day is the original Earth. And so on.

The modern day features a medieval-level society wrestling with these things and frequently finding itself out of its depth.

And what do I most like to play? Strangely, I feel the most agnostic here. Give me the right group and I don't truly care.

Campaign Report:

The Lantern Bearers

Characters

(Me): Peren Yaeldrin (Elf Druid)
Madelyn Meadows (Elf Wizard)
Bocephus (Centaur Barbarian)
Skippy Thistleroot (Herengon Rogue)
Cordesh (Human Bard)

The campaign covered levels 3-9 in D&D 5e, and lasted 33 sessions of approximately 3 hours each.

Setting

An island-continent with its own ruling structures and numerous cities and towns that is fairly remote and cut off from other land masses, surrounded by ocean on all sides. A wider world with other kingdoms is known and explored, but the campaign takes place entirely on this large, roughly circular land mass.

The world was entirely homebrew, a creation of the GM. We were provided an impressive, large hex map to help plan our travels, since the shape of the continent and location of major features and towns/cities were well-known to the characters we played.

Premise

Ten years prior to the campaign's start, plant growth on the island-continent began growing at supernatural rates. Additionally, the growth became more hostile over time and more difficult to navigate. Various settlements could remain largely untouched by maintaining their land, but anything not eminently civilized returned to the plants.

The Lantern Bearers were appointed by the King of the continent-nation (the more remote corners of which don't always recognize his authority) as a hybrid between errand runners, adventurers, police force, and navigators through the wilderness. Courier missions for supplies, rations, mail, raw goods, information, emissaries and more are common. They command some respect in most cities and towns.

Literal magical lanterns were bestowed to the group. These had minor magical properties that, among other small benefits, made pathfinding slightly less difficult.

The party played a group of initially initiate lantern bearers. Our first mission outside of the starting town was under the supervision of a more senior lantern bearer.

My Character

A Land Druid (spellcaster specializing in nature magic)

name Peren Yaeldrin.

I'd played a grumpy character immediately prior, and so I wanted someone more affable and willing to see the good in people. And so that's what Peren was.

A middle-aged elf, Peren had a love of herbs and plant life. He drank lots of tea, made from the herbs he collected. I'd sprinkle in non-sequitur plant facts - sourced from actual, real-world plant and herb trivia - into humorously inappropriate moments in the campaign as a form of levity. I was also the only party member to enjoy puns, which became a running gag.

With a couple more social characters, I'd often take a back seat in conversations. The campaign featured a few interrogations, and for these I morphed into a bear to play the "bad cop" role that we dubbed "Truth Bear." It worked, since I could contribute to such scenes without driving the conversations themselves.

Druids have a LOT of mechanical options, but I tended to focus on nature-based magic and summoning spells, from such disparate summon types as spectral wolves, fey creatures, and even a sea hag, the last of which I claimed was a friend whom I'd summoned, though it was unclear if I was manifesting the actual sea hag whom I'd befriended or merely a magical construct that took the same form.

I kept a collection of herbs that I gathered throughout the campaign, to no particular mechanical end, but it allowed me to spout facts about herbs to my exasperated compatriots. Only exasperated in-game, of course. My occasional misgivings about druids aside, the group consensus was that I nailed the roleplaying portion of it and created a character that worked seamlessly within the setting.

Campaign Narrative: Humble Beginnings

Starting in the town of Woodwick, with a simple retrieval quest under the watch of a more senior lantern bearer (who almost died on the mission "just before retirement" of course), this allowed for some exposition about the state of the wilderness and world before returning to town, which had numerous quest hooks posted in the town square for visiting Lantern Bearers.

The travel system was a bit of a homebrew hex crawl, with randomized vignettes and encounters doled out in each hex. The simplest of which could be resolved (successfully or otherwise) with a skill check. Sometimes they'd produce minor boons or banes, or reveal treasure or information. Some resulted in larger encounters that we roleplayed as a party.

Striking north, the early part of the campaign was dominated by exploration, random encounters, and resolving situations at one-off encounter hubs.

At one of these, in a remote cave that had attracted a curious amount of magical attention, we encountered some ancient elven ruins and a temple with a large brazier in the center of it. Our lanterns were able to relight the brazier, which thereafter glowed with perpetual magical energy.

This was a significant discover, more so once we realized that the surrounding area's plant growth began to recede to "normal" levels. We cataloged this finding, began inquiring about similar sites wherever we went, and made a note to notify the King and central Lantern Bearer hierarchy (both located in the capital city, many weeks' travel away).

We knew bits and pieces of the ancient elves, who inhabited the island before other races discovered it. We also had hints of a conflict that tore down their civilization, but no details. The remainder of the campaign would flesh this conflict out more and shed light (pun intended) on the connection with the braziers and plant life.

Political Life

Entering our first major city, we were hit with several new problems to contend with:

- The current leader didn't recognize the king's authority. As such, we were treated with suspicion.
- Other forces related to the current ruler reached out to us to attempt a coup, in a play to reinsert a ruler who would be loyal to the king.
- A bordering, large lake was plagued with a lake monster, and every citizen seemed to have a different interpretation of what it looked like. Regardless, the monster was hindering travel and trade, since seafaring travel was not inhibited in the same way that land travel was by the plant life.

Investigating further, we discovered that the existing ruler was pretty shady in other ways, and so we set about working with the would-be rulers while also being annoyed that we have to insert ourselves into politics.

A plot involving a treelike demigod - a probable figure behind the plant issues on the continent - is uncovered, and we help to establish what we believe will be a more benevolent leadership structure. In it, we also suss out a murder plot and incarcerate a member of the ruling family. We also send word to the capital (carrier pigeon) about our findings thus far.

The city also affords us some opportunity to research into

the continent's problems, and to inquire about other places we might be able to source information. Much of the information we'd hoped to find was taken by a professor of elven lore who used to work within the city. We get her name, but no specifics on her whereabouts.

The lake monster turns out to be a hybrid Frankenstein-like creature, seemingly created and manipulated by someone else, not a natural occurrence. In investigating this we meet a surly but not entirely unhelpful and powerful wizard who helps us travel faster to the capital.

Elves, Trees, Demons, Braziers and Pacts

Throughout all of this, we slowly find and uncover more temples and braziers, lighting them and fighting back the plant life through their magical influence.

It seems that some force is trying to disrupt the braziers and knows of our efforts, and we're subject to some trap and sabotage attempts at these locations.

This is skipping around the campaign a bit to do the main lore-dump all at once, but between various experts in cities, an ancient library tucked away in a mountain range, and eventually tracking down the elven professor mentioned earlier (Maeve), we piece together the following:

Millenia ago, elves fought a war against malevolent, sentient plant beings who tried to conquer the continent. Though we didn't learn this next fact until the final couple sessions of the campaign, the elves made a bargain with a powerful demon lord to help defeat the plants, who were winning against the elves prior to this.

The elves betrayed the demon lord, trapping him in the continent's enormous "world tree" in the northern part of the land.

The demon lord eventually managed to wield some influence and contacted the elven professor (Maeve) who had many of the documents we needed to piece this together. The demon lord, however, took the form of a plant creature to hide its true nature, and its growing forces were a mix of disguised demons and actual plants. Several clues pointed to this, though we didn't piece it all together until late in the campaign. For example, many of the plant creatures we fought were resistant or immune to fire damage, which would otherwise be quite confusing and curious.

There was some question of who was using whom between the demon lord (Verdant was the plant name he used; his demon name escapes me), and we cautiously even sided with Verdant for a brief time, thinking Maeve was the

mastermind who wanted to conquer the continent. She was being duped, though, and eventually fell victim to her own scheming, dying in the campaign's final third to plant forces who no longer had use of her.

King's Heroes and Unraveling the Plant Plot

In the capital, there was a plot against the King, who had been infected with a plant-based malady. Some clever combinations of spells and abilities allowed us to help him, and - in addition to some information-sharing on the nature of the braziers - we were able to get the Lanterns to commit forces to assisting us in locating and relighting braziers.

Meanwhile, we chased Maeve around for several sessions, and eventually found her only with the aid of Verdant, who needed her neutralized for other reasons.

Having exhausted her resources and realizing the betrayal of Verdant, she came clean to us and we actually let her go free, though she was killed by Verdant soon after.

Sussing out the particulars of Verdant's plot (essentially, driving all humanoid life off the island, with particular vengeance against elves), and locating the world tree in which his primary form was trapped (the specifics lost to history previously) in the middle of an enormous, dense, northern forest, we enlisted the aid of our wizard friend to teleport as close as possible and infiltrated the world tree itself, which was teeming with a mix of demons and plants bent on our destruction.

A central brazier that needed our combined lanterns was guard by Verdant's chief guards, and he met us there himself when it was clear we weren't to be stopped. We prepared somewhat poorly for the fight, rolling in with fewer resources and less health than we might have otherwise wanted. The ensuing battle was tense, with at one point all but one of our party being unconscious (though never more than two at a time, I believe).

I discovered that my summoned elemental was useless in a combat sense during combat, but it ended up having utility in collecting our lanterns and helping to relight the enormous brazier. Several unexpectedly clever moments lined the encounter along these lines, and it was probably the most harrowing encounter of the campaign.

The denouement was light on details for the world, which more-or-less returned to its previous state, with the magically-empowered plants receding to normal levels. We were already considered prominent Lantern Bearers and heroes of the realm, so we got to imagine the following

years as we wished.

Conclusion

Peren has a canonical postscript life as a park ranger, though, a fact made more concrete in a one-shot I ran at a charity gaming event back in November. The players in that session were all mutual friends of our group, and Peren makes a cameo appearance as a park ranger who is training new rangers (the party). He has to run off to deal with some nebulous threat, and the party is left to rescue a young child from some surprisingly intelligent wolves, who were in turn wronged by a nearby inhabitant of the forest.

In covering the campaign as a whole like this, it loses a lot of the flavor of characters and encounters. Our group runs on the sillier side, and the GM was unafraid of turning group chatter and in-jokes into plot hooks. Bocephus trying to discover the origins of centaur, for instance, and becoming increasingly confused at other hybrid creatures and becoming convinced that he was, in fact, an egg-laying creature who was confused with a centaur and was something different, was a delightful ongoing item. But it was also ancillary to the main plot. And, since I didn't take detailed notes, a pastiche of events is about the best my memory can manage. More granular details exist in my noggin, but would undoubtedly lose enough context that it would be confusing to attempt to retell.

Overall, though, the campaign was a success.

Responses to E&A #3

Gabriel Roark, Brian Rogers

Re: my monk character concept, thanks! I was on the fence on playing in this campaign due to some overwhelm in other areas of my life, but positive reaction to the concept in the last E&A (mixed with my own excitement to play it) helped to convince me to stick with it.

Jim Vassilakos

Re: my monk character concept, feel free to steal parts or the whole of it, Jim. If you do, I'd love to hear how it goes!

Patrick Riley

Re: Monks in 5e and D&D in general: In limited time thus far with the character, I'm happy to report I am holding my own in a mechanical sense. It helps that I went with a fairly logical build-out of the character, one that dual-classes with a couple levels of Barbarian. This is primarily for roleplaying reasons, but has thus far worked far better than my last monk dual-class (with Wizard) which was a catastrophic experiment that resulted in a running joke that

I needed to be knocked unconscious in every fight before it could be considered a legitimate encounter.

Roger BW

Funny you mention *Brindlewood Bay*. I just played in my first one-shot of it this past month. Slightly extended writeup just below in this zine, but yes, I can see how it might rankle players or GMs who prefer predetermined solutions to puzzles or mysteries, not improvised ones that retroactively turn out to be true.

Brindlewood Bay One-Shot

Brindlewood Bay is, in brief, a bit of an homage to *Murder, She Wrote* and similar tropes. You play as elderly women in a murder-mystery club who - wouldn't you know it - end up in the center of actual murder mysteries and feel compelled to solve them.

I played with four friends, with whom I've played *Fiasco* and *Alice is Missing* in recent months (my AiM writeup is in E&A #2).

I ended up playing a bit of a mashup of both of my grandmothers, flummoxed as I was to create a truly original character otherwise. Elements of their personalities intermingled, along with a couple of my own additions to make things more RPG-friendly (neither would have legitimately investigated murders, for instance).

The special abilities - borrowed from famous TV characters mostly from the 80s - are amusing as all get-out. My MacGyver-style ability was particularly funny, with me having to improvise a way to believably use random objects in a scene in a useful way, objects made up by my fellow players (and of course for added hilarity they're not trying to do me any favors by inventing obviously useful items).

Gameplay itself - in a fairly simple *Powered by the Apocalypse* system - I'm slightly less enamored of. Give me the full narratively improvisational glee of something like *Fiasco*, or something slightly crunchier like *Mouse Guard* or D&D. Insofar as the groups gravitated toward the world-building elements and character beats, the one-shot worked well. But it's a middling system as a whole for me, I think.

The mystery is always solved as well; it's only a matter of how coherently you pull together all the disparate clues you receive. I don't mind this and actively enjoyed theorizing with my group about the nature of the mystery and its solution. I just wish something similarly compelling existed for more generic action resolution in the game.

Conversations With Lucifer (#3)

Borrowed from a haphazard document I keep of unrelated thoughts, fragments of inspiration, and snippets of semi-artful construction.

“Am I in sin for speaking with you? For writing you into being with my questioning?”

“Do you believe you are?”

“No. An examination of darkness is not to accept it.”

“So then you believe in the existence of sin!”

“I didn't say that,” I countered.

“Ha! A measured response. An intellectual one. A modern one as well, with its technicality.”

“Do you prefer modern life with its technicality?”

“In many respects, yes. It makes the corruption so much subtler. It can stain the heart and wound another, robed in the language of precision and plausible deniability. It's what permits so many righteous injustices to go unpunished.”

“This is why I examine.”

“To understand sin, or to understand if you are guilty of it?”

“To probe it, lest it has hidden its nature from me.”

“That is my job, not sin's. Sin is open; to any level of introspection, it is honest. It is my job to convince you it is worth it.”

“And if I know your methods, can I not combat them?”

“I'm quite sure I don't care.” And at this I was a bit taken aback. So he continued. “Do you really think I have used the same tactics throughout history? Cared about each soul's corruption? Been present for every whispered threat or dark promise? Pulled for our against a religious cause in any known conflict? I do not need these things,” he said with cold indifference. “Only God does.”

“So it seems you're what Lucifer is to me.” Silence, but an affirmative one, it seemed to me. “And are you a manifestation of the universal Lucifer?”

“You don't believe in God, correct?”

“Not as such.”

“But me?”

“You're symbolic. You represent temptations, failures, dark impulses, and the myriad and personalized justifications that come with them.”

“My dear, what do you think God is? What do you think He's been to all the ages of the world?”

Philatelic Monstrosities #1 (Clark B. Timmins)

Monsters on postage stamps are not common. The USPS's "Message Monsters" (2021) and "Classic Movie Monsters" (1997) issues are well known, and the recent issues (by USPS and Royal Mail) of D&D stamps are another source of philatelic monsters. Looking deeper, though, for monsters on postage stamps is a difficult search. Especially if you ignore cartoons or images drawn by children, Muppets, heraldry, Dracula, and Frankenstein. Undeterred, we shall proceed as best we may.



Figure 1 - Transvaal Scott 187s. The Dutch-language overprint "Monster" indicates the stamp was a 'Specimen' submitted to the Universal Postal Union. The overprint also makes it the perfect postage stamp to introduce this English-language zine.

Black Shuck

Black Shuck is commonly known, but I'm a sucker for hellhounds. The monster is a ghostly black dog that roams East Anglia. Descriptions of Black Shuck and its nature vary considerably. An early published description comes from Reverend E. S. Taylor (1850): "This phantom I have heard many persons in East Norfolk, and even Cambridgeshire, describe as having seen as a black shaggy dog, with fiery eyes and of immense size, and who visits churchyards at midnight."



Figure 2 – Great Britain Scott #5312. "Black Shuck", from the Myths and Legends stamp set, 2025.

Black Shuck

Medium Fiend, Lawful Evil

AC 15

HP 58 (9d8 + 18)

Initiative +1 (11)

Speed 50 ft.

	Mod / Save		Mod / Save		Mod / Save
STR 17	+3 / +3	DEX 12	+1 / +1	CON 14	+2 / +2
INT 6	-2 / -2	WIS 13	+1 / +1	CHA 6	-2 / -2

Skills Perception +5

Immunities Necrotic, Poison, Psychic; Charmed, Frightened, Poisoned

Senses Darkvision 60 ft.; Passive Perception 15

Languages None

CR 4 (XP 1,100; PB +2)

TRAITS

Incorporeal Movement. Black Shuck can move through other creatures and objects as if they were Difficult Terrain. It takes 5 (1d10) Force damage if it ends its turn inside an object.

ACTIONS

Etherealness. Black Shuck casts the *Etherealness* spell, requiring no spell components and using Charisma as the spellcasting ability. Black Shuck is visible on the Material Plane while on the Border Ethereal and vice versa, but it can't be affected by anything on the other plane.

Horrific Howl. *Wisdom Saving Throw:* DC 13, each creature in a 60-foot Cone that can hear Black Shuck and isn't undead. *Failure:* 10 (2d6 + 3) Psychic damage, and the target has the Frightened condition until the start of Black Shuck's next turn. *Success:* The target is immune to Black Shuck's Horrific Howl for 24 hours.

Multiattack. Black Shuck makes two Withering Bite attacks or one Horrific Howl and one Withering Bite attack.

Withering Bite. *Melee Attack Roll:* +5, reach 5 ft. *Hit:* 7 (1d8 + 3) Piercing damage plus 3 (1d6) Psychic damage.

Ephialtes

The Greek physician Galen described sleep paralysis and nightmares and used the name ephialtes – for the Romans, this became incubus. The basic concept was a ghostly, malevolent being laying upon a sleeper during the night, leading to a sense of suffocation and paralysis accompanied by night terrors. The associated postage stamp has nothing to do with those things, really. It is one stamp from a souvenir sheet depicting surrealism. But I'm repurposing it as a monster because it looks like one.

Ephialtes

Medium Fiend, Neutral Evil

AC 15

HP 66 (12d8 + 12)

STR 8 Mod / Save
-1 / -1

INT 15 +2 / +2

DEX 17

WIS 12

Initiative +3 (13)

Speed 30 ft., Fly 60 ft. (hover)

Mod / Save

+3 / +3

+1 / +1

CON 13

CHA 20

Mod / Save

+1 / +1

+5 / +5

Skills Deception +9, Insight +5, Perception +5, Persuasion +9, Stealth +7

Resistances Acid, Bludgeoning, Cold, Lightning, Fire, Piercing, Psychic, Slashing, Thunder

Immunities Poison; Charmed, Exhaustion, Frightened, Grappled, Paralyzed, Petrified, Poisoned, Prone, Restrained

Senses Darkvision 60 ft.; Passive Perception 15

Languages Common; telepathy 60 ft.

CR 5 (XP 1,800; PB +2)



Figure 3 - Portugal Scott #2351. From "50th Anniversary of Surrealism in Portugal" mini-sheet, 1999.

TRAITS

Ethereal Sight. Ephialtes can see 60 feet into the Ethereal Plane when it is on the Material Plane.

Incorporeal Movement. Ephialtes can move through other creatures and objects as if they were Difficult Terrain. It takes 5 (1d10) Force damage if it ends its turn inside an object.

ACTIONS

Etherealness. Ephialtes casts the *Etherealness* spell, requiring no spell components and using Charisma as the spellcasting ability. Ephialtes is visible on the Material Plane while on the Border Ethereal and vice versa, but it can't affect or be affected by anything on the other plane.

Night Terror. *Melee Attack Roll:* +7, reach 5 ft. *Hit:* 15 (3d6 + 5) Psychic damage, and the target is cursed for 24 hours or until Ephialtes dies. Until the curse ends, the target gains no benefit from finishing Short Rests or Long Rests and has the Frightened condition.

Sleep Paralysis. Ephialtes gives the Paralyzed condition to a target within 5' that has the Unconscious condition. The condition lasts as long as the target is Unconscious and for 4 (1d6 + 1) additional minutes.

Bonus Actions

Shadow Stealth. While in Dim Light or Darkness, Ephialtes takes the Hide action.

REACTIONS

Deep Sleep (Recharge 5-6). Ephialtes gives the Unconscious condition to a target within 5' that is sleeping, taking a Short Rest, or taking a Long Rest.

Mapinguari

Mapinguari are said to inhabit the Brazilian deep jungle. Various accounts describe numerous variant traits – a situation that is common with many cryptids. Its most often cited traits are eating humans, avoiding direct sunlight, an enormous mouth, a frightful scream as it attacks, a massive body covered in reddish fur, emitting a foul odor, backward-turned feet, and massive heavy claws. In many accounts, it seems to be a type of lycanthrope, with old men changing into these monsters. Our stamp shows the extinct Mylodon, which fits many of the traits of Mapinguari. Mylodon walked on the edges of its feet, leaving the claws available for grasping – close enough to backward for me.



Figure 4 - Cambodia Scott #1459. Mylodon, from the Prehistoric Animals stamp set, 1994.

Mapinguari

Large Beast, Unaligned

AC 12

HP 42 (5d10 + 15)

Initiative +2 (12)

Speed 30 ft.

	Mod / Save		Mod / Save		Mod / Save
STR 20	+5 / +5	DEX 15	+2 / +2	CON 16	+3 / +3
INT 3	-4 / -4	WIS 12	+1 / +1	CHA 8	-1 / -1

Skills Perception +5, Stealth +4

Resistances Piercing

Immunities Frightened, Grappled

Senses Darkvision 60 ft.; Passive Perception 15

Languages None

CR 3 (XP 700; PB +2)

TRAITS

Bloodied Fury. Mapinguari has Advantage on melee attack rolls while it is Bloodied.

Stench. *Constitution Saving Throw:* DC 13, any creature that starts its turn in a 5-foot Emanation originating from Mapinguari. *Failure:* The target has the Poisoned condition until the start of its next turn. *Success:* The target is immune to Mapinguari's Stench for 24 hours.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Mapinguari makes two Rend attacks. It can replace one attack with a use of Roar.

Rend. *Melee Attack Roll* +7, reach 5 ft. *Hit:* 9 (1d8 + 5) Slashing damage.

Roar. *Wisdom Saving Throw:* DC 11, one creature within 15 feet. *Failure:* The target has the Frightened condition until the start of Mapinguari's next turn.

BONUS ACTIONS

Rampage (1/Day). Immediately after dealing damage to a creature that was already Bloodied, Mapinguari can move up to half its speed, and it makes one Massive Bite attack.

Massive Bite. *Melee Attack Roll* +7, reach 5 ft. *Hit:* 10 (1d10 + 5) Bludgeoning damage. If the target is a Large or smaller creature, it has the Grappled condition (escape DC 15).

Ogopogo

Ogopogo is said to inhabit Okanagan Lake in British Columbia. It's much like various other "lake monster" cryptids and is said to be a serpentine creature with smooth, dark skin. A body length of about 50 ft with a diameter of perhaps a foot is typically claimed. Most descriptions note Ogopogo has incredible swimming speeds, and it appears to prefer shallow water. Some descriptions claim that it is an evil, supernatural entity with ill intent.



Figure 5 - Canada Scott #1292. "The Ogopogo/L'Ogopogo", from the Folklore stamp set, 1990.

Ogopogo

Large Beast, Unaligned

AC 18

HP 136 (16d10 + 48)

Initiative +4 (14)

Speed 10 ft., Swim 60 ft.

	Mod / Save		Mod / Save		Mod / Save
STR 19	+4 / +4	DEX 18	+4 / +7	CON 16	+3 / +6
INT 6	-2 / -2	WIS 10	+0 / +0	CHA 6	-2 / -2

Skills Perception +5

Immunities Charmed, Frightened, Grappled, Prone

Senses Darkvision 60 ft.; Passive Perception 14

Languages None

CR 5 (XP 1,800; PB +3)

TRAITS

Water Breathing. Ogopogo can breathe only underwater. It can hold its breath for 1 hour outside water.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Ogopogo makes one Bite attack and one Tail attack.

Bite. *Melee Attack Roll:* +8, reach 10 ft. *Hit:* 17 (2d12 + 4) Piercing damage. If the target is a Medium or smaller creature, it has the Grappled condition (escape DC 14). While Grappled, the target has the Restrained condition and can't be targeted by Ogopogo's Tail.

Tail. *Melee Attack Roll:* +8, reach 10 ft. *Hit:* 18 (3d8 + 5) Bludgeoning damage. If the target is a Large or smaller creature, it has the Prone condition.

Sand Squall

The stamp depicts something like a sphinx or an aralez. The sandy color of the stamp suggests some type of sand or earth affinity, whereas the wings suggest some type of air affinity. I like the idea of forcing the earth and air into a single package. The juxtaposition suggests chaos, so the monster may help... or not... In any case, it probably doesn't stay around for very long.



Figure 6 - Armenia Scott #284a, Monster Mythology (imperforate), 1921. This example is a forgery.

Sand Squall

Large Elemental, Chaotic Neutral

AC 16

HP 109 (13d10 + 39)

Initiative +2 (12)

Speed 30 ft., Burrow* 30 ft., Fly* 60 ft.

	Mod / Save		Mod / Save		Mod / Save
STR 17	+3 / +3	DEX 14	+2 / +2	CON 17	+3 / +3
INT 6	-2 / -2	WIS 10	+0 / +0	CHA 6	-2 / -2

Immunities Poison; Exhaustion, Grappled, Paralyzed, Petrified, Poisoned, Prone, Restrained, Unconscious

Senses Darkvision 60 ft., Tremorsense* 60 ft.; Passive Perception 10

Languages Primordial (Terran & Auran)

CR 6 (XP 2,300; PB +3)

TRAITS

Air Glide. Sand Squall can fly but must remain within 5' of the surface. While it is using *Air Glide* it cannot utilize Tremorsense.

Commotion. Unless prevented from doing so, Sand Squall must move at least ten feet on each of its turns.

Earth Glide. Sand Squall can burrow through nonmagical, unworked earth but must remain within 5' of the surface.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Sand Squall makes two attacks, using Abrasive Slam or Thunderous Slam in any combination.

Abrasive Slam. *Melee Attack Roll +6, reach 10 ft. Hit 14 (2d8 + 5) Bludgeoning damage.* The creature has the Blinded condition until the end of Sand Squall's next turn.

Thunderous Slam. *Melee Attack Roll +5, reach 10 ft. Hit 14 (2d8 + 5) Thunder damage.* The creature has the Deafened condition until the end of Sand Squall's next turn.

BONUS ACTIONS

Sand Squall's Lick (3/Day). Sand Squall licks another creature and casts *Cure Wounds* 16 (4d8 - 2) or *Lesser Restoration* on that creature, using Charisma as the spellcasting ability. The creature has the Blinded condition until the end of Sand Squall's next turn.

REACTIONS

Whirlwind of Sand. *Trigger:* Sand Squall is hit by an attack roll. *Response:* Sand Squall adds 2 to its AC against the attack, possibly causing the attack to miss, and Sand Squall teleports up to 60 feet to an unoccupied space it can see. Each creature of its choice that it can sense within 5 feet of its destination space has the Blinded condition until the end of Sand Squall's next turn.

Thekwane

The stamp depicts an artist's interpretation of *Teratornis*, an extinct genus of large bird living primarily along the North American west coast. I'm a sucker for souvenir sheets so I'm going to appropriate the image. The legendary 'lightning bird', also known as impundulu or thekwane, is a creature of the folklore of the Zulu people. I'm not trying to recreate that folklore, just using the name and



Figure 7 - Laos Scott #1160, *Teratornis* Souvenir Sheet, 1994.

some of the ideas to combine with the image to make a problem for character parties. Thekwane stands about four feet tall and has a wingspan of about fifteen feet. Thekwane has an insatiable appetite for blood.

Thekwane

Medium Monstrosity, Neutral Evil

AC 17

HP 105 (14d10 + 28)

Initiative +4 (14)

Speed 20 ft., Fly 90 ft.

	Mod / Save		Mod / Save		Mod / Save
STR 11	+0 / +0	DEX 18	+4 / +8	CON 14	+2 / +2
INT 11	+0 / +0	WIS 13	+1 / +1	CHA 7	-2 / -2

Immunities Piercing, Poison; Lightning, Poisoned, Thunder

Senses Darkvision 120 ft.; Passive Perception 11

Languages None

CR 5 (XP 1,800; PB +3)

TRAITS

Lightning Dynamo. Whenever Thekwane is subjected to Lightning or Thunder damage, it takes no damage and instead regains a number of Hit Points equal to the Lightning or Thunder damage taken.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Thekwane makes two attacks, using Bloody Beak or Storm Bolt in any combination.

Bloody Beak. *Melee Attack* Roll +5, reach 5 ft. *Hit:* 9 (2d8) Piercing damage plus 5 (2d4) Necrotic damage. The target's Hit Point maximum decreases by an amount equal to the Necrotic damage taken, and Thekwane regains Hit Points equal to that amount.

Storm Bolt. *Ranged Attack* Roll +11, range 120 ft. *Hit* 13 (3d8) Thunder damage. If the target is a Large or smaller creature, it has the Prone condition.

REACTIONS

Lightning Rest. *Trigger:* Thekwane becomes Bloodied. *Response:* A lightning bolt strikes the Thekwane's space. Each creature in a 5 feet emanation from Thekwane makes a DC 17 Dexterity saving throw, taking 30 (9d6) Lightning damage on a failed save or half as much damage on a successful one. Thekwane vanishes and is teleported ten feet underground into a safe cocoon where it uses a Long Rest before emerging from the ground at some future point.

Tupilaq

The stamp depicts a polar bear. Polar bears are common enough on stamps, but usually they are presented as cute or at least safely distant. Here, the aggressive polar bear is depicted over its kill – which is a human. This stamp often is cited as a 'creepy' design. The recent Netflix series *The Terror* featured a monster called tuunbaq, itself a specific visualization of a legendary polar monster called tupilaq. Tupilaq are created by evil magic – the exact method varies considerably



Figure 8 - Greenland Scott #117, Polar Bear with Kill, from the Kalaallit Nunaat set, 1984.

from one story to the next. In one Greenlandic version of the legend, the tupilaq is constructed of parts of dead animals and dead children through a process of sex magic performed by a powerful shaman. Tupilaq are created for vengeance or revenge upon an identifiable target or group. In many stories, they might be sent back – by a more-powerful shaman – to kill the original creator. In almost all stories tupilaq have a strong resemblance to a massive polar bear with an even more massive mouth.

Tupilaq

Large Construct, Neutral Evil

AC 17

HP 142 (15d10 + 60)

Initiative +2 (12)

Speed 40 ft., Swim 40 ft.

	Mod / Save		Mod / Save		Mod / Save
STR 20	+5 / +5	DEX 14	+2 / +2	CON 18	+4 / +4
INT 7	-2 / -2	WIS 13	+1 / +1	CHA 7	-2 / -2

Immunities Poison; Charmed, Exhaustion, Frightened, Paralyzed, Petrified, Poisoned

Senses Blindsight 10 ft., Darkvision 60 ft.; Passive Perception 15

Languages Understands commands given in creator's language but can't speak

CR 8 (XP 3,900; PB +3)

TRAITS

Ice Absorption. Whenever Tupilaq is subjected to Cold damage, it regains a number of Hit Points equal to the Cold damage dealt.

Icy Passage. Tupilaq does not consider heavy snow or ice, shallow water, or steep slopes, as difficult terrain.

Magic Resistance. Tupilaq has Advantage on saving throws against spells and other magical effects.

ACTIONS

Multiattack. Tupilaq makes two Icy Slam attacks or one Icy Bite attack and one Icy Slam attack.

Icy Bite. *Melee Attack* Roll +8, reach 5 ft. *Hit* 14 (2d8 + 5) Bludgeoning damage plus 10 (2d6 + 4) Cold damage. The target gains one level of Exhaustion.

Icy Slam. *Melee Attack* Roll +8, reach 10 ft. *Hit* 14 (2d8 + 5) Slashing damage plus 7 (2d6) Cold damage. If the target is Large or smaller, it must succeed on a DC 16 Strength or Dexterity saving throw (it chooses which) or it is pushed 5 feet away and has the Prone condition.

BONUS ACTIONS

Icy Stealth. While in Dim Light or Darkness, or when in any snowy or icy environment, Tupilaq takes the Hide action.

REACTIONS

Retreat into Ice. Trigger: Tupilaq becomes Bloodied. *Response:* Tupilaq takes the Dash and Disengage actions.



Figure 9 - Royal Mail's Dungeons & Dragons Miniature Sheet, 2024.

Riposte Office

B 11 ½ - *The Royal Harvest Festival Apophenia* can be downloaded as a PDF from:
<https://rpggeek.com/filepage/304205/b1112-the-royal-harvest-festival-apophenia>

Redden: I also saw *Jurassic World Rebirth* in the theater. It was exactly what I expected it to be, which is both bad and good. Much like an FLGS pick-up session of D&D. You know what to expect, it will be entertaining but likely not particularly memorable.

Cule: re: “the prehistory of the site...” I am enamored of this idea as well. But my at-the-table experience has not matched my concept of how it would work. For example, in one session the players spent much time arguing / investigating various things that they considered to be significant ‘clues’ but, in reality, were just old denizens’ leavings that I’d intended to give the place the feeling of a long history. I think it’s because when we collectively share an imaginary location the actual shared details are very few. When the GM notes *e.g.* something scrawled on the wall in bugbear – and there are no bugbears in the dungeon – the players want to grab onto the detail as significant. I’ve

often struggled with how to insert (largely) unimportant details into play without the derailing effect.

Grumer: *Love* the green ‘paper’. Such a nice touch. It made me feel like I was reading old A&E.

Riley: I know they say to convert orcs to “Tough” – but then why don’t they say to convert goblins to something, and trolls to something and *etc.* Removing the orc... IMHO it was a stupid move. Yes, I used Dungeon Map Doodler. Useful tool!

Rogers: re: “xandering” - You say tomato I say tomato.

Misiaszek: I loved the old 3-ring binder *Monstrous Compendium*. The format has not been kind to keeping things organized, however. I have monster pages tucked away *everywhere*. TSR’s numbering left a lot to be desired. Anyway – nice find!

Eckman: *Old Artifacts* should’ve been the cover...

Padol: *Hanta Yo* (Ruth Beebe Hill). I didn’t care for it.

Vassilakos: Re: “xandering” - <https://thealexandrian.net/wordpress/13085/roleplaying-games/xandering-the-dungeon>



Figure 10 - Scott India #568 Indipex Peacock, from India International Philatelic Exhibition set, 1973.

Children's interactive fiction – part V: *Joões e Marias* (2014)
by Pedro Panhoca da Silva <ppanhoca@yahoo.com.br> and Camila Lourenço Panhoca
<camiladopedro@gmail.com>

Another joint creation by José Roberto Torero and Marcus Aurelius Pimenta, *Joões e Marias* (2014)¹ – “Johns and Maries”, in free translation – is an interactive version of the well-known Brothers Grimm fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel”.

The story begins in the same way as the original text: a family of four, consisting of siblings João and Maria and their parents, lives in a house in the middle of a forest. Due to a lack of food, the parents decide to put João and Maria on a boat to find food so that at least they can survive. Without anyone noticing, João throws pieces of something along the way to mark the way back home. Maria cries because of her parents' attitude, but João calms her down, showing her that he left clues for them to return later. From here on, the reader begins to decide and play at being the “co-author” of the story, choosing the type of pieces that João left along the way (stale bread, carrots, watermelon seeds or ice cubes), how the evil witch's house was built (with sweets, vegetables, fruit or ice cream), what kind of idea João comes up with to escape after being imprisoned and fattened up by the wicked witch (hot, bubbling, “spinning and going vroom” or very cold), what they find in the chest after defeating the wicked witch (paper things, golden things, things from nature or shiny things) and how they use the reward they have earned (they become fat, generous, handsome or frozen).

It is clear that there are only five interactions during the narrative and, regardless of the choice, the ending will be happy. With children in mind, this interactive fiction works well, despite being limited. As in other interactive books by the duo, these forks are actually just false choices, as there is no chance of failure. Only the development and outcome will change, but all of them are positive and fun. The book presents this sad story of abandonment with humour and helps to stimulate the creativity of young readers by presenting choices throughout the narrative.

COMMENTS #3

JOHN REDDEN: Thank you very much ☺

GABRIEL ROARK: It depends a lot on the size of the references, but you can calculate 3-4 references per page, which would be somewhere between 12-16 pages, not counting internal illustrations, vignettes, monster encounter tables etc. Adapting my solo adventure to the system that Beuren applies in his interactive texts was his job. I just suggested where there should be attribute tests and monster encounters, and he did everything else.

MYLES CORCORAN: Actually, the United Kingdom is the birthplace of gamebooks, but as for solo adventures, very few are actually released, I think in all countries. Nowadays, it is fashionable to publish gamebooks with extensive narratives. A well-known group is “Fighting Fantasy (and other gamebooks)”: https://www.facebook.com/groups/2347541406?locale=pt_BR.

BRIAN CHRISTOPHER MISIASZEK: Wow! I didn't know about these texts by Howard... they sound incredible! I'll check if there's a Portuguese translation of them. Thanks for the tip!

LISA PADOL: No, I expressed myself badly: actually, I was upset that I wasn't interviewed. And yes, you saw correctly: it was my first published solo adventure ☺

JIM VASSILAKOS & TIMOTHY COLLINSON: Unfortunately, it doesn't sell that well even in Portuguese... but I'm enthusiastic about globalising Brazilian gamebooks. Maybe one day...

¹ An excerpt from the book can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbmQt4aFVm4>, unfortunately only in Portuguese.

Firedrake's Hoard

Number 2: by Roger BW

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



Arr! The 19th may be sinkin' on the horizon, but in these parts *every* day be Talk Like a Pirate Day!

What I've Been Playing

Cold War Pulp: dealing with holdout Nazis in Antarctica, with superscience. We disabled their terror weapon (well, its weird science power source did a lot of the disabling after we hit it with a bazooka round), Caleb (who fought his way up Italy with the Rangers) was glad to learn that even now Nazis still fall over when you shoot them with your trusty .30-06 Springfield, and the survivors were induced to surrender.

"They probably haven't had chocolate for years. And if they have it's weird Nazi mad science chocolate that keeps you awake all night or something."

and a bit later when sorting out prisoners:

"That one Caleb shot, he was an officer."

"Gonna have to narrow it down a bit there, sir."

We managed to get one of the senior Nazis to surrender (offering him a free choice between that, sitting in the base until the radiation poisoning got him, dying in the Antarctic wastes or marching off to see what the Elder Things wanted). But just what is "die Glocke", the superscience device that, while horrendously

radioactive, allowed them to hover an aircraft at 40,000 feet without needing fuel?

All the Nazis ended up having done one of surrender, commit suicide, or wander off to the City of the Elder Things; and the campaign has gone on hiatus for now due to GM life.

2300AD Bayern: as Michael Cule mentioned last month (but I'd already put in my zine), the August session with the Sunday group jumped forward a fair bit, largely because they felt that engaging with a (possible) von Neumann probe to the extent of exchanging more than trivial information might well be Very Dangerous (well, yes) and therefore didn't do it. Which is legitimate, but not necessarily fun. (The only formal system for measuring the success of the mission relates to observation and exploration of the Pleiades, the primary mission target, so there's no question of negative long-term consequences from this, just a missed opportunity.)

In September we moved on to a different adventure, a semi-derelict alien spacecraft with some odd activity aboard. Much of this one is sorting out the potential multiple factions, and working out which is the ship in need of help and which the invading parasite. The phrase "homicidal calamari robot" may have been uttered. (This one originates as about a page of adventure outline, including a terrible dearth of

hard numbers, so I expanded it extensively in the process of running it.)

Meanwhile Whartson Hall, playing the same campaign, are a bit further ahead (started earlier, usually playing more often) and are engaged in a classic *Traveller* trek across a hostile environment. I always like the idea of gaming human vs environment challenges, but compared with conscious opposition I find it tricky to build a sense of tension, perhaps in large part because you mostly aren't making fateful decisions the way you are in combat: if you have the relevant wilderness skill, you know the best thing to do. (Also you can carry a *lot* of pitons if you're already in an armoured spacesuit on a low-gravity world.) We've put this on hold for a bit after 18 sessions to let me recharge my GMing batteries.

Cried the Lady: also with Whartson Hall, a gaslight Lincolnshire scenario. Clearly there's something going on in the possibly-haunted house, and it seems to have to do with mirrors, but we're still at the poking things and seeing what pokes back stage of the investigation.

"It's a normal family tree, right? I mean, not a straight line or a loop?"

"Or a Möbius strip?"

Something seems to have come out of the biggest mirror, which seems to be reflecting a *slightly* different reality... But the second something—which seems, even to white Victorian men used to annihilating harmless wildlife in the name of sport, more unhealthy than vicious—may have come out of a smooth pool of water, so merely whitewashing the mirrors isn't going to help.

And then there's the set of mirrors that seem to match the alchemical principles.

Lions, Tigers & Dragons: a few years ago I ran a campaign of an alternate WWII combined with the return of magic to the world, *Irresponsible and Right*. Everything lined up to make it a great game, specifically including the players and how we built on each other's contributions. When that came to an end, two of the players volunteered to run their own campaigns in the same setting, and this is one of them: we're a variety of British-aligned intelligence agents in India, though most of the PCs are native to the country and regard the British only as better than the alternative colonial powers. (One of us is probably going to end up as the first President of India.)

In any case, in August we dealt with Japanese agents in Chongqing (in 1941) who seemed to have had descriptions of us, so we're now trying to found a new theatre tradition that will require actors who look like the (fairly diverse) party. It's that sort of ethos: the war is grim, but we might as well (in character) try to laugh about it.

"If I were being fake police — not that I ever have — I would secret a key to my own handcuffs about my person. These guys are amateurs!"

Starting Bayern

I played a bit of *2300AD* (and its first edition, *Traveller: 2300*¹) back in the day, and I was amused to see that Mongoose had reissued it, finally putting it under a system of standardised *Traveller* rules rather than its own specialised

¹By most accounts, this name was used because Marc Miller felt that *any* SF game he was involved with should be called *Traveller*, but it certainly produced a great deal of confusion that persists to this day; the setting is entirely disjoint from the *Traveller* Imperium, though there are points of coincidence. For simplicity I'll just call it *2300AD* here.

thing. Then [the core rules](https://www.mongoosepublishing.com/products/2300ad) (https://www.mongoosepublishing.com/products/2300ad) and [the Bayern campaign](https://www.mongoosepublishing.com/products/project-bayern) (https://www.mongoosepublishing.com/products/project-bayern) came up in a Bundle of Holding in 2023.

Back in the day *2300AD* was widely known in my social group as “the *Aliens* game”: of course without any sort of official licence, but if you wanted military SF that was mostly about the blokes on the ground rather than the starships, and without the extreme technology of *Traveller*, this was definitely one of the places to go. Although there are some niggles round the edges, there’s basically one impossibility in this setting, the stutterwarp, which leads to fast space travel both in-system and between stars; but there are limited things a ship in orbit can do to help you on a planet, and apart from the very occasional laser or plasma gun for specialised tasks fighting is still largely a game of bullets and body armour.

But I wasn’t particularly in the mood for a military SF game, and *Bayern* offers something different: a multi-year exploratory mission of several hundred light years, to the Pleiades and back. Even in its original 52-page book form, this had the potential to be an epic campaign, and now at 312 text pages with a host of supplemental adventures and encounters (not to mention full deck plans for all the vessels on the mission) I think it lives up to that. (There’s also rather more illustration, mostly practical rather than evocative, but that’s handy for saying “your space suit looks like *this*”.)

Of course, the traditional Mongoose “light touch” editing is present in abundance and I’ve had to do a fair bit of work to go even from the substantial books to something I felt ready to run.

For a start, there’s very little about the player characters who might join this mission: they’re supposed to have had at least some contact with academic institutions, fair enough, but I suspect the original authors intended that groups would to take their party from an existing *2300AD* campaign directly into *Bayern*. I didn’t do that; instead, I presented the mission brief to my players, and asked them to think about people who might be interested in joining.

Also, this is meant to be a project that’s hugely oversubscribed, such that the planners doing crew selection can pick from the best humanity has to offer. And while there clearly is a certain amount of institutional politics involved, they really ought to pick people with skills at the top end of what human civilisation includes (assuming those people are still reasonably young and fit).

But Mongoose’s *2300AD* uses a lightly modified *Traveller* character generation process, which is designed to spit out starting adventurers². So rather than mess about with point-based generation³, which felt a little clumsy, I took off the constraints completely: any time the system asks you for a die roll, *you can pick the result*. Or make the roll and then say “nah, I’ll take the other option”. And so on. If you want to have a character with maxed out stats and skills, you can; just have a story to tell of how they got that way.

My players aren’t munchkins, and while some were initially reluctant to engage with all the

²More or less. In Michael Cule’s earlier *Traveller* campaign under the same rules, my character went from SOC 2 gutter scum to a Marine Colonel and Baron with his own planet to rule. He was a great enthusiast for the imperial system: look what it had done for him! But another player with poorer dice rolls ended up with a much less capable character, and had less fun.

³which gives you stats, skills and ranks, but doesn’t provide you with a career history

possibilities this offered they did eventually get the hang of it. I also pointed out that they really ought to have a +3 or +4 in the thing they did best, to be on a par with the statted-out crew.

As a side note, while *Mongoose's Traveller* is traditionally stingy about skill improvements, it depends on an EDU roll: every 8 weeks you see whether your study during that period has been effective or wasted. For this game, since that is in effect a part of character generation, it's an automatic pass. The mission schedule encompasses a total of 23 8-week blocks, and seven blocks would let you go from incompetence in a new skill up to +3, but since all the PCs are getting similar levels of improvement (thanks to the lack of rolls) I don't see this as a problem.

Interestingly, the slots for PCs (aboard one of the subcraft of the flotilla that makes up the new version of the mission) are mostly "crew" rather than "scientist" roles; of the 20, 24 or 26 people aboard the craft (the books give all three values in different places), only two are scientists. Of course, with free character generation, it's quite possible for the crew to have significant science skills and vice versa, and that seems like a reasonable approach in narrative context too.

There isn't a single summary of the mission setup, so I wrote this to give to the players:

The *Bayern* flotilla consists of four ships: *Bayern* herself, the largest at 43kt and about 200 crew, with the specialised stutterwarp drive systems needed to cross interstellar gulfs, and three smaller ships each of about 4kt and 20 crew. These are *Anton Dohrn*, an Initial Survey Vessel, usually running in advance of the main operation surveying new systems for

hazards and noting features of possible interest; *George Bauer*, a Logistics Support Vessel, used as a repair tender and for resupply mining operations; and *Entdecker*, a specialised Encounter Vessel, able both to land on a planet and to fly FTL under its own power. Depending on the tempo of operations, the ships fly separately or link up, the latter particularly for the long crossings.

Onward to new stars!

What are your favorite RPGs to play, run, or just read?

I try other systems but always find myself drifting back to *GURPS*, with one great big caveat: character generation takes ages, and requires that whoever's doing it know the system pretty well⁴. Also, points are all very well as a concept, but the more diversity you have between characters the less useful they are as a basis for comparison. Even in a single world, say a fantasy one, are those four points you spent on reading dead languages ever going to be useful? More useful than an extra +1 for hitting people? Some games yes, some games no.

But *given* the characters: well, it just flows. Pretty much any game I run spends most of its time in a loop of my description, players' reaction, and mechanical resolution thereof, leading to a new piece of description. The system has little to say about the first two parts, but when it comes to the mechanics, we already know what's happening in terms of the shared subcreation that is the game world: we just want to translate it into rules to work out what

⁴Generating effective characters to a point budget is, in other words, a skill, and it need not be correlated with one's skill in running or playing in enjoyable games.

happened. And **GURPS** is great at this. It starts off with a model that's not wildly far from the real world⁵, and then adds its magic and high tech and so on in a consistent way. You try to disarm the trap? Roll Traps. You hit the stone door? I know how much DR and HP it has, and how much damage you can do. You talk to the living statue? Roll, hmm, that sounded like Fast-Talk. And so on.

This is something that I've seen cause confusion on the [Steve Jackson Games forums](https://forums.sjgames.com/) (https://forums.sjgames.com/) especially when people arrive from a background of pretty much pure *D&D*. They come in and ask about optimal character builds, or whether a particular rule is "official"; but **GURPS** is a Rule Zero game, where the primary authority is the GM, and the rules exist only to assist them. (And it would be *impossible* to run a game with all of the **GURPS** rules; some of them are explicitly alternatives to each other, more appropriate for particular styles of play or dealing with the way magic works in a specific campaign.) There aren't the fine balances of power you'd find in *D&D* or *Pathfinder*, or (usually) the blaming of players for not building a sufficiently combat-effective character; this type of RPG is not a competition between players and GM in the mode of the terrible but classic *Tomb of Horrors*, it's a collaborative way of having fun. (Sometimes that fun means a PC dies.)

More significantly, **GURPS** as I run it (and every game I run) is world-first. There is a place that we are jointly imagining, and we apply the rules as necessary to work out reasonable things to happen in particular situations, but the rules are necessarily an imperfect reflection of the reality. But the impression I get from at least some *D&D* and *Pathfinder* groups is a rules-first

game, in which the pure mechanical effect of the rules is the "truth" of the world no matter how incomplete it might be, and descriptions of what's going on are very much secondary.

So because the system isn't trying to stay perfectly balanced so that any level 6 character is as good as any other, and because it's not being called on to provide a rigid model of reality, one doesn't have to use the system all the time. Here's an inconsequential action: do I need to go to the full depth of detail that the rules allow? No, just roll your skill. Here you're doing something more significant: well, let's bring in more modifiers and considerations and take a bit longer to resolve it. I hardly ever have to bring in the full weight of the rules.

That said, I've also been enjoying running the Mongoose version of *Traveller* lately. It feels to me, more than any of the other iterations since the Little Black Books, like a set of house rules added to the original mechanics, getting rid of things that didn't work well or were unnecessary⁶ while retaining the core mechanics.

To play, I'm also happy with *BRP*, specifically in its *Call of Cthulhu* mode⁷. Here's a percentage, roll it, done. If you get into a fight with a Tentacled Beastie, you've probably lost already. If you want to punch Cthulhu in the face, go and play *Arkham Horror*.

To read... not any more. Back in the day when I had relatively few RPG books available, I read them exhaustively. (Yes, I remember finding the random harlot table.) Now I'm more inclined to be diving in and looking for a specific thing. I'd

⁵or at least a slightly cinematic version thereof

⁶like the weapon vs armour table that meant each new weapon or piece of armour had to be defined in terms of an existing one to avoid combinatorial explosion

⁷in my case that usually means the open ruleset [Cthulhu Eternal](https://cthulhueternal.com/) (https://cthulhueternal.com/)

really rather start from a bare-bones rules core, from which I can get to more detailed explanations if I find I need them.

We Also Heard From

Comments on E&A number 3

Cor, pride of place in issue 3! Thanks, chaps!

Pedro Panhoca da Silva and Camila

Laurenço Panhoca: I take your point that this isn't what we would normally call interactive fiction, but I think that's a difference of degree rather than kind: reduced to brutal minimalism, this could be regarded as a game book with three decision points, of which only the last one affects the ending. (Are some of the outcomes "better" than the others? At the very least I'd expect that some will be more enjoyable to the reader.)

Michael Cule: sorry, you say "extinct volcano" and my first thought is: *reeeeeealy extinct?* I've seen a few "comprehensive city" products over the years; "comprehensive" in the sense that you can pick any spot and say what's on that street, down to the level of specific businesses if you like, how often the cops come by, which gang's turf you're on, and so on. It's a lovely idea... but somehow I've never actually used one in play⁸. Of course if you double the circumference, and thus the radius, each Expansion, the available area goes up by 4x...

Re Mongoose 2300AD: as noted elsewhere in this zine, it's not so much that you quickly worked out what was going on (though congratulations!) as that your, and the rest of the party's, instant response was to have nothing

to do with it. Fair enough, it's a legitimate choice.

Re *RuneQuest*, I feel the trick with *RACHE* doesn't work as well if there aren't people called Rachel in the world.

Clark B. Timmins: I don't speak modern D&D, but back in the day a movement speed implied *tactical* movement: i.e. each time I enter a new hex or square, I choose from several that are adjacent to me, rather than having limited ability to turn (that was restricted to aerial manoeuvre). I could quite easily believe in what you've statted: a creature that perhaps could jump in straight lines at a sustained 70mph, taking a moment to brace itself on launch and landing, but which would not be able to move that fast within the tactical grid of a fight. If it mattered, you could call it a special non-combat move.

George Phillies: see my comment in the main body of this zine on *GURPS* (and, I think, early but not modern *D&D*) as a "rule zero" game where the GM is explicitly the ultimate authority. I could get rantier about this, but overall I think the modern style demands less of the players and GM, which makes it more widely accessible, but also makes it harder to have the really *good* games that are why I got into this hobby and why I stay in it 40+ years later.

Dylan Capel: perversely I think it's harder to set expectations in a one-shot than in a campaign, when there's plenty of time to talk about who the PCs are and what sort of world they're living in. You say to me "cattle raid" and I think of the violent, but usually non-lethal, raids in Ireland and Scotland, and I think that's not too far off what Glorantha does; but someone else may not have that background

⁸I have occasionally used real-life central London, when I was living there and knew just what was where, with fictional insertions for game purposes.

information. In my very limited experience of *Quest Worlds*, where I think it can fail is in the framing of contests: it doesn't really want to resolve "you and I have a fight", it's much more about "you and I sort out who's top dog, which may involve a fight, a boasting contest, and perhaps other things".

Avram Grume: (hi, I think we have spoken occasionally elsewhere): I agree with you on the procedural nature of *Blades in the Dark*. I've found it very frustrating: I want to role-play, and the system keeps telling me "no, you have to do one of these three things". The system asks me to act like a great big hero, and I look at my odds of success and say "hmm, no, I want to be a bit more cautious than that". I fear it's just not for me; which is a shame, because clearly many people are enjoying it. Meanwhile I'd argue that *Masks'* relatively abstract approach to superpowers is probably truer to the comics experience than having everything rated on a scale.

Cthulhu Eternal inherits the "doubles are special whether success or failure" mechanic from I think *Unknown Armies*⁹. I've found it a very satisfactory mechanical replacement for *Call of Cthulhu*, especially the latter's 7th edition which feels to me unfocused and bloated (the chase rules are a particular bugbear, but compiling a checklist for resolving combat is not a trivial task). *Cthulhu Eternal* does not do the perverse "double zero is low" thing which throws all odds calculations off by 1%.

And finally, I'm styling links so that they're still usable if this thing is printed, but nobody's told me I have to.

Pum: I think there's a difference in feel between the joke told out of character, which to

me breaks an intense moment, and the one told *in* character, which can accentuate the mood at the table because it's what the characters do to try to break *their* intense moment. (But bear in mind I play as part of Whartson Hall, who have been described as "Carry On Cthulhu".)

Myles Corcoran: a fine game, *Project L*. It's had enough expansions and extras that one of the later crowdfunders included a replacement box, twice the height of the original.

Patrick Riley: I've never liked the magic shop paradigm. And my main D&D experience was with original AD&D, where you could read into it the idea of magic vendors but it wasn't explicit. In my head, the "obvious" interpretation of those price lists was that there were collectors of magic, and you could sell treasure to them, but as with art collectors in the real world things rarely came back onto the open market.

Brian Rogers: hark, do I hear someone asking for a board game recommendation? If you're looking for a party game feel, *Just One* is good; for something a bit more conventionally board-y, consider *Tsuro* (do not get *Tsuro of the Seas* which is a later version by a different designer who didn't appreciate the original), or *Flamme Rouge*.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek: While the asylum is a common end for Lovecraftian adventurers, the Mazorra is a good reminder of why in the 1920s it's much better to be rich and insane than poor and ditto. Some more ideas for PCs to get involved: something is preying on the inmates, because nobody cares enough to try to stop them (possibly even with the connivance of the authorities if there's a chance for enrichment); a particular person was buried on site, and now their remains are needed;

⁹ *Cthulhu Eternal's* antecedents are various OGL games.

someone did some fine esoteric work before they were committed, and now we need more detail about what they were thinking, but have their years of treatment made them genuinely insane rather than just politically inconvenient?

Lisa Padol: RYCT Joshua Kronengold in #1 regarding the cops: some of this is a genre constraint. Is this the sort of game where calling the cops can solve the problem, or do you need to make sure it doesn't happen too early because the PCs should be doing the solving? In a game I ran a little while back, only magically capable people could even *see* the supernatural beasties and effects, so even if the police believed you they'd have no chance of restraining the bad stuff. Re same comment rather later: yeah, a player who wants to play *against* me as GM is not going to be happy in my games any more than I will be happy with them. We're in this together, and I will aim to screw over your character *in ways that we both find fun*.

RYCT Patrick Zoch in #1: some NPCs may be one-off plot elements, but I always try to be ready to spin them up into actual people in case the PCs want to engage with them more deeply. Yeah, I'm just the city gate guard, but maybe the party will ask me what's been going on lately, and they're going to get what I know filtered through my biases—so I need to know, or at least be able to invent quickly, those things.

RYCT Clark Timmins: "I'm dreadfully sorry about your boyfriend, madam, but we are trying to save the world. Does he have a strange stone arm or leg? No? Then I'm afraid we just don't have the resources to spare."

Joshua Kronengold: RYCT Myles Corcoran, Flip Three on yourself is useful if it comes up early in the hand, because it can get

you a head start on the score and tempt other players into making mistakes. Also, it can be better than giving it to That Lucky Player who simply converts it into points.

Jim Vassilakos: RYCT John Redden: a reframing of sanity I've appreciated lately (in part from [this piece at tasker.land](https://tasker.land/2025/06/10/on-pretending-to-be-normal/) (https://tasker.land/2025/06/10/on-pretending-to-be-normal/)) is to view it as the ability to fit into the normal world. You met the ghouls, you have the scars, you saw them eat Emily; how can you hold down a job after that, knowing what's under the city? How can a therapist help you when they don't believe, and they're trying to get you to deny the reality you experienced? The world as you knew it is a lie; and the more things you learn about the real state of affairs, the harder it is for you to pretend well enough to keep mundane friends or even walk down the street without people avoiding you.

RYCT CLark Timmins, I think the traditional fantasy approach is "there are no forces of law and order, if you want the problem fixed you'll have to do it yourself" — in other words, the wild west that inspired so much of early role-playing. I prefer to set my games in more functional societies, so why are the PCs the ones who get to solve the problems? Broadly, in my case, because it's their job (they are the Police Who Deal With Weird Stuff), or because they are uniquely capable of doing it; or because the society, while broadly functional, doesn't care about this particular problem, and the PCs do.

RYCT Joshua Kronengold: yes but isn't this part of the inherent silliness of having an objectively detectable "good" and "evil"? For an angel or a demon, fair enough, but for every sapient being? It's always felt to me like an artificiality, and one that cuts out a whole swath of possible stories.

Ignorable Theme for E&A Issue #4

What are your favorite RPGs to play, run, or just read?

Amber Diceless Roleplaying Game

The rpg I've probably read the most and had the most fun reading, though I've never run it, is Erick Wujcik's *Amber Diceless Roleplaying Game*. I had heard of, but had not read, Roger Zelazny's Amber stories, but I found the rpg fascinating. It is a flawed game and I'm sure I would have hated playing it with the author as the GM, but the concepts both in system and setting fascinated me. I have since read the Corwin and Merlin sagas, but they failed to live up to what the rpg sparked in my imagination.

I hate PvP in games. It triggers a nerve that turns me into an insufferable, angry person. *Amber's* attribute auction sets it up as a game of PvP from the jump. It's appropriate for the setting, though, so I can't fault the design. I just know that it's not for me.

The core diceless system is basically just GM fiat based on what makes sense and/or the best story given the character's relevant abilities. This forms a pillar of my game design philosophy: the dice (or cards or other randomizer) and the systems that use them are tools to help GMs and players make decisions. Running games by fiat is mentally exhausting. Being able to offload the mental load onto rules and dice allows GMs to spend more energy on other aspects of the game. This is not to say that the randomizers cannot have other effects that enhance the gaming experience—I'm looking at you, Jenga tower from *Dread*—but for the vast majority of traditional rpgs, the act of rolling a die, drawing a card, or flipping a coin is just a means to make a decision about an outcome.

Other Roleplaying Games

I'm too fickle, finicky, and cynical to have a favorite rpg (or board game), but a few come to mind.

I have probably run *Savage Worlds* more than any other system. For many years, it hit the sweet spot of adaptability and usefulness. I can't run every game concept I have with *Savage Worlds*, but I can usually get close. Unfortunately, two things happened over the years that have tempered my desire to use it.

Because it is an adaptable system, campaigns can feel "samey" even across genres. The character creation system has a lot of variety, but a lot of that (especially magic and powers) relies on chrome. Plus, I think I've seen nearly every iteration you can have.

The system has gone through many revisions over the years. They all have the same essential core, but the devil is in the details. The last revision of the Adventure Edition (SWAdE) broke me, I think. I am now getting rules mixed up and it has crested the hill of fiddliness I don't want to slide down.

I used to really like running *Big Eyes Small Mouth (BESM)* for its adaptability and utility. The 1st and 2nd editions had a good heart that won me over. But nowadays when I try to go back to it, I'm still charmed, but the spark is gone. It's like having lunch with an old friend you haven't talked to in a very long time, only to find that once you are done catching up and reminiscing, you don't really have anything to talk about.¹

I maintain a fondness for *Fudge*, though *FATE* does stuff with it that I don't like.² *Fudge* used to be my fallback for when I wanted to run a quirky con game and no rule system really fit. Nowadays, I gravitate toward my own *Wildcard Roleplaying System* that I designed specifically for this purpose. As written, I think *Fudge* is too detailed and shows a "GURPS, ultra simplified" bent.

Back in the day, I thought I liked *Champions* until I realized that I sucked at it. I describe the game as being "by engineers, for engineers" and though I can playact as an engineer in my day job, I'm not that guy. I moved onto *Mutants & Masterminds I* (1e & 2e) but switched over to *ICONS* by the same author. One of the reasons I like *ICONS* as a superhero game is because it started as a *Fudge* meets *Marvel Superheroes (MSH or FASERIP)* mashup. There's some *FATE*-based stuff thrown in, but I mostly ignore it.

At the end of the day, the play style, discussed in previous issues, is more important than the game itself. Every system will annoy me at some level, so I just have to deal with it.

¹ Yes, this happened to me recently.

² And it really annoys me when people call the dice "FATE dice" instead of "Fudge dice."

Dice Corner

Introduction

In percentile-based skill systems like *Call of Cthulhu* or *Unknown Armies* (to name two), there are three popular methods for giving a bonus or penalty to the roll.

The most basic is to give a bonus, like +20% to the skill before rolling. A 58% skill becomes 78% if the task is easier than normal, for example. This works but is boring.

Another way is to have the player roll 2 dice for the 10s place and pick the better one. For instance, a player might roll a 5 and a 7 for the 10s die and a 3 for the 1s die. Picking the 5 gives a roll of 53, which is under their 58% skill. Be careful though because if the roll had been a 5 and a 0 on the 10s die with a 0 1s die, then you want to pick the 5 and not the 0 for the 10s die!

A variant of this is to just allow a full re-roll. The benefit of a re-roll is so close to using a bonus 10s die that I didn't include it in my charts for clarity.

The third I'll discuss is swapping the 1s and 10s dice (or just rolling 2 dice and reading them in the most favorable order). So a roll of 7 and 3 could be read as 73 or 37.

Comparison of Methods

Percentage Bump:

- **Pros:** Easy to implement. You can stack bumps or have multiple bumps.
- **Cons:** Boring. You have to address the question of what happens if a skill gets bumped to over 99% (or under 1%).

Bonus Die

- **Pros:** Fun. You could stack multiple bonus dice (roll 3+ dice and pick the best) and not break the percentage scale.
- **Cons:** A bit confusing and awkward in practice. A re-roll is better, but is slower to implement.

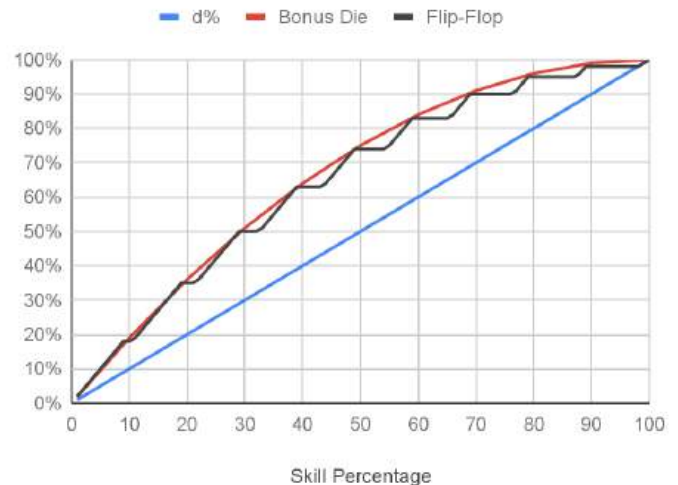
Flip-Flops

- **Pros:** Funnest (unless you roll doubles). Easy to explain.
- **Cons:** No way to stack multiple flip-flops.

What prompted my writing this is because I was reading the quickstart to the *Zweihander* (Reforged) rpg and it uses all 3 methods. This raised a question in my mind of how the 3 methods compare.

First, let's look at how adding a bonus die compares to flip-flopping the dice.

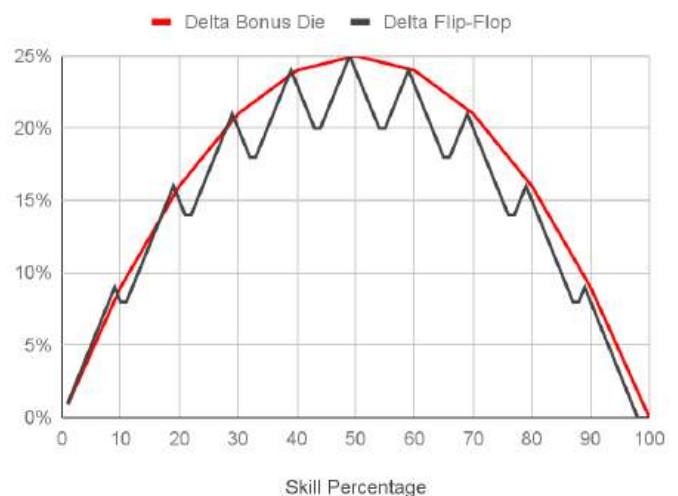
Chance of Success



For example, if your skill is 40, you have a 64% chance of success using a bonus die and a 63% chance using a flip-flip.

Note that compared to a straight d% roll, the bonus die and flip-flop methods provide roughly the same benefit. Flip-flopping is generally worse overall, but they're close. This is easier to see in terms of how much benefit they provide at each skill level:

Benefit to Odds of Success



If your skill percentage was 50%, adding a bonus die has the same effect as adding 25% to the skill, raising it to 75% chance of success. A flip-flip only provides a 24% benefit. At a 28% skill, they both provide a benefit of +20%. If your skill is 73% or higher, you're better off by adding 20% to the skill than using either method.

Does a game need all three methods?

Probably not. Bonus dice and flip-flops could be viewed as redundant.

Using all three methods increases the rules complexity since different rules call for different methods and it is easy to get them jumbled. However, using all three means you can use them simultaneously. So long as you are consistent with how each one is used, you can smooth out the potential confusion. For example, you could say that a flat bonus is used for general difficulty (it's raining, target is behind cover, etc.), a bonus die is used for skill specializations, and flip-flips are used for boons or talents.

Major and Critical Successes

Zweihander (and *Mothership*, as pointed out by Avram last issue) has a rule that if you roll doubles and succeed, you get a critical success.³ In *Zweihander*, you also get a crit on a roll of 01. I find this annoying. It's an exception to an exception. You get very similar results to just say any roll that ends in a 1 is a critical. Rolling a 21 or 31 for a crit just doesn't feel as cool as when you roll 22 or 33.

The same thing is true for critical failures. Failing a roll and rolling doubles is a critical failure. A roll of 00 is always a critical failure, but that is also a doubles, so it fits better than the critical success rule.

How *Call of Cthulhu* handles difficulty requiring a Hard ($\frac{1}{2}$ skill value), Extreme ($\frac{1}{3}$ skill value), or Critical (01) success. This would be a pain if used with percentage bumps as the ranges would change.

Personally, I think the level of success should be based on the results of the 1's die: 6-0 = Normal Success; 3-5 = Hard Success; 1-2 = Extreme Success. A roll of 01 is just a special case of an Extreme Success. This addresses the "character sheet that's a spreadsheet" issue of *Call of Cthulhu* that Avram complained about.

³ I proposed a similar method ages ago in A&E for a 2d6-based system, but it is smoother with d% rolls.

The Adventurers Guild

Our Protagonists

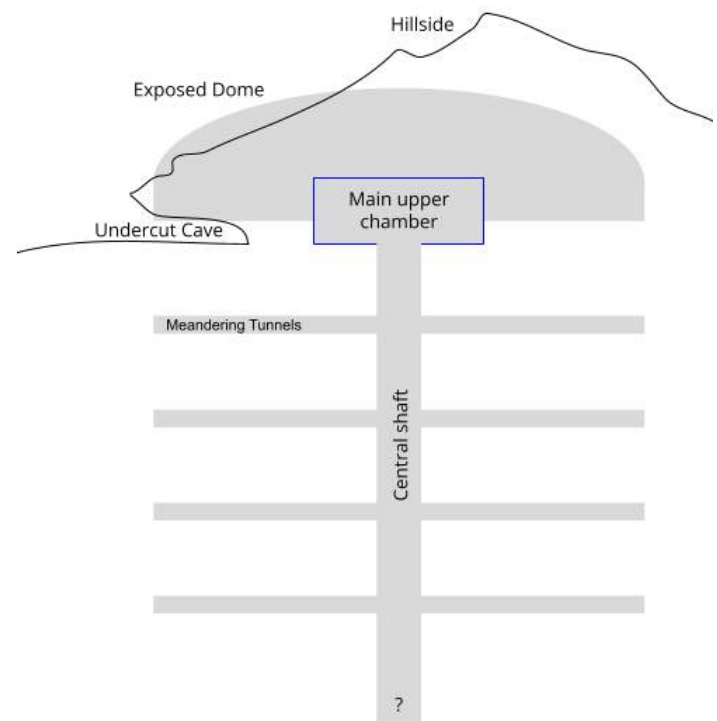
- Iggy: Rock Gnome Bard
- Chayote: Rock Gnome Cleric of Hathor
- Anan: Copper Dragonborn Fighter
- Millie: Human Wizard
- Entan: Human Druid

Into the Depths

Once the digging crew broke through into the main upper chamber, Professor Farthington crawled through the hole and was followed quickly by an exasperated Anan.

The main chamber was dominated by a circular pit surrounded by eight plinths, a few of which had been knocked over. They were decorated with dikaryan writing and topped in gold.

The plinths and the complex were carved from strange gray stone that did not match the surrounding rock of the hillside. This was no masonry, but a smooth and continuous mass, as if shaped by magic. But over the centuries, the outside rock had penetrated the structure and created an uneven coating on floor, walls, and ceiling where stalactites had formed.



A Bit About Mapping

This dungeon was once an underground dikaryan city. They did not so much build cities as *grow* them. It had a central shaft with multiple levels that branched out from there. The shaft was perfectly circular and vertical and its walls featured a texture of branching grooves. The corridors below the entry chamber meandered without any geometric precision. This was the result of how they were built as well as the borrowings of creatures who now lived here.

The corridors close to the shaft were mostly intact, but the majority of them that branched hundreds of meters from the shaft had collapsed. Rock debris littered the dungeon and acted as obstacles and cover when navigating the dungeon.

When crawling through a dungeon, I need a battlemap. It is simply too difficult to describe the corridors and rooms, especially if they aren't straight, especially during a fight where movement is restricted and distance, line of sight, and cover are important. In my experience, players and GMs alike get confused and frustrated easily when they can't visualize what's going on. It is much easier to go without a battlemap in a big open space.

I also like to maintain a sense of exploration and do not want to plop down an entire dungeon all at once. I did this for Lady Fionna's house since nothing would prevent the PCs from quickly exploring the place and knowing the layout. For dungeons, it makes sense to build the battlemap as the PCs explore. This works well when everything is on a grid. One would think that drawing "natural" caves would be easier, but paradoxically, I find it more difficult. If I'm following a map that has already been drawn, it's just harder and it never looks right and I'm under the gun while the players wait for me to lay down the squiggly lines in the right places and I'm never satisfied with the result. I could just make it up on the fly, but that has its own issues of mental load and a feeling of "I'm just making this up on the fly and I don't have a plan and don't look at me like that...."

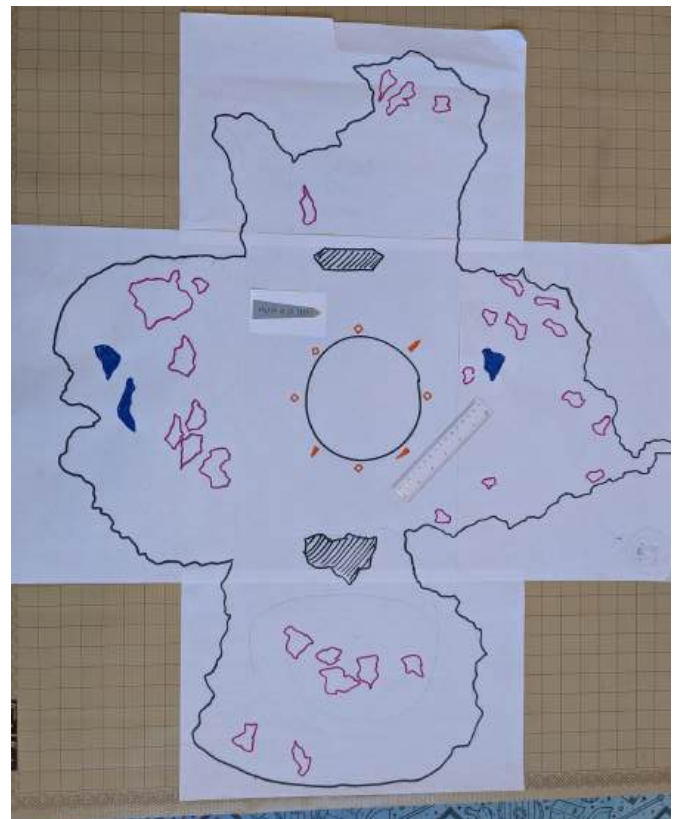
For this dungeon, I drew out the maps ahead of time on a bunch of 11"x17" ledger sheets of paper that I had left over from when I had a printer that worked with that size. I did not have a grid because no printer (duh) and I wasn't going to draw out a grid by hand. As it turned out, the players liked not having the precision of the

grid, though we used my handy 6" ruler⁴ when precise distances and areas mattered.

This allowed me to break up each level into 4 sheets each that I could pull out when the PCs reached that area. This does mean that I don't have a digital copy of the map and have to show photographs instead.

Main upper chamber.

The 6" ruler is included for scale. The entry tunnel is on the left and the shaft is the circle in the middle surrounded by plinths. A cutout of a side-view of a plinth (not to scale) is also in the shot. The magenta blobs are large rocks. The blue blobs are puddles of foul water.

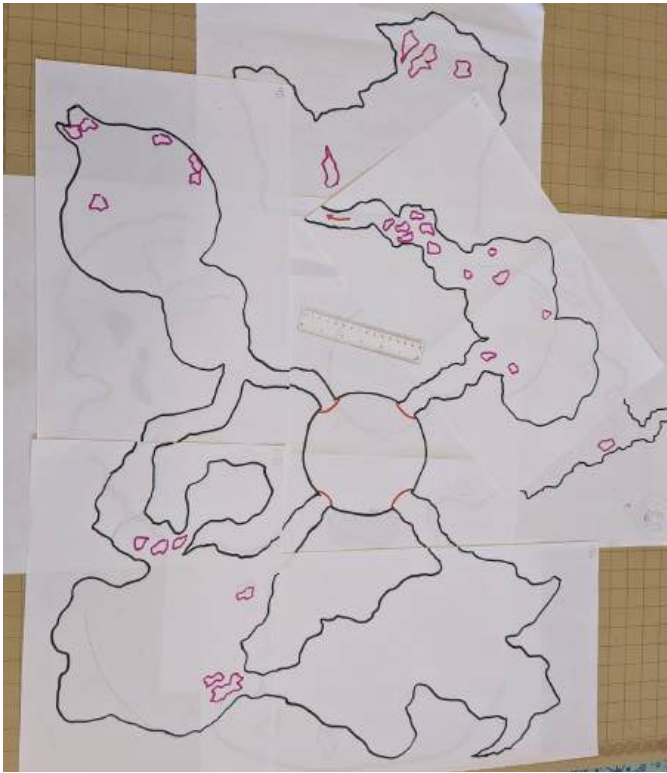


It's a bit crumpled at the top because it's been used for multiple sessions. Iggy's player doodled on it as well.

The lower levels are numbered based on the number of ledges in the shaft. Level 4 is actually the first below the main chamber. This was done purely for my convenience when recreating the map. I also made notes in pencil on each sheet. They are also named after the class of creatures that resided there.

⁴ Gifted by Millie's player.

Level 4: The Neogi Level



The keen-eyed among you will see some thin blue lines. Those are the extent of a spell effect that the PCs were ambushed with. The orange arrow on the “north” side is a downward slope to the next level.

Level 3: The Slime and Ooze Level

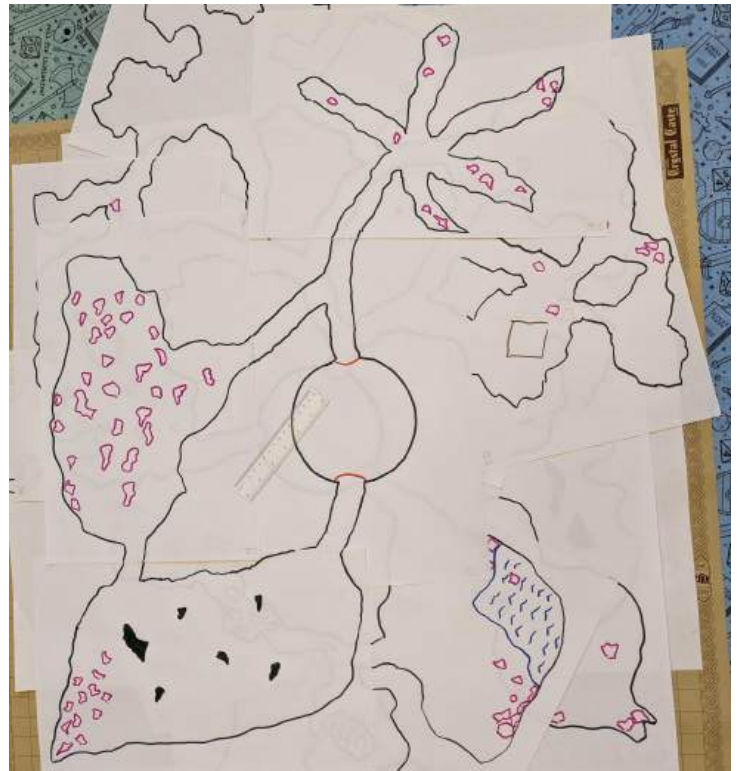


More water on this level. The large pool in the north-east is rather deep and not meant to be explored. It was home to a giant black pudding, though.

The brown rhomboid on the east side is where Anan threw some marbles and his player drew the area as a square. We joked that the marbles had mysteriously or miraculously confined themselves to that square.

The orange blob to the west is a crevasse that reaches down to level 1, bypassing level 2. And yes, I left a blank spot on Level 2 that it passes through. The maps are rotated in weird orientations on these photographs, but it works. Trust me. :)

Level 2: The Level of Floating Eyeballs



Yes, I was just laying the maps on top of each other. Sorry if it is getting confusing.

The other reason for reducing the number of ledges at each deeper level was that I was getting bored with the map drawing.

The black blobs in the south-west are floor-to-ceiling natural columns.

Level 1: The Deepest Level

At this point I was totally just done drawing dungeons. (And I also forgot to add the ruler to the photograph.)



Though this is the last level, the shaft keeps going down. Below this ledge is water. To the north-west the dungeon is just flooded. To the north-east is where the crevasse from level 3 leads. To the south-east is a carved room with 6 pillars, a dias with a plinth, and 4 large stone plaques covered in runes—some sacred text left by the dikaryans. Behind one of the plaques is a passageway that leads to a flooded circular room with a plinth in the center. This is where the PCs will physically meet the big bad of the dungeon if they ever make it here. They aren't necessarily good at searching for secret or concealed doors and I don't know how D&D 5e intends PCs to find them without actively searching.



I'm using S. John Ross' Yemite Snow Letters from Uresia as my dikaryan runes.

Getting the Shaft

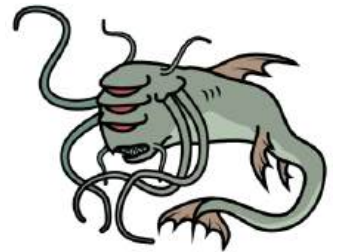
While Professor Farthington was distracted by the plinths and trying to figure out how to detach them, the PCs wandered to a side chamber of the main room and encountered a colony of large purple mushrooms. They emitted a cloud of spores that caused a few of the PCs to fall unconscious. The effects were short-lived except for Millie.⁵ While they dispatched fungus, they noticed a strange creature who had been observing them scuttle away. Anan gave chase but was unable to catch up to it before it reached the shaft and climbed down the side.

Climbing down the shaft to the first set of ledges was going to be tricky. After figuring out logistics of tying off rope from the top, Anan was the first to go down and held the rope steady while the others made their way down one-by-one. Iggy slipped and started to fall, but Anan reached out and grasped their hand, saving the gnome at the last moment.

By now, they had created enough commotion that a couple of "scuttlers" as they would become known, began harassing those on the ledge from inside the tunnel. After a short, chaotic melee with some of the PCs still clinging to the rope, they survived the attack but decided to retreat and reassess their approach.

Unfortunately, on the way back up, Anan lost his grip on the rope. Thinking quickly, Iggy cast feather fall and Anan reached the dark watery depths below at a safe speed. This was a great use of the spell, but I think it might have distracted Anan's player into not realizing that Anan could fly. This was a new ability for a 5th-level dragonborn and it hadn't been shown "on camera" yet, so this would have been an awesome opportunity to show it off.

Unfortunately, the bottom of the shaft was filled with dark, foul water and swimming in plate armor is difficult. Fortunately, Anan was rescued by a strange creature whose tentacles grasped him in the water and brought him to a place where he could breathe. It spoke to him in his mind. In their brief conversation, it intimidated that he was much older than the place they were currently in. It also told him to leave this place. Anan was compelled to agree.



⁵ Whose player had the flu and missed the session.

High above, the party were making their way up, but Entan⁶ also fell, striking the water with such force that he became incapacitated. Fortunately, Anan had made his way to the shaft and was close enough to administer a health potion. Soon, the crew had tied enough ropes together to drop the full length of the shaft. Eventually, the two of them made their way to the top.

Anan tried his best to convince the party and Professor Farthington that they had to leave immediately. Though they thought it odd, they played along and made the reasonable suggestion that they were in no state to travel and it would take a while to dismantle the camp, and so it would be best if they left the next day. They were hoping Anan would get over the notion after a night's sleep.

He did not.

Having grown tired of the conflict and not wanting to waste more time, Professor Farthington bonked Anan on the head. It only hurt him a little, but it brought him to his senses.⁷ Embarrassed and upset, Anan was eager to continue their exploration.

Clawing Darkness

They descended the ropes again and managed to push back a couple of scuttlers. However, once they seemed to get the upper hand, they were engulfed in cold, stinging darkness—a spell cast from a scuttler on the far side of the shaft. The party became disoriented and split off—Chayote and Entan going left while Anan and Iggy going to the right. Iggy fell from the continuous damage the darkness was inflicting upon him, but Anan was able to rush in and pull the unconscious gnome to safety.

The darkness faded after a minute and the party was able to reunite, lick their wounds, and return to the surface.



⁶ Who could have shapeshifted into a spider and had no issues climbing... but he's a terrible druid.

⁷ Taking damage triggers another saving throw, which he made. The Professor got a lucky hit; did he know it would work or was he just taking out his frustrations on the adventurers he hired? I'm not saying.

A Man Dragonborn Comes to Town

We had a new player join the group in this session. That brings the total up to 6 PCs which will slow things down a bit and make the table that much more cramped, but if this first session is any indication, the new blood will be a grand addition. This was the first time this player had played D&D non-virtually so there was some miscommunication and misconceptions because there was no virtual tabletop to present all the options and do all the calculations at the press of a button. He is a friend of Iggy's player and it was heartwarming to see them help the newcomer with rules, given that for the past year, they were the most rules-challenged of the group.

Vraxanath Emberclaw is a dragonborn ranger and treasure hunter. He was mentored by Professor Farthington and followed him out to the dig site after Vrax had discovered texts written by a mad elf sorcerer that referenced the site. With Professor Farthington's vouching (and insistence that he help), Vrax joined the group.

Strengthened by the new member and Millie recovering from her fungus-induced incapacitation, the party was able to gain advantage over the scuttlers and push them back. They had to battle through another assault from the darkness. For a few tense moments, Anan had his will overcome by the scuttler leader who attempted to retreat with the dragonborn warrior providing cover. Vrax also had to learn that just rushing into the fray was not conducive to him staying conscious.

Once the last of the scuttlers fell, the party split up and explored the empty corridors. While looking into a large pool of foul water, Chayote and Vrax were attacked by a large mass of black sludge that emerged from the water. The two of them were quickly overcome with none of their attacks having much effect on the creature(?). Unfortunately, Vrax was incapacitated; fortunately, he fell next to a cleric of life and Chayote was able to revive him in time for the rest of the party to converge on their position. It took their combined effort and targeted application to finally destroy the regenerating ooze.

Following the contours of the cavern, they found themselves at the shaft, but a level lower than they had started. They planted some pitons and rigged some rope to shimmy around the circumference of the shaft to the next ledge. Venturing further in, they were met by humanoid-shaped creatures resembling walking

oozes, one of which was twice Anan's size. One of them called out "Protect the Master!" in barely-understood common. Anan tried to slow their progress with marbles, but their quasi-solid "feet" simply oozed around the tiny spheres.⁸ Vrax charged forward and was heavily injured, but managed to get behind their enemies. The battle proved victorious for our invading heroes and they took a breather to collect themselves and explore the immediate area more thoroughly.

This was a good place to wrap the session. The next session, scheduled two weeks later, fell through because Vrax's player got sick and Entan's had a scheduling conflict. Given where they were in the dungeon, I didn't want to run with 2 missing NPCs. I had a plan that could account for Entan's disappearance⁹, but I thought 2 PCs would be pushing it. So, I ran a completely unrelated one-shot instead.

Birthday Interlude

This session also coincided with my 55th birthday. As a day, it's not incredibly auspicious. I can now order off the IHOP senior's menu and no longer fall into the 44–54 age bracket on surveys.

Conspiring with my wife, they brought pizza (ham & pineapple, my favorite) and various snacks. We also had carrot cake that my wife had bought the day prior. Thankfully, there were no candles or singing.

Millie's player gifted everyone with "Mystery Dice" and me with a set of silicone dice (I nearly bought myself some a few weeks prior, but they didn't know!) and a set of LED dice. I also got a card signed by those who made it that day.

I try hard to let my birthday pass with as little fanfare as possible. But even my cynical mind was touched by this sweet gesture.

This also served as a good social distraction and reduced the game time. This was fine by me because my idea was at best only half-baked.

⁸ Should marbles work on a plasmoid? I thought saying no was funny, but I gave Anan's player a Heroic Inspiration for compensation (and trying to be clever and tactical, even if it failed).

⁹ As the big bad of the dungeon who could put the whammy on Entan similarly to how it had done to Anan.

The Spider Trap

I drew inspiration for a haunted house scenario on one I had run back in 2016, borrowing NPC names but changing the scenario. I was winging it most of the time and I had to do a couple of on-the-fly retcons, but it all worked out well enough. I have retroactively changed some details below to make more sense and added details as they occur to me now that I'm writing it up.

Rather than do a play-by-play of the session, I'll just provide the setup and the background details of the scenario.

I used my *Wildcard Roleplaying System* because it was literally designed for one-shots. In addition to the usual Physical, Mental, and Social stats, I added Spiritual as the Wildcard stat and decided against using Specialities. Based on my playtests, I think they are essentially superfluous but they make for a good optional rule.

The Setup

I pitched the scenario as paranormal investigators from the university investigating a suspected haunted house. I let the players make their own characters, but because no one made an actual professor of parapsychology, I borrowed Prof. Simon Emmerson from my previous adventure.

In 1982, the field of parapsychology no longer had the academic attention or funding it once had. Prof. Emmerson was desperate to keep his research alive and assembled a small team to investigate the Blake Estate.

The PCs were:

- Zegon: A technician and grad student who was writing a dissertation on... well, no one was exactly sure what.
- Agatha: A middling journalism student who wanted to get a big story.
- Steven (aka Steel): A student athlete who thought this class—and the extra credit from this investigation—would be an easy way to maintain his academic eligibility.
- Karen: A professor of biology and skeptic who was auditing Prof. Emmerson's work on behalf of the school administration and had a personal bet with Simon about whether or not he would find anything.

The character sheet included a brief questionnaire, mostly put there to get the players roleplaying quickly. If I were running this as a more planned-out game, such as at a convention, I'd do more with the information.

- What do others perceive of you?
- What do you perceive of yourself?
- What role do you play in this investigation?
- What are your motivations?
- What do you hope to achieve in this investigation?

The House of Uriah Blake

Uriah Blake was a technical genius who did ground-breaking work in the early days of the semiconductor business in Silicon Valley. He built a house for himself in the Santa Cruz mountains and became a recluse while he worked as a consultant. No one had seen him since 1971. During the past decade, locals had reported seeing strange blue lights in the area as well as seeing lights and shadows from the home's windows despite no one living there. The police had been able to find anything amiss about the house; in fact, it was in excellent condition despite the years of neglect.

Everything in and around the house looks as it did in 1971, including the cleared brush around the house, the food in the kitchen, and the amount of dust on the floor and furniture.

The house has two floors and a basement along with a detached garage. The ground floor has a living room, dining room, kitchen, and a bathroom under the stairs. Near the back door is a locked door to the basement. The upper floor consists of two bedrooms, an office, and a full bathroom.

The dining room table was primarily used as a workbench and has a number of homemade electronics, electrical lab gear, and reference books that include both engineering and esoteric topics. The office has many more such books as well as a personal computer (with specs years ahead of what was commercially available at the time it was assembled). Also in the office are many schematics and component drawings for a device labeled as a "spider trap." The device will be recognizable as the electrical cabinet in the basement. The master bedroom has all of Uriah's clothes and other mundane affects, including a set of keys to the front and back doors of the house, the garage, basement door, and the cabinet in the basement. The other bedroom has a simple box spring and mattress with no bed linens and a few boxes of

miscellaneous sundries that were never unpacked from when he moved here.

Minimal land was cleared for the structures which are nestled among the tall coastal conifers. Strung among the trees is a network of electrical wires that fan out like a spider web from a central tree a few dozen yards away from the rear exit of the house. They are so high up and hidden in the trees that they would easily go unnoticed by the casual observer.

The wires are connected to a junction box mounted on the central tree and connected to conduit that runs down the tree and into the ground. These details are not visible from the house itself.

The underground conduit leads back to the basement where it comes out of the wall and into a large metal cabinet (2m long x 1.5m high) with a single red light, blinking silently and a 6-digit nixie tube display in the form of 000:00:00 (hms). The display is counting down every second and will hit zero at midnight. The cabinet panel is locked and is highly resistant to tampering.

Behind the panel are dozens of analog gauges, switches, and dials. They are labeled with such names as "ground counterflux," "aetheric current," and "quintessence coupling". The most ominous control is an industrial grade, shielded red button labeled, "Power." One display labeled "Recharge Delay" includes a user-settable rolling number display, currently sitting at "024 Hours". The cabinet (and indeed the entire house) is not connected to the municipal power grid (or phone line) and is powered through unknown (or unknowable) means.

Also in the basement is a washer, dryer, and laundry table with cleaning supplies. A bare light bulb hangs from the ceiling; a similar bulb hangs above the wooden stairs that lead up to the ground floor. The wooden paneling on the walls is covered with chalk writing and drawings that combine the esoteric with electrical engineering. Clearly, they are the works of a madman and/or mad genius.

The garage houses a 1950's era pickup truck and miscellaneous tools for maintaining the truck, the house, and the grounds.

Shunting—Or How to Become A Ghost

Every 24 hours, the cabinet sends out a pulse of... let's just call it electricity... through the conduit and outdoor wiring and can be seen an eerie blue light traveling along the path. Anything within the area circumscribed by the wiring is reset to the state it was 24 hours ago. Anything or anyone that had entered the area during this time and was caught within the pulse's effect, is brought out-of-phase with normal reality. To those so "shunted," there would be no obvious effect except now they can clearly see and interact with anything that had been shunted previously. To an outside observer, anything "shunted" would simply disappear.

Over the course of the last decade, countless forest bugs and a few larger animals have been shunted. So too have any interloper—would-be burglar, curious neighbor, or mischievous teenager—who was caught inside the trap at midnight. Anyone sensitive to such things could potentially see anything or anyone that had been shunted, but they would appear ghostly. This includes spider webs, rats (or more likely rat corpses), trash and graffiti left by interlopers, and even people.

Time passes normally for the shunted, but they cannot leave the area. Their biological clock is reset with each recharge, so they will still get hungry and thirsty, but would only feel the effects of a day without food or water. The only threat to their (im)mortality is the *beast*.

The *beast* is what the trap was designed to catch. It feeds upon life force and most creatures that have been shunted have been killed. A few people have managed to elude and hide from the *beast*. If the PCs join the rank of the shunted, they will be confronted by the *beast*.

If anyone were to turn the cabinet off, that would un-shunt everything and set the new recharge date to the date the power was turned off. This would free the *beast*. Turning the power back on would trigger a new pulse, (re-)shunting those inside the effect area. It would also drain any battery, extinguish any fire, and knock out any generator that was running in the area.

To the shunted, the real world appears normally and they probably won't realize what happened to them until they hit the limits of the trap. If they pick up an object, to them they did pick it up, but it is only a shunted version of that object—the real object remains where it was. While a person and what they are wearing or carrying is shunted, other objects are not (for some reason). It would be as difficult for them to notice the

distinction as it would be for someone in the real world perceiving the ghostly, shunted realm.

With enough effort and willpower, it is possible for a shunted being to influence the non-ghostly realm. They could move physical objects short distances but with little fine control. Scrawling a message would be limited to only a word or two. They could make noise, but there is too much interdimensional interference to communicate with speech. If the power button of the cabinet was exposed, it could potentially be pressed, freeing the shunted (hopefully after the *beast* was defeated).

Essentially, the shunted can act as poltergeists and the PC investigators could interact with them through the normal means people use to communicate with ghosts. The scenario could also be run with the PCs already having been shunted and having to elude the *beast* while a (different) team of investigators came to the house. Maybe there is a way to be really ambitious and have two separate groups of PCs playing simultaneously with limited communication between them.

Comments on E&A Issue #3

Roger BW

Nice to see you around these parts. I have been listening to *Improvised Radio Theatre with Dice* since the beginning. Thanks for the recommendation for Typst. I tried using Scribus and found it impenetrable in the very short time I tried to use it. I'm used to markup languages from my days of handcoding HTML and would probably find it much more comfortable to use. I'll still use Google Docs for this zine, but I'll try Typst when I get around to formatting and releasing my *Wildcard Roleplaying System*.

Myles Corcoran

RYCT Lisa, though a loner PC in a team superhero game is in-genre, we have to remember that RPGs are not comics (or novels or movies or ...).

Avram Grumer

Good to see you again. I liked the zine layout just fine, though I found the title font very difficult to read. The background color is a nice touch that compliments the old-school format. I wrote my Dice Corner before reading your zine (but then updated it based on your comments on *Mothership*).

RYCT me about D&D's art style, I'm trying to imagine a rulebook that includes art from both *Ryuutama* and *MÖRK BORG*. Given the masses of people who have seen the D&D art, I think you'd hear complaints no matter what art style(s) they chose to go with.

Joshua Kronengold

RYCT me about D&D being anodyne, my complaint was not the PCs surviving encounters. I think the ticking clock of death saving throws works well for this. I just sometimes lament the "everything will be fine after a long rest" aspect of the game. See also my comments to Gabriel about D&D healing.

Lisa Padol

RYCT me, if my players noticed the plot hole, they quickly got past it. I usually have too much going on in my head to remind players of their PCs' abilities or Heroic Inspiration. I hand out poker chips as a physical and visual reminder, but we still forget. See the writeup above regarding Anan forgetting he could fly.

RYCT Michael about playing Terraforming Mars cooperative instead of competitively. There are only 3 parameters to terraform Mars: raising the temperature, adding oxygen, and creating oceans. Many of the activities of the game that are fun to do and/or earn points in the game do not contribute to the terraforming effort. Building cities and introducing animals are the two most obvious. The game would be lesser without these elements. The solo game is an efficiency puzzle—terraform Mars within a certain number of turns—and you only do things like bring colonists to Mars or build space stations to maximize your score (perhaps risking not finishing in time).

George Phillies

I found the linked blog post condescending. The "later books" with all the rules were known as AD&D, written by senpai Gyga. A bunch of popular and influential games that came out in the 1970s had fewer rules than (A)D&D.

To a certain extent, the point of rules is to make the job of GM easier. How fast can someone swim? Rather than make something up on the fly¹⁰ or hunt for a reference on Olympic time trials, GMs can just look it up in the same book that tells them how much damage a broadsword does. Or better, the players can do it.

¹⁰ People may underestimate how much mental load making stuff up can add to the GM.

Everyone has their own cutoff point as to how many rules are too many or too few. Or in which rules are needed and which can be left to the GMs.

Pum

I have the same feeling about AI art as you do. Unfortunately, at least in the US, no AI company will be "sued into the ground and bosses jailed." Lawsuits and fines are just the cost of doing business for these AI companies. Also, corporate governance laws protect bosses from personal culpability in the wrongdoings of the companies they lead. Two cases to follow are *Bartz v. Anthropic* and *Kadrey v. Meta*.

John Redden

Based on what I read of the *Mouse Guard* comics and rpg, I assumed it was intended to be serious and potentially scary and deadly.

Odds are that if you walk into a game store, it will be focused on D&D5e. The only question is how much of the new 2024 edition books have displaced the older 2014 books.

I too haven't received my remaining balance for *A&E* (nor the final issue). I had completely forgotten about it until you mentioned it.

Gabriel Roark

D&D5e bent over backwards to avoid clerics being forced to do nothing else but heal. In 5e, a cleric can use all their spell slots for other spells and the party could still heal itself, either through the use of Hit Dice¹¹ during a Short Rest or a full recovery over a Long Rest. While I appreciate the motivation, I don't care for the implication of the rules. However, I can't say they are worse than how "cinematic" games handle damage.

To be fair I've always had a contentious relationship with D&D healing (and other aspects of the game). I always found the argument that hit points were from defensive fighting ability and other factors a load of hogwash. Damage from falling, traps, and/or poison¹² break that logic. I always wondered how access to magical healing would shape the world compared to our own history.

¹¹ A terrible cooptation of that term, imo.

¹² In those cases where you fall into a pit trap onto poisoned spikes. :)

Feel free to air your gripes here. Even if caused by a knowledge gap, they might still be illustrative. I once had a misconception of Unknown Armies (1e) because the GM ran it differently than the rules as written. I was corrected when writing about it in *A&E*. The best thing about D&D for me is that I can find players. Once my current campaign ends, I think I can convince them to play something else (but I will let them decide). I have already created a form with 8 different choices, one of which is D&D.

The need for training highlights an issue that I often have with D&D worlds: the level of NPCs in the world has to scale as the PCs gain levels.

Brian Rogers

In general in the US, “proving” one’s innocence is not enough to overturn a conviction. Overturning a conviction requires some fault of law or process. On one hand, this is terrible. On the other hand, it prevents paying off someone to make a false confession to get you out of prison.

It would have been much easier to simply have Daniel Dyce be falsely imprisoned, perhaps framed by Orlando Jones. If Dyce is so well liked, he could just get pardoned by the governor.

Heath Row

For a rules-lite superhero game, I suggest *ICONS*.

RYCT me, the pictures of the miniatures are only that. The players created them on HeroForge and took screen shots (cropped versions of which I put in my zine). I printed them out for cardstock standees during play (though you could not see them well in the picture from my table in *E&A* #3).

Clark B. Timmins

For the Fiery Thing’s movement, I think it is safe to assume that while in pursuit, it is using the Dash action, effectively doubling its move rate. Also, you could give it the ability to perform a Dash as a Bonus Action, so you’d only need a base move of 200 ft. to achieve 600 ft. per turn.

I think it is a mistake to give the Rolling Thing a climb speed. Per the rules, “While you’re climbing, each foot of movement costs 1 extra foot (2 extra feet in Difficult Terrain). You ignore this extra cost if you have a Climb Speed and use it to climb.” Normally, this means that a creature with a 40 ft. movement rate could climb 20 ft. per turn, making a 10 ft. climb speed rather

superfluous. Maybe your intent is to say that the rolling move of 40 ft. cannot be used for climbing—essentially that Rolling Things take a ¼ penalty instead of the usual ½ penalty for climbing—but this would still allow it to climb a “tall, steep rock.” I suggest giving it a Trait that it cannot climb grades steeper than 60 degrees.

Jim Vassilakos

RYCT Brian, the issue is not opposite sides considering each other villains but of people being assholes and trolls and wearing it as a badge of honor—to say and do things that have no value other than to piss off “the other side.” When called out on their bullshit, they cowardly throw up a smoke bomb called “free speech.”

RYCT me regarding Millie and Isadora, it is important to know that I have never roleplayed a scene between the PC and NPC. Isadora’s actions did not make sense to Millie, but the player wrote it that way. Throwing a spellbook into the fire rather than let a lowly servant read it was an extreme and irrational action by Isadora. So, I set her up as an extreme and irrational villain, someone who values class and position and craves power and influence. This is in sharp contrast to Millie’s humble beginnings, practical mindset, and quest for knowledge.

It made no sense to Millie that Isadora would send an invisible stalker after her rather than simply ask for the candle. As GM, I would not have had Isadora do that because a) I felt that Isadora would not simply ask; and b) it was more exciting and interesting to not do that. My next step is to establish Isadora up as a threat that the PCs have to deal with independent of her connection to Millie. I also need to do the same for an NPC introduced in Iggy’s background.

RYCT Clark, the structure of The Adventurers Guild campaign gives players the choice of which quests to follow—the “red meat” you mention—while not burdening me with a fully open sandbox to create and populate.

Mark A. Wilson

Condolences and commiserations to your girlfriend on being laid off.

Rather than publish “player’s guides” (RYCT Heath), Wizards opted for “starter sets” (both physical and digital) which probably work better for D&D.

John Redden



Reddened Stars number 2
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Mix Natter And Anti-Natter

Regardance

We finished Andor, 2nd season. I thought the ending was disjointed and overall I thought it was disappointing.

My wife watches Wednesday based on the Addams Family. I caught some of it. I think it's a cross between the Addams Family and COC.

She also watched Man in a High Castle. I couldn't watch it, given the current social-political in the USA. Years ago I read a series of short stories by Phillip K. Dick, including Man in a High Castle and We Can Remember It for you Wholesale.

I am reading Alien Clay, by Adrian Tchaikovsky. Depressing in a similar manner as Man in a High Castle. But it is very well written.

Sum Comments

Favorite RPGs

In Northern California, Traveller with GURPS rules. I also like COC depending

on the Scenario. Years ago I was influenced by Nicolai Shapiro's Other Suns Games and always enjoyed them. I generally enjoyed Lee Gold's games with the exception of the last "Chocolate" adventure.

I appreciated the comments on I.C.E. invading my farm. Thank you. I have a few more comments I put in an article I wrote. E&A is not the proper forum for the article. If you are interested see <https://johnredden.substack.com/p/suppression-in-hawaii> .

The layout of zines in E&A is impressive. The graphics and artwork has taken a huge step up.

Roger BW, I also like GURPS, especially GURPS lite. I was a software engineer for over 40 years. What languages do you use? Welcome to E&A.

Pedro Panhoca da Silva, Camila Lourenço Panhoca: 33 little pigs? I love it.

Attronarch, Gabriel Roark, Clark Timmins, Mitch Hyde and Mark Nemeth: I enjoy reading your zines on D&D. I just don't have much to contribute since I haven't played <flavor x>D&D in years. Hah! That might change. My 10 year old granddaughter asked her dad if she could play D&D. If he runs a game, of course I will play.

Gabriel Roark, re the numbering on my zines. I decided to start at zero and count up one at a time until I stop writing.

Michael Cule, a city in the caldera of a extinct volcano? Yikes! Err... from someone who lives on an island full of real and extinct volcanoes. I continue to enjoy the Glorantha material.// Re my toe. It healed. The beautiful young female Norwegian doctor did an excellent job.// *You*.

George Phillies, I obtained the original three D&D books from my late youngest brother. Groups of people creatively invented their own house rules are my best memories of the period.

Dylan Capel, Questworlds is a gaming system and not a module or scenario? Sic et non?

Avram Grumer, welcome back. I met you at a World Con in Orlando years ago.// I like your zines old school image.//I hope to see details for some of Lisa's game write ups.

Paul Holman, I have no problem with AI art as long as it doesn't copy someone elses art without permission.

Patrick Riley, I especially like the quests. Great zine formatting and visuals.

Brian Rogers, I enjoyed The Dyson Megadelve adventure. My wife is an avid Ticket to Ride player. I played V&V years ago.

Patrick Zoch, the war games table images brings back memories from the 1980s.

Heath Row, *grin* at Musk blood.// In Culver City I lived on Sawtelle Blvd within walking distance of Tito's Tacos and Johnnies Pastrami.

Mark Nemeth, an excellent beautiful zine.

Brian Misiaszek, I enjoyed the continued writeup of Cuban history and a potential horror campaign. If I use it I need to design an adventure subset.

Jim Eckman, Reconstructing Planets is based on my son's conception of the short story. I am making some changes he suggested to the story before I try to publish it.

Lisa Padol, Horror on the Orient Express. Yes, it's a campaign. I had trouble keeping track of the NPCs. David says he will run it the next mini-con in NoCal. Let's see what he does. He is an experienced GM.// I read all your zine and enjoy it even though I am not familiar with many of the game systems.

Joshua Kronengold, David the GM wanted all the PCs to have high credit ratings so they could have advantageous access on the Orient Express.// re toe. I went to the bar on the ninth deck. The ninth deck has one of the excellent views of the fjords. A storm hit with wind and rain. I wanted to go to our cabin on the fourth deck and take a nap. Due to turbulence, the elevator was shutdown. I waited an hour. I decided to take the stairs. They are small so I carefully only put pressure on the stairs with my left foot. Keep in mind I have no feeling in either of my feet. When I arrived at our cabin at the fourth deck, I looked at my left toe and the skin at completely been rubbed off.

Mark Wilson, conversations with Satan, excellent.

Jim Vassilakos & Timothy Collinson, Playing Capt. Plankwell: **Conrad Rader**, A lawyer? Eek!// Re geoengineering game. Social and psychological are important due to the hundreds of years they spend in a star ship, though mostly in cryogenics.// re I.C.E. raids on the Big Island and all over the geopolitical USA. You don't want to get me started. This zine is not where I should detail our eroding freedom.

Humor

Three young woman are graduating from a Catholic school and the head of the school is with them. She asks each a question.

She asks the first graduate what she will do after she graduates.

"Oh, I am going to be a scientist and study physics and prove that God exists".

The school head smiles and says "excellent".

She asks the second graduate what she will do after she graduates.

"I am going to be a teacher so I can help people improve their lives."

The school head smiles and says "outstanding".

She asks the third graduate what she will do after she graduates.

"I'm going to be a prostitute."

The head of the school faints and falls to the floor. Her sisters gather around her and revive her and she makes it to her feet. Finally she asks the third graduate again, what she will do when she graduates.

"I'm going to be a prostitute."

The school head says, "I'm relieved. I thought you said Protestant."



A little beauty. Looking out my front door

Engines & Emulators #4

Sept. 19, 2025

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Expanded Options for *Super City*

Inspired by last issue's exchange with Brian Rogers about rules-light superhero roleplaying games, I spent some time in late August with *Super City*. (<https://carpedavid.itch.io/super-city>) Apparently designed for grade school students, the game is simple indeed—but still offered an evening of lightweight fun. At \$1, it's very affordable.

Playing through the game once, completing four scenes before accomplishing my mission, the fifth scene, I determined two things. One, even if playing solo, it's a good idea to play with more than one character. You get more Energy that way. And two, for replay opportunities to yield fun value, more options might be welcome. So I made some up. These are the first tables I've ever made.

What follows are proposed expansions for David Garrett's suggested Heroic Verbs, Mission elements, and Scene elements as included in the two-page *Super City*. Basically, this is a series of expanded tables; I've indicated what was included in the original, shorter tables or lists to place authorial credit where it's due.

Suggested Heroic Verbs

Now a six-by-six table rather than a list. Roll a d6 twice to select. (* denotes Garrett's original options)

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Fly*	Teleport*	Vanish*	Build	Absorb	Control Elements
2	Dash*	Lift*	Jump*	Punch	X-Ray Vision	Sonic Scream
3	Blast*	Zap*	Freeze*	Squeeze	Shape-shift	Weather Control
4	Crush*	Explode*	Repel*	Wrestle	Elasticity	Animal Empathy
5	Hyponotize	Unlock	Brain-push	Levitate	Fire Mind	Magic
6	Mend	Hack	Tinker	Heal	Magnetism	Camouflage

Mission Elements

Roll a d20 rather than a d6 to select.

Citizens (* denotes Garrett's original options)

1. Construction worker*
2. Delivery driver*
3. Garbage collector*
4. Hot dog vendor*
5. Meter reader*
6. Talking mouse*
7. Stern librarian
8. Police officer
9. Fire fighter
10. Bounty hunter
11. Little old lady
12. Grumpy farmer
13. Newspaper reporter
14. Dog walker
15. Short-order cook
16. Bartender
17. Fashion model
18. Bank teller
19. Computer programmer
20. Rodeo cowboy

Dangers (* denotes Garrett's original options)

1. Chasing a sneaktopus*
2. Covered in poison goo*
3. Floating into the sky*
4. Hiding from a monster*
5. Running from a robot*
6. Stuck to the sidewalk*
7. Kidnapped by criminals
8. Threatened by a street gang
9. Stampede!
10. Mysterious snowstorm
11. Molasses flood
12. Street riot
13. Boiling in oil
14. Trapped in a mirror maze
15. Pecked to death by ducks
16. Quicksand!
17. Invaded by an enemy army
18. Pulled a muscle
19. Lost lunch money
20. Brain freeze

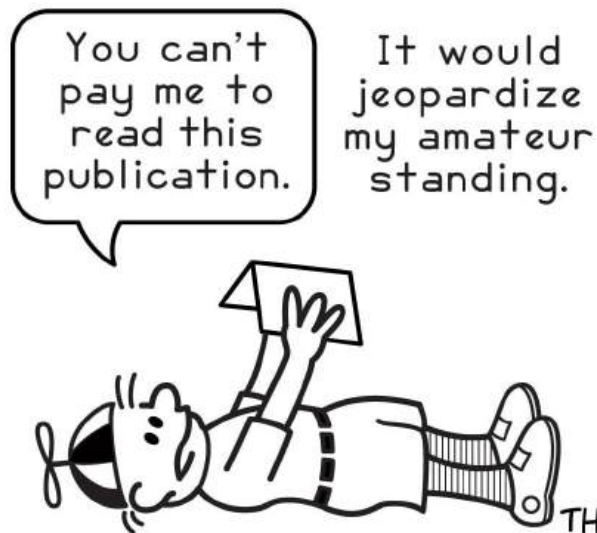
Scene Elements

Roll a d20 rather than a d6 to select.

Places (* denotes Garrett's original options)

1. Amazing Avenue*
2. Green Gardens*

3. Powers Park*
4. Super Square*
5. Terrific Towers*
6. Wild Waterfront*
7. Agitation Alley
8. Bountiful Boulevard
9. Capitol Square
10. Merchandise Mart
11. Terrible Tavern
12. Sunday Drive
13. Fresh Field
14. Garment District
15. Hooligan's Hideaway
16. Secondary School
17. Police Department
18. Learning Library
19. Rambling Road
20. Musty Museum



—Teddy Harvia

Problems (* denotes Garrett's original options)

1. Catch a falling meteor*
2. Clean up super goop*
3. Destroy a mind-ray*
4. Fix a falling building*
5. Repair a broken robot*
6. Shoo away giant bugs*
7. End an alien invasion
8. Stop a burglary
9. Thwart mole men
10. Divert a flood of acid
11. Eliminate embezzlers
12. Avoid a car accident
13. Save an endangered baby
14. Help an old woman cross the street

15. Protect newborn kittens
16. Stop a volcano eruption
17. Eradicate gambling
18. Stymie shoplifters
19. End the threat of electrocution
20. Confuse counterfeiters

I also drafted some hero description prompts that could be used to flesh out the lightweight character (which possesses just a name, a favorite ice cream, and three Heroic Verbs). Some of the prompts suggest other possible tables I can create in the future.

What do they look like?
 What is their uniform or costume like?
 How does their voice sound?
 Do they use a vehicle?
 Do they have a sidekick?
 Do they use a catchphrase?
 What is their secret weakness?
 Who is their alter ego?
 Who is their alter ego's best friend or helpful contact?
 Do they have an arch enemy? Who?
 Where did they come from?
 How did they get their powers?

And if a player wants to play *Super City* as more of a journaling game, I drafted some prompts that can be used to describe missions and scenes in more detail, if desired.

Who
 ... is causing the problem?
 ... are they with?
 ... do they care about most?
 ... proves most difficult?
 ... gets hurt?
 ... is most helpful?

What
 ... happened just before?
 ... were they doing?
 ... tools are available?
 ... did it sound like?
 ... did it smell like?
 ... got in their way?

Where
 ... did it happen?
 ... were they going?
 ... had they come from?
 ... would they rather be?
 ... were they born?
 ... did the threat come from?

When
 ... did it occur?

... did they first notice?
 ... did the threat begin?
 ... had the plan been made?
 ... was the deadline?
 ... did the hero arrive?

Why

... was the danger occurring?
 ... was the hero there?
 ... was the citizen there?
 ... did it happen then?
 ... did it occur there?
 ... did it matter?

On the Forthcoming English Translation of *Sword World*

In late 2023, I briefly explored the state of roleplaying games in Japan (*Emulators & Engines* #8) after visiting Tokyo, commenting on the long-running popularity and impact of *Sword World*. Kansas City, Mo.-based Mugen Gaming is working on an English translation of GroupSNE's *Sword World* 2.5. (<https://mugengaming.com/pages/sword-world-rpg-coming-soon>) If you sign up for alerts related to their upcoming crowdfunding campaign, you'll receive a 67-page primer.

I haven't spent any time with it yet, but the primer contains the basic rules, a solo adventure, a one-shot adventure, and premade characters. The crowdfunding campaign is expected to launch in early 2026, and the American release of *Sword World* could be a big deal given recent and growing interest in manga, anime, and LitRPG.

Not only did the game inspire *Record of Lodoss War*, more than 10 million copies of the roleplaying game have sold in Japan. There's 35-plus years of official content just waiting to be translated. The mind boggles. Heck, we might even see replay fiction—similar to our session reports—reach our shores.

Comments on Ever & Anon #3

The recruitment advertisement made me chuckle. I also enjoyed the cover artwork.

In *Firedrake's Hoard* #1, **Roger BW** joined our august ranks. I'll have to explore your work with Whartson Hall, *Improvvised Radio Theatre with Dice*, *The Path of Cunning* and other such efforts. You certainly have your hand in a lot of pies. I, for one, welcome the growing cabal. Welcome!

Pedro Panhoca da Silva and **Camila Lourenço Panhoca's** *Ficções Interativas Infantis* Parte IV concentrated on *Os 33 porquinhos*, an interactive version of the Three Little Pigs. With 1,331 possible paths, it sounds like an interesting artifact!

In *Reddened Stars* #1, **John Redden** reported on

recent viewing and reading, including three space operas written by John Scalzi. At some point, I'll more thoroughly explore his work. I enjoyed your description of the *Mouse Guard* session. Lee Gold sent me a refund of my A&E balance in late April.

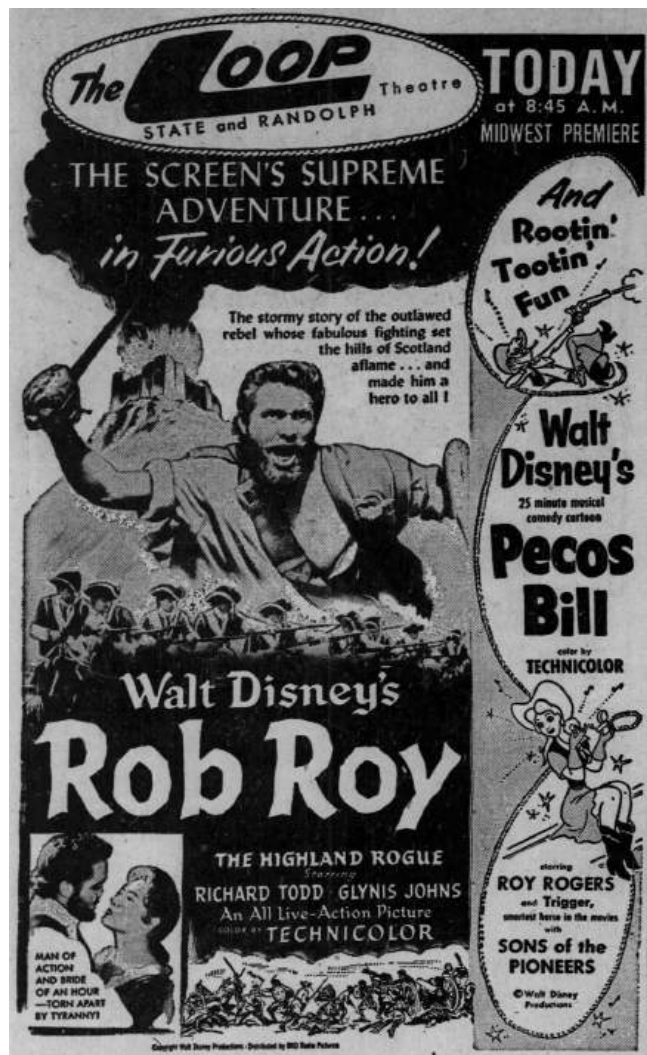
I quite enjoyed the date headers, illustrations, and layout of **Attronarch's** *Overlord's Annals* Vol. 4 #7. While I recognize the effort that goes into the session reports, I was especially pleased to see the Exedra of mailing comments. I look forward to future such discussion!



Chicago Tribune, March 19, 1954

Gabriel Roark's *Bugbears & Ballyhoo* #42 updated apans on the continuation of his ice skating! How neat that it's "become a highlight—often the highlight—of the week" for you. You have The Lord of Chaos #1-13 in PDF? I have but #1-5. Faunch! I enjoyed your remarks to George Phillies about your staged routine for reading and writing for apae. Now that E&A and Anzapa are the heftiest apae in which I

participate, with Anzapa far surpassing even our page counts in E&A, I might need to come up with a method other than Hack It All Out Just Before Deadline.



Chicago Tribune, March 19, 1954

For thish, at least, I've given myself some wiggle room. I wrote "Expanded Options for *Super City*" shortly after filing last month because I didn't like how short my previous ish was. I haven't been playing, prepping, or reading much game-related stuff lately. But because my wife and I are going away this weekend—to Lake Geneva, Wis., for a bit of a self-led *Dungeons & Dragons* magical history tour (I mapped it out Friday, drawing on numerous sources)—I know that I won't be able to finish that trip prep in time for the deadline early next week. So I'm writing mailing comments several days before the upcoming deadline in order to have a middling-sized issue to contribute. Next ish will be very, very cool. Or so I expect.

I try to mix session reports—when I'm more actively playing—reviews of game-related materials,

and mailing comments. Given A&E's history of including more player and GM aids—especially in the early days—I'm going to explore offering such material even if we don't all play the same games. That intent is what inspired the lead piece for thish.

You're right, though. I appreciate that you "let myself off the hook about commenting on every zine, every issue..." That way—trying to do so—lies madness. With Anzapa, for example, which frequently surpasses 600 pages, I've taken to alternating: I comment on them what I have time for one round, and next ish, I comment on them what I didn't. We can't do All the Things All the Time. I also try to write my comments in such a way that readers who aren't in the apa can understand what's going on.

I call our domicile the Infernal Wilson—and now, the Infernal Wilson II—because we live on Wilson Street. Furthermore, because I write my apazines as Blasted Heath Row, an Anzapa participant turned me on to *I'm Sorry, I'll Read That Again*, a BBC radio comedy program from the 1960s and 1970s. The show featured John Cleese, Graeme Garden, Jo Kendall, David Hatch, Tim Brooke Taylor, and Bill Oddie. That program's parody of *Macbeth* is what provided the name for our homes, which are not slan shacks:

Announcer: Scene 1.

Voice (Oddie): I've seen 2.

Announcer: The blasted heath.

Voice (Oddie): Better than the infernal Wilson.

I'm not sure what they meant by that joke—maybe they knew a Heath Wilson?—but I like it. A lot. So, the Infernal Wilson it is. That the Airbnb we moved to from the furnished apartment was also located on Wilson Street is solid gold.

Your discussion with Attronarch about dungeon economics reminded me of my recent reading of James Webb's Vietnam War novel *Fields of Fire*. The Marines in that novel frequently trade cigarettes and C-rations with non-hostile villagers. Regardless of NPCs' alignment, there could be several reasons to trade with adventurers: friendliness, fear, seeking influence or leverage, and other motivations.

In **Michael Cule's** *The Phoenix Nest* for E&A #3, he detailed his approach to developing a city. On the topic of Gormenghast, if a house can contain a cabin (<https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Property/HI68389>), I figure a castle could contain—or at least serve as—a city. A case in point, perhaps: Kowloon Walled City. (<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/kowloon-walled-city>) Aegis sounds grand indeed. I enjoyed your reading report and conrep. There've been at least two *Brindlewood Bay* references in this

mailing, so I'll have to prioritize finding it among our belongings once we arrive in Portugal.

Clark Timmins's *Four Things* adapts several creatures from pulp fiction magazines for use in 5E gameplay. I applaud your experimentation along these lines. At the very least, I'll have to seek out William J. Elliott's "Doctor Doom, Ghost Detective" in *The Weird Story Magazine* #1 (August 1940), Jack Williamson's "The Moon Era" in *Tales of Wonder and Super-Science* #15 (Autumn 1941), Mark Schorer's "A Bottle from Corezzi" in *Strange Stories* Vol. 2 #3 (December 1939), and George Allen England's "The Thing from— 'Outside'" in *Amazing Stories* Vol. 1 #1 (April 1926). I've had the pleasure of reading the last story listed already. (*Faculae & Filigree* #32) Here's what I said in a previous apazine:

George Allan England's "The Thing from— 'Outside'" is a pleasant example of the outre. An invisible creature (or creatures) terrorizes a group of people in a remote cabin, resulting in disfigurement, insanity, and memory loss.

What you are doing is absolutely brilliant. Kudos!

In *A Rhodomontadulous Promenade* #3, **George Phillis** discussed the difference between rulings and rules. I enjoyed your Preparatory Tale substantially. **Dylan Capel's** *Attacks of Opportunity* #2 reported on a session of Chaosium's *QuestWorlds*. Not that I need another system to explore, but darn, *DriveThruRPG's* description rings all the bells: "A Setting-Agnostic Roleplaying System: *QuestWorlds* is a rules engine designed for play in cinematic, larger-than-life settings inspired by classic pulps, comic books, and weird fiction." Grumble, mumble. Twitch.

I'm glad you're enjoying the *Foundation* television program. You should read the books, too! I also think the noble society, planetary authorities, and hereditary royal families influenced the *Warhammer 40,000* worldbuilding.

The ASCII art banner for **Avram Grumer's** *Going to Be Ad-Libbed* was a sight for sore eyes. Well done, and welcome back! I very much got a kick out of you referring to polyhedral dice as Platonic solids. That's the second such reference I've encountered in perhaps as many weeks. I enjoyed your descriptions of *Tiān Dēng*, *Scum and Villainy* ("for people who like making little bullet lists then filling in little boxes": Harf!), *Masks: A New Generation*, *Call of Cthulhu*, *Mothership*, and *Black Star*. I've had a yen for an sf or cyberpunk-oriented game of late, and there's a lot of skiffy in your gaming. I've been eyeing Micro RPG's *Neon Road* for solo play.

In **Paul Holman's** *De Ludis Elficis Fictis* dated

August 2025, he continued to stoke my jealousy of the growing British cabal. Oh, you lot! Your remark that "world building can resemble solo RPGing quite a lot" brought to mind Brandon Lee's *Cartograph*, a "solo roleplaying game of mapmaking and discovery." I haven't spent any time yet, but it recently arrived.



Chicago Tribune, March 26, 1954

Myles Corcoran's *Twisting the Rope* #3 self-defined the author as a redneck. I've long thought that that term described farmhands and other working class people whose necks got sunburned because of fieldwork and other outdoor labor, but I recently learned that there might be another source. While the aforementioned usage might date back to the late 19th century, "redneck" can also be applied to workers protesting during the West Virginia Mine Wars of the early 1920s. Those fighting for labor rights wore red bandanas tied around their necks during marches. That makes me curious: Have any roleplaying games focused on the labor movement?

I continue to enjoy your *Mausritter* campaign. Just as the Wizards of the Coast house art style "dominates a lot of the imagery of high fantasy RPGs" and leaves you cold, I dislike that so many self-publishers riffing off the license utilize page templates replicating the design of *D&D* materials. So much of the same old. In the sf vein, I'll have to check out *Offworlders*. Thank you for describing the meaning of your fanzine title. Me? I just reversed the order of my previous title, like E&A did with A&E's initials.

In *Dreadsword* #2, **Mitch Hyde** continued

documenting his *AD&D* campaign. The artwork is excellent! **Patrick Riley's** *Quasipseudoludognostication* #3 commented on his playing style and offered a session report—complete with boxed text, which I adore. The quest list and map were also welcome. “Dyson Logos is da bomb.” Heck yeah.



Chicago Tribune, March 26, 1954

Brian Rogers's *Denizens of the Library* #2 mentioned reading five books during his trip to New Hampshire. That's the stuff! Lost River Gorge in

Woodstock, N.H., looks wonderful. Your weekly *Knave* game riffing off The Dyson Megadelve (<https://dysonlogos.blog/maps/the-dyson-megadelve>) also sounds glorious. I'll need to return to *Knave* at some point. (Peter Mullen's artwork: le swoon.)

Between Clark Timmins's *Four Things* and your “Stating up Regrets” entries, I'm aswim in awesomeness. I'll have to continue my exploration begun in *E&E* #3 to scratch my public domain supers itch. Your assessment of Matt Dinniman's *Dungeon Crawler Carl* series surprised me. The books aren't... crud? Given my limited experience and enthusiasm for LitRPG (*Theoretically: Game* #2), I just figured that mainstream LitRPG couldn't be any better.

In *The Dragon's Beard* dated September 2025, **Patrick Zoch** reported technical issues that briefly interrupted his regular gameplay. When I stop working in mid-October, once we're firmly ensconced in Portugal, I plan to return to either online game sessions via video calls and Discord in real time or play-by-forum games like I used to enjoy on *RolePlay onLine*. I'm kind of looking forward to that. I enjoyed your writeup of the Fort Leavenworth Area Wargaming and Research Studies group's Epic Game Day. You should definitely flesh out the stats for the Dream Fish.

Mark Nemeth's *The Seedling* #50 offered a session report in time for the deadline. May your days become less busy! In *Age of Menace* #240, **Brian Christopher Misiaszek** indicated that he chose not to go to PulpFest this year. Similarly, Lloyd Penney forwent participating in Worldcon recently. I wonder if Mr. Penney knows about Attic Books! (<https://atticbooks.ca>) Just in case, I'll inform him. TSR's *Monstrous Compendium* binders can indeed be a mess and a muddle if obtained on the secondary market. They're still pretty neat.

Your research on Havana, Cuba, and its environs continues to fascinate me. Your map of Mazorra and the encounter tables are quite impressive. Keep going. Keep going! I appreciated your mention of the May-June 1939 issue of *Operator* #5. Your exchange with Patrick Zoch on antifascist stories and imagery in pulp magazines and comic books was also really interesting.

With *Ronin Engineer*, **Jim Eckman** offered a short but solid ish, including some intriguing artwork. RAEBNCs all around! And **Lisa Padol's** *An Unlooked For Zine* #2 mentioned the post-A&E one-shot, *Something Completely Different*. I look forward to receiving it when it's completed! While I didn't quite make it to the end of this mailing—page 129 of 161—I did make it to the bottom of this page. Off to Lake Geneva!

The Rhodomontadulous Promenade

George Phillies
phillies@4liberty.net

Alas, I am too overworked to be able to be much of a contributor, but I will have another tale for next time. Perhaps I will dig up my account of a Champions III campaign, in which I stayed with a somewhat ill-designed character, one who could do a lot of damage if she ever managed to hit anything.

A Gentle Stroll: I will add the AGS#4 cover as a second page.

Small Giant Class Liberation Army
a background tale, now concluded

“Forgive me, Grand Master,” Eric said, “but I have tried Speak in Tongues twice, ditto Commune with the Songs of the Earth, and I fail to understand what the strange people are saying.”

“Actually interesting,” the Grand Master remarked. “And the strange people test out as having more or less no magical residue. How are they blocking your spell?”

“I am embarrassed to say, Grand Master, but I do not know. While I cast each spell the second time I had Acolyte-Third Morris casting a magical detection spell. I put up a circle so we would have enough quiet for that. He detected my spell and nothing else.”

“That is different.” The Grand Master lifted her hat and scratched. “OK, I will try a similarity spell. The hard part, of course, is to get one of them to talk for long enough for the spell to bite. I think we will need to do a pantomime. The tall woman is the one in charge?”

“Yes, Grandmaster.” Erik pointed at Ching-Fei, waved, smiled, and gestured for her to come over.

Grandmaster Sandra pointed first at herself and then at Eric. “I.” She pointed at herself. “You.” She pointed at Eric. She repeated the gesture and word several times. “Your turn, Eric.”

Eric repeated the I and the you. He was reasonably sure the mysterious young woman was following the gestures and the voice. Indeed, before he got much further, the woman pointed at herself and said “I”. She then pointed to each of the two magicians and said “You.”

Sandra advanced to the next step. “I — Sandra.” Then Sandra pointed at Eric. “You — Eric.” Eric repeated the words. The hard part was hoping that the strange woman would realize that names were being used.

Mayor Stromheim, who had been waiting patiently to thank the Grand Master, understood what was going on, and inserted into

the conversation “I — Stromheim. You — Eric.” Then he pointed at himself again and said “I — Stromheim.” Finally he pointed at the strange woman, and said “You” and waited.

Ching-Fei thought for a few seconds. These foreigners had very strange names. She hoped that was what they were saying to her. She bowed slightly at the Grand Master “I — Ching-Fei. You — Sandra.” She stumbled slightly over the strange name. “Sandra.” She then bowed to Eric. “You — Eric.” She thanked the gods, no matter that was not what a good communist would do, that she had learned how to pronounce English, since these strange people were speaking a language that seemed to use the same sounds. Finally she bowed to the Mayor, and managed “You — Stromheim.”

There followed an elaborate pantomime, at the end of which Ching-Fei decided that for some reason the foreigners wanted her to talk and keep on talking. She launched, speaking not too quickly, into an explanation of the fundamental principles of Mao thought and dialectical materialism. She kept talking. The strange people kept smiling and nodding. While this happened, the elaborately dressed foreigner Sandra gestured in a complicated manner in her direction. She was absolutely unable to decide what the gestures might mean. Finally Sandra held up her hand in something like the military halt! gesture. Ching-Fei paused.

End of written tale: The visitors have the limitation that none of them know how to make gunpowder, not to mention that their pre-World-War II weapons will be be able to fire usefully with it. However, as late as World War II, in urban combat in close quarters the sword was an entirely effective melee weapon, typically better than a bayonet. The alien visitors will bring to the table the use of Fabian tactics.

Comments

Just a few of these, I think. I tried commenting on the entire E&AA effort once, and it took forever, a forever I simply do not have at this point.

Lisa Padol: your suggestion that a more perfect form of Gowist virtue is to fail to flee, because the practitioner is too much of a coward to consider fleeing, is indeed very clever. Or highly heretical.

Joshua Kronengeld: I did indeed send around suggestions about a new D&D APA to the people that I could reach. My list of email addresses was mostly out of date. I was a bit surprised to read about the APA now called Ever and Anon, but had the unfair advantage in starting first that A Gentle Stroll did not have a rules committee.

John Redden: Thanks for the Comment on Small Giant Class Liberation Army.

A Gentle Stroll

September 2025 — Issue Four



Water's Edge
by Tiffanie Gray

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a zine for *Ever & Anon*
by Avram Grumer of Brooklyn, NY
CC BY-NC-ND 4.0
email: avram@grumer.org
see <http://grumer.org/>
for social media links
software: Affinity Publisher
font: IBM Plex Mono

Life Update

=====

I've just (like, an hour or two ago as I write this) replaced my decade-old 22" monitor with a new 27" 4K model (56cm & 69cm, respectively, for those of you not living in a nation where people associate the metric system with Communism), and *oh sweet spirit of François-Ambroise Didot*, I can actually see things now! In particular, Affinity Publisher's cramped and cryptic user interface is now legible.

Abbreviations & Acronyms

You Don't Need to Know:

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- * **TASER**: Tom Swift's Electric Rifle
- * **POG**: Passionfruit, Orange, Guava
- * **IKEA**: Ingvar Kamprad Elmtaryd Agunnaryd
- * **HIPPO**: Highest Paid Person's Opinion
- * **CAPTCHA**: Completely Automated Public Turing Test to Tell Computers and Humans Apart
- * **Rg**: Roentgenium

Recent Gaming

=====

Scum and Villainy

I remembered to take notes this time! Here are the PCs:

- * **Harmony Qián**, a Mechanic (me)
- * **Valsi**, a Mystic (Lisa)
- * **Von Redwell**, Muscle (Gareth)
- * **Verilu**, aka Vary, a xeno Speaker (Josh)

Last session we had been hired to drop off a package on Warren, the capital of the Procyon Sector, a moon orbiting Alpha, a gas giant, itself orbiting the star Rin. When we went to the bar to meet the recipient, he had already been killed! Guards from House Malklaith (the ruling noble house of the sector, and a name so awkward that no two of us pronounce it the same way) were closing in. We managed to escape

through the vents, and make our way to the spaceport. The delivery itself, which we scooped up as we fled, turned out to be a Precursor artifact called the Aleph Key. With the Way, and the Key's help, Valsi was able to get us to our ship, but all ships were locked down. I forget how we managed to get through that, but it had something to do with Vary and religious literature. Then we took off. Our Entanglement roll called for some consequence that only made sense if we were still dirtside, so we evaded that.

For the first full session, we took a kidnapping job. A black-marketeer friend of Harmony's called and asked if we'd be interested; he thought maybe it had something to do with counter-Hegemony intelligence. The target, a high-ranked Guild of Engineers member named Proctor Seven, was to be found on Straylight, a nightclub space station in Rin system. We were being asked to kidnap him and take him to the Cove, a hidden pirate hideout.

Here we encountered the first complication: our crew wasn't certain they wanted to do this. Kidnap a guy? Von and Harmony were OK with it, but Vary and Valsi were dithering. (Von likes mayhem. Harmony's got a heterodox mystical ethics system, which she spent a bit of time explaining to the others: "See, there are ethical dimensions intersecting the physical ones, and proper behavior involves acting so that you are perpendicular to as many as you can manage. Right thoughts, right words, right angles.") So we went to the station, without formally accepting the job, to check the guy out, and see if maybe he'd turn out to be evil in a way that would justify kidnapping him. We sat around drinking and arguing, and looking over our Urbot waitron (an unusual use of a sentient Urbot), until we eventually realized that the drinks bill at this hideously expensive nightclub had left us with no choice but to take the job

or risk going into debt.

It turned out we needn't have worried, because our target *wanted* to be kidnapped! It was a condition of the job that he be publicly seen resisting the kidnapping. But we figured that still left opportunities for things to go wrong, so we came up with this plan: (1) slip our target a mickey and sneak him onto the ship; (2) Vary, a xeno shapeshifter, impersonates him; (3) Vary and Von stage a fake kidnapping in public; (4) escape!

Here's where the Forged in the Dark system shines. Rather than work out all of the fine details, we just used the rough outline above to figure out how many dice to roll (three, I think?), and rolled to see how close we could get to the first obstacle. We got a 5, which meant that things were risky. Gaylord (the GM) must have decided that drugging a willing target wasn't really an obstacle, so Proctor Seven was already unconscious on the ship, with Harmony to watch over him, when the House Malkovich warship showed up to "escort" him (or rather, the shapeshifter that they thought was him) off somewhere.

There was a lot of activity, and a bomb threat, and a bunch of stuff I didn't write down because my PC was busy on the ship hacking into the control system of a nearby cargo ship and using it to knock the House Malaclypse warship away from the airlock. Rolled a critical on that one, so Harmony covered up the data trail, too, leaving no digital fingerprints. It all worked out, and we got away with our man, and the info he'd been collecting from those Urbots.

Then we had to find the Cove. Proctor Seven didn't know where it was, and neither did we. We managed to find some pirates in a sleazy bar on Warren, the Lock Luna, and get the info from them, but Von got shot as an side effect. We started to think maybe we should have taken the Medical Bay ship's module instead of Crew Quarters.

We got to the Cove, inhabited by the Maelstrom pirate gang, and they allowed us to dock, though we're not sure they're going to be cool about letting us leave. We've picked up a ton of Heat, boosting us to Wanted level 1. The Entanglement result was Vary (chosen by die roll) being threatened with arrest (by the pirates), and she paid a bribe to get out of it. Then she overdid her Vice roll, and got into debt overspending on her luxurious lifestyle.

More Games I Haven't Played

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Never Tell Me the Odds

I backed this one on Kickstarter in 2018 in PDF form, and then bought the POD hardcopy on DriveThrough when it was on sale at some point. It's a nice product, with lots of bright color and cool artwork. As you could probably tell from the name, this is a *Star Wars*-ish game.

The elevator pitch for this game is in the name: when you roll the dice, you succeed on an even result, and fail on an odd one. That's it! A 50% success rate, every time! You can use d6, d10, d20 – doesn't matter! Just grab whichever one of those shiny math rocks takes your fancy and give it a spin!

The way the game handles difficulty is, well, first I'd better explain how you make a character. Each PC has (among other stuff) six *values*: Belief, Physique, Possession, Relationship, Reputation, and Resource. For each value, you write a *factor* – that's what the value actually is. Like, maybe your Belief factor is "I always repay my debts," and your Possession factor is "My patched-up space cruiser," and your Resource factor is "Connections to the Vesta Quadrant mob," and so on. You also rank your values – two high, two medium, and two low.

When you want to do something risky, you describe what you're trying, and the GM tells you how risky it is – high, medium, or low risk. You then decide what it is that you're going to risk to succeed. If it's something you value as much as the risk level, that's *Matching* the risk: an even roll means you succeed, odd means you fail and the thing you risk is endangered. If it was already endangered, then it's lost.

If the thing you risk is something you value more than the risk level, that's called *Going Over*. You succeed no matter what you roll, but an odd result means the thing is endangered, as above.

If the thing you risk is valued less than the risk level, that's *Going Under*: even means you succeed and endanger, odd means you fail and lose the thing.

In addition to risking a value, a PC can risk their life, which always counts as *Going Over*.

Troika! & Longshot City

Anyone have any experience with these? I'm interested in *Longshot City* as a rules-light supers game with quick chargen, but maybe it's *too* rules-light?

Like, there's one stat, Skill (1d3+3), that all of your character's abilities are based on. Roll badly during chargen, and you're stuck with an effective penalty for the rest of the game.

Let's say you roll up an Ace Reporter, and you've got a Skill of 4. All of your Ace Reporter abilities ("Advanced Skills") are +2, so if you're trying something unopposed, you've got to roll 6 or less on 2d6 (42% chance) if it's covered by one of your Advanced Skills, and 4 or less (17%) if it's not.

In most game systems, what you can try is to leverage your higher scores to help out with the lower ones, by finding a thing your PC is good at, and figuring out something you can do that gives you a bonus when trying the thing you're bad at. But there doesn't seem to be a mechanism for doing that in the *Troika!/Longshot City* system. There's no "get a +3 on your next attack" or "invoke this advantage for a bonus" mechanism, at least not that I could find. No way at all of adjusting a roll to take in advantages or complications. If you're rolling unopposed, you're just rolling 2d6 equal-to-or-under your Skill (maybe plus an Advanced Skill or Power), and if you're rolling opposed, it's 2d6 plus your Skill (maybe plus etc) trying to get higher than the opposition's 2d6 plus their Skill (maybe plus etc). That's it!

So maybe the Ace Reporter is an Archetype (character class, roughly; *Troika!* calls them Backgrounds) designed for players who are comfortable relying on player skill to bullshit the GM into letting them get away with stuff without having to roll for it. OK, that's a venerable RPGing tactic, but lots of people are bad at that, and *Longshot City* hands out character Archetypes randomly. A shy, tongue-tied player who gets stuck with an Ace Reporter PC won't have much in the way of mechanics to fall back on unless they also roll well on that initial chargen roll for Skill.

Anyone out there got *Troika!* experience and can tell me if I've read it wrong? Is this a failure-is-fun game?

Comments on E&A #3

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We hit 161 pages! Bigger than *A&E* at its peak! We're gonna break the PDF stapler!

Roger BW: I spent a few weeks fiddling around with Typst for the first issue of my zine, and there was a lot to like about it, but ultimately it just wasn't designed for the kind of layout I wanted to do. But I did like that I could store my page background colors in an array, and have the program cycle through them automatically based on my issue number. Anyway, using it for character sheets is a great idea.

John Redden: re *Andor's* second season – While I enjoyed this a great deal, it's marred by having originally been planned as a five-season story, which got compressed down to three, then just two. There are important chunks of story that happen off-screen and get delivered as chunks of dialog.

self: myct Jim Eckman re sci-fi games – I forgot about *Tiny Frontiers*, part of the *Tiny D6* family of games from Gallant Knight Games.

Myles Corcoran: re *Apocalypse World* clocks – The Forged in the Dark games use these too, and I think one of their benefits is suspense. Like, if the PCs are fighting in a burning building, you can put a clock out there that says "The building starts to collapse," and check off wedges as the combat proceeds, and the tension as it ticks towards completion is better than just announcing "The building starts collapsing!" with no build-up.

yct Pum re dice is what got me to write about *Never Tell Me the Odds*.

Ooh, Offworlders, another game I own but haven't gotten around to playing! Its author, Chris Wolf, has also worked up a simple *Traveller*-like game called Night Tripper, which is just online.

Brian Rogers: re *Ticket to Ride* – I've played the full version of a bunch of times. They've recently come out with a line of "Cities" versions that are smaller, and play faster. Sadly, they aren't set in metro systems, but instead

depict traveling about the city by taxi, bus, or horse-drawn carriage. I bought the London set (which I haven't played yet) when Amazon had it for half-off, because I knew that if we tried playing the New York City set, we might spend the whole game annoyed at inaccuracies.

Heath Row: yct Brian Rogers re rules-light supers options – Consider *Tiny Supers* (a *TinyD6* game), *Longshot City* (a *Troika!* Game, which I've just complained about), or *Icons* (sort of a hybrid of *Fate* and the old Marvel FASERIP system, not quite as rules-light as *Tiny* or *Longshot*).

Lisa Padol: re that thing about *making* the SAN roll, not *succeeding* at it – On the one hand, yeah, that player was trying to pull some bullshit, but on the other, the version where the writer specifies that success is necessary is *better, clearer writing*. I'm pretty sure you've heard me rant about how terrible the writing and editing are in most RPG rules, and this is an example: it is lazy, confusing writing to use the same verb ("make") for *both* succeeding *and* for checking to see if one's succeeded, and we only tolerate it because we're old-timers who've internalized the rules that distinguish between the two meanings.

yct yrself re empires in Max Gladstone sf books – Most of Gladstone's work consists of the Craft Sequence/Wars books, which are fantasy, and depict a world with a variety of nations ruled in a variety of ways, including one called the Shining Empire (which I'll admit we don't see much of). Of his two non-Craft solo novels, the one (*Empress of Forever*) that is traditional spaceships-and-pew-pew sci-fi has, well, an empress.

yct Brian Rogers re *Jamais Vue* – Y'know, I've been hearing you talk about this game for years, and this is the first time I've seen the name written out. I'd thought it was *Jamais Vous!* (The difference in pronunciation is very subtle.)

yct Clark Timmins re oracles – I believe Vincent Baker started the trend by calling his random generators oracles in his 2007 game *In a Wicked Age*....

yct Mark Wilson re mysteries in *Apoc-*

alypse World – I've seen a "Meddling Kid" playbook for *Monster of the Week* that has an Unmasked move: When you have a monster captured, you can make a speech about how you figured out it's not a monster at all, but someone in a mask! Explain all the supernatural events you witnessed, name the culprit, and roll+Sharp. On a miss, the monster escapes and causes chaos while you were explaining. On a 10+, you were right! On a 7-9, Keeper chooses one of these: It's a real monster, but the person you names was its ally; or you're right, but they escaped while you were talking; or it's a person in a mask, but not who you named.

Joshua Kronengold: re me supposedly contributing to *A&E* by stencil, once – I think I *tried* to contribute by stencil, but it turned out to be the wrong kind (ditto rather than mimeo). Let's see... I don't have the files handy for my first two *A&E* zines (probably on a floppy somewhere, possibly lost forever), but #3-7 (1990-91) are all TXT files, and they look like they've all got the formatting codes for Lee's software. Then I see DOC files starting with #8 (Apr 1991), and QXP (QuarkXPress) with #25 (Jan 1994). It looks like I tried LaTeX at some point in the early 2000s, but I don't think I got anywhere with it. I think that my usual method was to print out a copy of my zine and mail it to Lee for photocopying, so she didn't have to worry about fonts and such, and my deathless prose was left intact.

Attacks of Opportunity

Issue Three, Dylan Capel

Playing

I finally had the chance to play *Cloud Empress* after having backed the Kickstarter but not had the confidence to try and offer my own game with it. I enjoyed it a lot. Our characters were tasked with investigating reports of mysterious spores. We took a ride on a kind of airship and averted a hijacking but at great cost to the crew. Then we encountered fungus farmers who warned us that people infected with the spores tried to infect others by pushing parts of their body into other people's orifices. The farmers had captured an affable person who seemed to be a living symbiote with the spores and seemed to be returning to life when killed. He claimed to be able to absorb the spores which the farmers refused to believe. We were able to prove that he really could do so by managing to get ourselves infected while searching for potential test subjects. Thank goodness for long incubation times.

The system was the most enjoyable variant of *Mothership* I've played to date as the mechanics felt a bit more bonded to the background. Stress and Panic felt like they worked a bit better but there also feels like there is a lot of GM-discretion in how these get applied so possibly it is more that they felt more appropriate than some of the sci-fi variants I've played.

Link: [Cloud Empress](#)

Weird games

This year I've managed to play *Electrum Archive* for the first time and also do another session of *Vaults of Vaarn* and some *EcoMofos*. I slot them into a category of games where the setting comes after the civilisation we have now but where the world is not definitely ruined (a conceit that looks to the climate crisis and adaptation rather than nuclear war and devastation).

The touchstones of these games are *Nausicaä* and the worlds of *Mobius*. For *Vaarn* the comics of the UK [Decadence collaboration](#) are a particular touchpoint.

Electrum Archive recommends creating little tactical maps (as you might in *Fate* for example) and I generally don't enjoy this as an idea but for some

reason I really enjoyed it this time round and the resulting little maps helped highlight the locations without needing to get into the tedium of having to draw out a shared map for the whole abstract location.

These family of games often seem to emphasis a slightly more optimistic view of dystopia with community foregrounded against a backdrop of danger and decline. I sometimes think they are a stealth piece of propaganda for adaptation, that our current civilisation is unsustainable does not mean that our future is inevitably doomed to barbarity.

Knightly banter

We continue to play *Pendragon* and have now completed the introductory adventure and with Arthur claiming his crown we are now doing dubious missions for our upstart king.

We had quite an interesting experience during our first battle, we spied an opportunity to steal a banner in the first round and were immediately eager to seize the chance for glory. However, we were completely outmatched by the experienced knights guarding it; losing horses, consciousness and swords in the process. The banner was forced to retreat to the rear to regroup.

Having reequipped and done our best to shake off our wounds our depleted group returned to the line and spent the rest of the battle peasant sniping. We tried to identify the worst armed unmounted troops on the battlefield and then charged them, racking up bonuses for our better equipment.

This was highly effective, if not very glorious (mechanically or in nature) and as our morale score trickled away mechanically we also felt the wind leave our sails in-character.

It was an interesting but ambiguous experience. It did create the sensation of callow youth being inducted to the unpleasant realities of battle but as with all Arthurian games you wonder about where the balance is between trying to find a realism or naturalism alongside the mystical elements of the story.

The mechanics of the personality traits exactly model this but in doing so further reduce the experience of the game and character to a metagaming substrate. "How did this battle affect my character's worldview? He failed his Cynical role so he is still idealistic..."

Feast crashers

I have very much enjoyed the feasting sub-game which is surprisingly crunchy with stats feeding into card draws and a slight push your luck mechanism. The random events of the feasts have pushed my concept of the character as they end up getting invited to random social events that they

aren't very adept at. I've even ended up spending skill points on courtly skills because it feels like this is what my character has really been learning.

It has been so much fun I almost wanted my character to start questing for the best feasts from the greatest lords. Who is serving the best river fish? Where are the hottest widows going to be? Is it okay to play the flute? It could almost be a campaign idea or entire game in its own right.

Solo gaming

A few Kickstarters have arrived: *Grimscar* and *Kinless*. *Grimscar* has a bespoke system and features an isolated village in a magical wood whether you venture into the woods to find supplies for the villages via a hex crawler that should start to feature fixed hexes as you discover them. It has a unique rules system and so far I've just read the introduction to the game which also has a bit of in-character interaction.

Kinless is based on *Mork Borg* and is a fantasy Viking revenge tale with a father losing his son and being exiled for threatening the chieftain he blames for this son's death. The introduction brings to mind *The Northman* and *The Revenant*. The game system is inspired by *Barbarian Prince* with a hex map with written entries in the book for each hex. You have to manage resources to survive and hopefully grow powerful enough to have your revenge.

I also picked up a suggested procedure (*Playing Solo - LBB*) for playing Classic Traveller solo. I've been using a mix of sources for my current solo Traveller experimentation but I was also able to get a set of pristine classic books and the layout is far more readable than most of the modern books that I've seen. I'm still reading through the procedure a bit but I'm looking forward to trying to create the first character.

Reading

I continue to read and enjoy the *Collected* 28 (the collected edition of [28 magazine](#)). One of the modellers had used William Blake's illustrations as inspiration and talked about how her cultists were more disturbing for having "dad bods" instead of the usual ripped steroid musculature. It feels wonderful that everything comes at the topic of model soldiers from a serious cultural perspective. Patrick Stuart has written a far better piece than I could write about the meaning of the movement and of [having a physical representation](#) of it.

Neuromancer

For many years I've said my favourite book was *Neuromancer* but with the reissue of the Sprawl trilogy in different editions recently I wondered if it really was as good as I remembered, especially as while I love Gibson's latest work, I wouldn't say it was great literature.

Settling into the re-reading; the opening chapters in Night City were as great as I remember them. I felt immediately sucked into this world and the desperation of this point of view character. The tech is perhaps an even stranger mix of retro and unachievable than it was when first written.

I first read the books in my mid-teens and I clearly cannot have understood the descriptions of sex and drugs like I do now. I probably just drifted over them in the same way that the physics of a hard sci-fi novel would have passed me by.

I don't think I properly understood the relationship of the two AIs, Wintermute has also been more fascinating to me than *Neuromancer* although on a re-read I have a better understanding of the intent of *Neuromancer*. now.

I also didn't really understand the cryogenic suspension that the Tessier-Ashpool's use. This seems like a great prediction of the ways that the rich and powerful might use technology to achieve a kind of immortality.

I hadn't remembered the grotesquerie of incest and murder that Molly finds on the station but maybe I didn't enjoy that the first time round either. I didn't remember the character of Peter Riveria the illusionist at all.

The Rastafarians make way more sense to me now although I'm not sure their portrayal in the book requires much more than a teenager's vague understanding of Bob Marley.

Meta

There's something interesting about E&A as a physical product. We're still targeting Letter as the page format and many people are using double columns which implies that paper is the target medium.

However I was asked about references for a couple of things I mentioned and therefore I'm trying to include more links which is what people are using to confirm what I'm referring to.

I've switched to a mono-column format because I have no intent to really print these out so I see the APA as primarily digital. Are people really printing out the whole PDF to read?

Comments

There was so much content in the last issue! I've skimmed through everyone's contribution but I'm still reading the game writeups from issue 1! It is great to have so many new contributors but it may be a while before I have a properly engaged comments on pieces or indeed even catch up on some of the writeups.

Roger BW

Thanks for mentioning Typst, I may have heard of this before but reading about how you used it gave me the confidence that it might be the kind of thing I want to use to produce my own zine. I currently use Google Docs because it is relatively quick and easy and I've found Latex too intimidating. I'm still going through the manual but I might be tempted to try and submit something with it soon.

Useful tip about the US Letter/A4 compatible sizing.

Avram Grumer

I loved the retro look of your zine

Brian Misiaszek

Your Cuban material has been fantastic, it feels like it must have been a tremendous effort to put it together.

Lisa Padol

You referenced the correct *Fallen* I was referring to, the *Perplexing Ruins* one. I have played *Spire* a few times but I'm not sure anyone quite uses the tone of the book or share the vision of the authors. Maybe not even the authors. Which aspect of it were you thinking about?

Joshua Kronengold

The *Spelljammer* dungeon sounded really interesting. On reflection maybe *Belonging Outside Belonging* is just fine on a spreadsheet, one sheet for the characters and the other for the Forces.

Jim Vassilakos

That is the same 28, the free PDFs have a lot of the same qualities as the printed edition, essentially the *Collected 28* is a best of compilation with a tremendous amount of craft going into the book, layout and photography.

Ronin Engineer for Ever and Anon #4
by Jim Eckman,
Mountain View, CA
alarum@roninengineer.com

Why are you in this book/game?

What motivates your character, why do they act the way they do? One reason that I like the thought of an SFRPG that plays like an Andre Norton novel is her characters have it rough, they often lack resources, have desperate needs. On the other hand many older SF novels have protagonists that are middle class with an easy lifestyle. Why are they in this book?

Robert Heinlein versus Andre Norton:

1. I was at a political rally that was raided and a sexy woman convinced me to join the revolution.
2. I was starving and my mother was dying a painful death. I sold myself into slavery so that my mother could pass in a painless and happy dream via drugs.
3. After high school graduation, I was socially pressured by a sexy woman to go into Federal Service. I wound up in the Mobile Infantry.
4. I was raised by my very traditional grandfather, at 14 I was drafted into the military because of my special abilities and served as a child soldier in intense combat situations. The war ended when I was 18, my home world was destroyed and I suffered horribly from PTSD. The only thing keeping me apparently sane was my promise to my grandfather to kill a man.
5. When my father died, I was made a ward of my loathsome uncle. He and my creepy cousin though I would make a good servant and mistress. I fled from them on a primitive planet that was mentally controlled by a computer.

6. I was bumming around the south of France when I replied to a strange job ad in the local paper. A sexy woman convinced me to go on an adventure with her.

Book titles next issue, feel free to guess!

Also another reason I find Traveller's character generator a bit silly. After you retire from a rough life, are you really going out adventuring?

Of course there are characters like Hammett's Thin Man that find themselves in the middle of a mess that requires their talents, so in some cases that's a valid reason for retirees to be in harms way.

This does make Cthulhu in Space attractive, stressed out characters may have issues that they can't handle, require serious support or treatment to recover. So some method of handling insanity is called for.

Ignorable Theme

My favorite RPGs to play, run, or just read?

I'm addicted to reading, so I will read anything once, maybe twice. I will play in any game with people I like, though I'm not fond of new D&D style games with very elaborate rules. If I'm running a game, I prefer games I've played often so that I can concentrate on role playing and not game mechanics.

Next issue

Read more on current SF RPGs, finish sorting and scanning Wanderer.

Reactions to Issue #3

Firedrake's Hoard – Roger Bell West Typist looks interesting, can you run it locally as opposed to web-based? I was unaware of Cthulhu Eternal, it looks awesome. GURPS is not a bad system, I wouldn't mind it as a player and if I had enough players I'd GM it.

Depending on the campaign, In the Labyrinth has some tech variants being run in their Heresy zine. Weapons of mass destruction, spaceships are uncommon in most of my games and many are smart to one degree or another. They don't allow suicide flights.

Children's Interactive Fiction, Pt 4 – Pedro Panhoca da Silva & Camila Lourenço
Panhoca What an interesting book.

Reddened Stars #1 – John Redden GURPS for Traveller sounds good. I will have to add it to the list.

Overlord's Annals (v4n7) – Attronarch
RAEBNC

Bugbears & Ballyhoo #42 – Gabriel Roark
Sounds like there's much gaming and skating going on. *Your Bushido games: creating famous martial arts schools & teachers sounds like loads of fun.* It also creates additional adventures and enemies. "You've insulted my master, now you must die!"

The Phoenix Nest #3 – Michael Cule Re: Style of Play I have had a couple of campaigns with high stakes (Your clan has lost the Onin War!) but usually I let the characters set that. Re: Starman Jones – Holds up better than many of his others!

Four Things – Clark Timmins RAEBNC

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #3 – George Phillies I do enjoy simple game systems that allow for stretch. In the Labyrinth is a good example. On the other side, D&D 5 is hugely overwritten with horrible typography that pains my eyes.

Attacks of Opportunity #2 – Dylan Capel
RAEBNC

Going to be Ad-Libbed #1 – Avram Grumer
Some interesting games and play.

De Ludis Elficis Fictis – Pum IgTheme I think I would enjoy gaming with you and everyone should get a chance at the spotlight. I'm not fit

enough to handle 25+ persons for 8 hours of intense crazy anymore. I may have a copy of Universe.

Twisting the Rope #3 – Myles Corcoran Pride! Awesome. IgTheme simple is better. I may have a copy of WE Star Wars. More games to look into!

Dreadsword #2 – Mitch Hyde Nice artwork.

Quasipseudoludognostication #3 – Patrick Riley I do like a mixture of in and out of character time myself. At one time gaming was my major social time.

Denizens of the Library #2 – Brian Rogers
Thanks for the SF game info. *Can't Spell Treason Without Tea* by Rebecca Thorne: Fun read! *We now have an entire genre dedicated to the people who play D&D but want to run shops rather than adventure.* ROTFL

The Dragon's Beard #88 – Patrick Zoch Nice figures.

Engines & Emulators #3 – Heath Row *Billions Vs. Billionaires—at Worldcon* Sounds like a blast. I understand the attraction of Portugal.

The Seedling #50 – Mark Nemeth RAEBNC

Age of Menace #240 – Brian Christopher Misiaszek Mazorra is fantastic! Nice book haul. Andre Norton is one of the greats and ages much better than most older SF. Its going to be a while but the research will be fun.

An Unlooked For Zine #2 – Lisa Padol *I wonder if we met at the 2018 Worldcon?* Possible, I was quite overwhelmed by it. There are some serious Cthulhu in space rules and they may be a good choice. Also thanks for the list!

Accidental Recall #2 – Joshua Kronengold
RAEBNC

Bumbling Through Dungeons #3 – Mark A. Wilson *IgTheme: Playing Style and What I Look For As a GM, I have found myself incapable of running purchased adventures anywhere near*

as-written. I like to roll my own, though sometimes I steal bits and pieces from other sources.

Traveller PBEM: Plankwell, Ch 48 – Vassilakos, Collinson, and Rader FTL in SFRPGs: I usually don't worry about how spaceflight works (magic!) but how I use it in the game. Also space combat is a great way to trash parties, so I make it easy to avoid. "Let's not go to Flattus Five, tis a silly place.

The PhOENIX NEST



MORE MATERIAL TO BUILD MY LEGACY

I sometimes wonder if we need all this deep history.

You know sort of thing I mean. At the start of the description of a setting you come to a paragraph or two about The Ancients. It's there on Hârn, with the mysterious Earthmasters (who exist to give an explanation of the inter-world gates scattered about the island). It's there in the TRAVELLER universe, primarily to explain the human variant species scattered across the setting. It's there on Tekumel, to explain why there are all those peculiar dungeons beneath every major city. The Professor was kind enough to give you layers of ancient civilisations so the characters could mutter: "Ah, yes, this is pottery of the Time Of The Fisherman Kings. The black glaze is typical as is the picture of a fallen Dragon Warrior."

Even settings that don't make use of the idea tend to have them, mostly I think because Tolkien liked them.

**A zine for EVER & ANON 4 by
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<https://room3b.blog/>

Now, as someone who has recently said that you should delay defining the details about anything until the last possible moment, I have my doubts about whether this is necessary at the start of the campaign.

However, I feel that you should think about this sort of thing if it is necessary for you to make sense of the setting. That was my motivation when I created my version of the deep history of Yrth, the parallel Earth which is the setting of Steve Jackson Games BANESTORM.

For those of you who don't know, BANESTORM is SJG's primary fantasy setting. It is a world the same size, length of day and year as Earth, a remarkably similar moon and identical planets and stars in the sky. But the geography is different.

And to explain this the authors of the current edition (it's been around as a setting since the 80s and has had two previous writeups) have put in an ancient magical war that has warped the landscape and scoured the moon. And whose details have remained undefined in the official version.

After that mysterious war, the parallel world went on being a fairly standard fantasy version of Earth with elves (of various kinds), dwarves (and their relatives the gnomes) and dragons.

Oh, and Orcs.

There were wars between the Elves and Dwarves over the things the two species always seem to fall out over and there were wars between both of them and the Orcs because of the usual Orcish behaviour: violence, robbery, eating of other sentients and suchlike cliches.

And then on June 26th, 1050 A.D (as absolutely no one on Yrth called it at the time) a group of Elvish racist radicals completed a huge summoning ritual intended to call something to the world that would destroy the damned Orcs once and for all, a Bane for the Orcs. (Some of them were keen to target the Dwarves as well.)

It massively backfired, destroyed the cities of the faction that tried it, leaving desert in place of verdant forests and bringing to Yrth people from other parallel worlds, including humans, halflings, centaurs, giants and all the other fantasy species you might need for a properly fantastical world. The humans brought their religions which added a new reason for people to fight each other and gradually grew to dominate the landmasses where the Banestorm touched. The Elves aren't doing too well in a world with so many other species. The faction that called the Banestorm has gone underground and continues to plot and cause trouble between the various peoples of Yrth both natives and incomers.

Some people find the inclusion of religions from the (Allegedly) Real World TM to be tasteless or troubling. Some people find the world 'flavourless' or 'generic' but that never bothered me. And I am old enough to find the orientalism in depicting the Islamic nations or the depiction of the absurdist Nippon crossed with aspects of Aztec culture that is Sahud just old-fashioned and not something that needs cancelling. What caused me to want to change and improve the background was a question of biology.

As in Tolkien humans can interbreed with elves. There are plenty of families with an elven ancestor or two on Yrth.

Humans can also interbreed with Orcs. That's not in Tolkien as far as I know but it is a DnD thing. There are doubtless families with Orcish ancestors but they don't often mention it.

Humans cannot interbreed with Dwarves. Dwarves cannot interbreed with Elves. Elves and Dwarves cannot interbreed with Orcs.

Now if two life forms can interbreed they are, on some level, the same species. They probably had common ancestor species. Yrth is a parallel world. If hominids evolved into Elves instead of humans and then cousins from other time lines turned up that would make sense.

But why don't the other crossovers work? Why do the Dwarves and Elves not breed together, having (presumably) evolved together?

When I thought about it the answer was obvious. They weren't evolved they were all designed. Even the Orcs but they had a different designer than the rest.

Imagine an alien race coming from the stars to Yrth. They took the world and established cities on its moon and around its surface. They altered the proto-humans into two broad categories of servants.

The Dwarves were the industrial workers, delvers and forgers, miners, engineers and craftsmen. Adapted to life underground and hard physical labour. Their cousins the Gnomes lived on the surface and were agriculturalists producing plant and animal products both for the appetites of the other humanoid species and for the masters hidden in their sealed cities.

The Elves were the servants who worked most directly for the invaders. House slaves, gardeners, foresters. Artistically inclined, with enough Magery to operate the Masters more advanced devices..

This didn't last. The Masters had fled their

homeworld to escape a terrible enemy and that enemy followed them to Yrth. There was war. The two species clashed, the world was damaged and in the background the slave species became de facto free beings as their Masters died.

There are a few examples of their construction in obscure places on Yrth and a nearly complete Moonbase. Otherwise they are forgotten.

One device that got left behind was found by the aforementioned racist radicals among the Elves. It was a genetic re-sequencer capable of taking a living entity and without killing it or disrupting its memory turning it into another creature entirely.

The Dark Elves (as others call them in the current day) used it on captives from among their enemies in their own species and created, in order to exterminate the Dwarves. Let me repeat: the Dark Elves created the Orcs out of members of their own species. The new species was supposed to be a Bane for the Dwarves. It was a spectacular failure. The conspirators suppressed these facts and went on to seek a different Bane to use on those they despised: it went even worse.

(I decided that the reason the Orcs could breed with humans was that they were altered Elves and that the Elves were altered humans. The Dwarves and the Gnomes were altered by the invaders so much that interbreeding between the two servant species types was impossible. I later used that to create one of the great background romances in my campaign and an excuse for the player characters to climb Yrth's equivalent of Mount Everest to find the Throne of God.)

So, there we have part of the answer to the peculiarities of Yrth. There were alien invaders who came to the world and turned the proto-human inhabitants into workers for their homes and their factories.

And then someone came along and exterminated them in a war that changed the face of the planet. Who that someone was and where they are now I'll write about next time.

But the bigger question here is: how much of this stuff is needed? Am I odd in finding this sort of secondary creation (or perhaps tertiary given I'm reworking a published universe) interesting and useful?

Would it have been better if I had asked my players for input? No on the whole. I wanted to surprise my players with my vision of the world.

THE WAY OF THE WORLD

Please consider that I deleted a page and a half of political commentary and Wisdom For The Ages here. Interesting times, eh?

I finally got my bathroom replacement that my landlords had been promising all year. They told me it would take three days: it took eight including one spent waiting fruitlessly for a promised electrician to turn up. I have never been so glad to take a shower in my life as I was on the eighth day. The bitter spirit of scepticism about improvements has entered my soul.

I went up to Birmingham for a day of Gloranthan Games. It was great fun but if I ever do this gig again I am booking a hotel room for the night before. Getting up at six o'clock in the morning meant that I started falling asleep in the afternoon game. Deep embarrassment. I shall see how well I manage the slightly later start for Tringcon next month. Old age, old age... Snoring beside the fire isn't so shameful as snoring at the game table.

CUNNING PLANS AND OVER-REACHING AMBITIONS

I recently realised that January 1st 2026 will be the fiftieth anniversary of my first RPG game. I am currently dithering about the best way to mark the occasion.

My Monday night group had one session, Hartley having mostly put behind him the COVID of the summer. Having had time to think about the dilemma we left him with ("You grab at the monk's robes but are pulled down into the dark hole with him...") he came up with

a just about legal use of the Teleport spell to rescue himself. They have discovered more hints of what the whole conspiracy and fraud claim is about and I may actually be able to get them to something like a climax of the current case in the next few meetings.

Which aren't just yet and Chris, Jenny, Me and Hartley have been playing boardgames Monday afternoons. My new enthusiasm is FLIP 7, a push your luck game and Chris' is TYPEWRITER a word game from the same stable as PAPERBACK and HARDBACK.

On Wednesdays we continue to battle monsters and bureaucrats in the capital of the Lunar Empire

GLAMOUR DAYS AND NIGHTS ¹

Player Characters:

Alan as ESHAN, a Seven Mothers worshipping Nobleman with a lot of social skills

Graham as VOSTOR a worshipper of the Lunar war god Yanafal Tarnils with a dark secret.

Drak as JARATHIR another YT initiate with a Big Sword.

Martin as SANDENE, a 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

THE BAT MAN: A bat themed vigilante prowling the streets of the capital and disappearing people.

THE JANITRIX: The woman who cleans, collects rent, arranges repairs and knows just

about everything that happens in her Insula. She is a mostly retired Incredibly Senior and Highly Decorated NCO in the Legions.

VISHI: A High Llama riding pygmy by origin and a slave in Vostor's family since he was five. Sent to keep an eye on the Young Master and not let him put his foot in the politics. Too late for that, as it turns out.

SENATOR FALERIUS AGGARIA The owner of the Insula the party are staying at, the father of one of their deceased comrades. A Biggish Cheese in Senatorial politics.

FALERIA AGGARIA The Senator's headstrong older daughter. Red haired and headstrong.

KARASIN THE ICONPAINTER An obsessed artist.

STRALLO: A professional informer.

MURTIN PILLINI THE BAKER A disgruntled man with powerful forearms.

TAD THE BARBER Only in passing.

JOMES THE BARMAN Not guilty of anything but still gets spoken to firmly. Twice

Various citizens, guardsman, servants, an undead chaotic spider.

At the start of this session we looked at what happened to Eshan the Officer when his player was away the previous week.

GM: Please go with the flow...

DRAK: If at any point you say 'My character wouldn't do that'...The Power Of Mike Compels You.

At that morning, after a breakfast of red lentil porridge provided by Vostor's manservant and

¹ I think that's what I'm going to call it. Session for 23 July 2025

pastries provided by Sandene who never sleeps² the Officer received a letter from the hands of Ureus The Valued, the free trollkin who was the Treasurer and rent collector for the Senator's properties. He had popped in (he said) to check that the soldiers understood the terms of their limited lease and give them a few tips about furnishing the place. But at the end he handed over a sealed letter to Eshan who opened it and having read it instructed the others to 'stay out of trouble' and went off rubbing his chin stubble.

Eshan took himself to the barbers on the ground floor of the Insula for a shave and haircut and found himself at a quarter to noon at the Courtyard of the Queens one of the spaces leading into Red Square, the large open public space in the centre of the outer city.

The paving in Red Square is made out of Moon Rock; there were devoted religious persons laying down in the square in order to put themselves in contact with the body of the Goddess.

He was greeted by the noble and beautiful young daughter of the Senator, Faleria Aggaria, who had offered him this opportunity to be shown the city by a native.

She expressed herself as being motivated by his charm and kindness when delivering her brother's ashes. In his judgement, she was clearly hiding her true motive in seeking him out but he kept his speculations to himself and let her show him around the Gloranthan Imperial Market, a vast conglomeration of stores, food stands and hucksters with goods from more places than he had ever heard of. It was built around the Temple of Eteryies the Lunar trade goddess and was a place to buy just about everything (much of it at inflated prices).

² SANDENE I just bought them I didn't make them,

GM: You can buy just about everything there.

GRAHAM: Except rhinos

MARTIN: You can buy them but you can't walk away with them.

(This was in reference to the shopping scenes with the other soldiers in the previous week's session in which they went through the Weapons & Equipment book for RQG looking for absurd things they might buy.)

GM: (After a discussion of how many Rhinos could fit on a shelf and Drak's suggestion of pocket or desktop rhinos) There's probably some sorcerer somewhere who is Tapping Size out of rhinos just because he can.

ALAN: STR 35 SIZ 1 Rhinos.

DRAK: Do give anything it asks for.

GM: I've got this vision of a small child who has been given this sandbox of miniaturised Praxian beasts for his birthday. And he watches them trying to break through the concrete wall surrounding them

She showed him hats, she showed him sweets, she showed him the latest fashions which he couldn't afford even with his Capital Extra Subsistence. There were weapons and everything he could imagine. Straining his brain, he tried to think of a present he could buy for her³. After a while (and a Customs (Imperial Heartland) roll) he came up with Terracotta vases, black with red decoration. Done in what would have reminded the players of Classical Greek Style but probably came from Darra Happa or Peloria in this universe.

FALERIA: Oh, that? Yes, I collect that myself. Perhaps your mother.... Is your mother still with you?

Hearing that she was, the lady began quizzing him on his family, immediate and more distant. He noticed her brighten up when he mentioned being related to Fazzur Widread,

³ *GM: Shoes would be appropriate in almost any cliched female shopping expedition. DRAK: But we're not that sexist.*

the currently-not-in-favour Imperial General. She began to praise the General, mentioning his many services and how unfair it was that he had been sidelined.

They potted around the shops buying gifts for his family and discussing the state of the world. (The other players threw in such helpful suggestions as "A Crimson Bat Plushy!") After an hour or so shopping, she took him up to the cafe on the roof of the complex for tea and cakes. She pointed out the sights to be seen from there including the Red Light District. "The Temple of Uleria⁴ is doing a special today!" She raised an eyebrow quizzically and coyly. He made a deflating remark and managed to get away with it by being Charming.

She laughed ("That was unfair of me.") and went on to talk about her father's friendship with General Fazzur since they were at the University together. Had he spoken to the General recently?

(I reminded Alan that he had a missive from the General and a sudden Bat Man related lack of anyone to deliver it to.)

At which point I asked Alan to make an acting roll. He failed it but though a subtle clue may have crossed his face he didn't blurt out anything.

ESHAN He seems well. Enjoying his retirement. I only spoke to him briefly...

FALERIA: Well, please remember my father to him, when you speak next. Or write to himm.

ESHAN: I will do. Thank you.

They spent the rest of the afternoon doing the tourist thing. There were monuments and statues and places where people fought

bravely to defend the city against the invading nomads from the East.⁵

Throughout the afternoon, she was very charming but he got the feeling there was something she was thinking of saying but decided against it every time.

As dark fell, they wandered arm-in-arm back to the insula and the rest of the squad and suddenly a figure lands in front of the two of them, having jumped possibly from the rooftops down to street level.

Glowing red hands. Bat like ears on the hood he wore concealing his face. No cape.

DRAK: Are you aware of any tax evasion in your recent past?

ALAN: Not to my knowledge

DRAK: You may be all right.

THE BAT MAN: (*For it is he!*) You! Woman! I wish to have words with you.⁶

Eshan stepped between the two of them

GM: Alan, tick your Honour.

TBM: You, out of the way. I have no quarrel with you.

ESHAN: But you're making a quarrel with me by going after her.

GM: What skill are you using to convince him?

GRAHAM: Tremble?

DRAK: Intimidate?

PUM: Timorous Sincerity? Sing?

GRAHAM: Interpretive Dance! That'll scare him off.

ESHAN: If you wish to speak to someone it's better to make an appointment, isn't it?

⁴ Goddess of Love.

⁵ *GRAHAM: They got this close did they?*

GM: Oh yes. Sheng Seleris, that lot.

DRAK: It was some time ago.

⁶ In a growly sort of a voice that would be very bad for anyone with a normal larynx to keep up for any length of time.

GRAHAM: Bureaucracy! The swine!

Eventually, I insisted he was trying Charm and he augmented it with Honour. Which caused the vigilante to lower the baton he was holding.

TBM: You are innocent. Pure of soul. Unlike some people.⁷ We shall speak again, harlot.

He was suddenly not there.

When Eshan turned to look at Faleria her face was white, partly with terror and partly with furious anger.

FALERIA: Let's get off the streets, shall we. Thank you! That was a noble thing to do.

She didn't actually kiss him but he could tell she was thinking about it.

And as the insula came into sight with the coach and horses outside she said:

FALERIA: That's odd. My father's there. Oh. Well, let's go and say hello.

And then a murmur started in the air from all the people around and they started pointing upwards and to the south. They turned back to look down the avenue they had come up and saw in the sky out of the centre of one of the great constellations emerged the constellation known as Orlanth's Ring. Some of the people about were very unhappy about that, he heard muttering about it being 'too soon'. There was a rumbling sound and something rose up in the sky, far to the south. Something large and brown and breathing flame.

GRAHAM: It's a duck.

GM: It is not a duck.

DRAK: It may be a dream duck.

And at that moment the Red Moon overhead *flickered*.

I paused to consider whether I should make them roll any sort of reaction or loss of stability here. I went with asking them to roll against either their devotion to their Lunar Gods or their Loyalty to the Red Emperor. Jarathir Criticallied his Loyalty. The rest succeeded less spectacularly but there were some people who witnessed this and were audibly very distraught.

Faleria rushed up to her father and sought both reassurance and to know what he was doing there.

SENATOR: We will have to talk about that when we get home. (*Looking around at the people on the street.*) Oh, dear. Oh, dear. This is very bad. Ummm... (*Turning to Eshan*) What do you think is likely to happen now?

Around them were signs of a rising panic on the streets.

ESHAN: Someone needs to take charge.

SENATOR: Unfortunately, I don't have an entire army at my disposal.

The Officer called over his men, who were looking like slinking away was their primary concern. He then offered the Senator an escort home. Which he gratefully accepted but pointed out that the Insula would be very vulnerable in any rioting. Jarathir suggested Eshan might like to split the squad into two details, one to see the Senator home and one to guard the Insula.

GM: Oh goody! I get to use both sets of material I prepared.

Eshan, Vostor and Sandene went with the Senator and his daughter. The other two

⁷ MARTIN: Pure of soul: empty of mind.

(Jarathir and Keanus) were to guard the Insula.

The Senator turned to the Janitrix who was standing nearby, asking her to help the two soldiers who were staying behind to close up the shops and the bar and get everybody indoors. She nodded and Jarathir stood to attention and nearly saluted as she shouted for everyone to listen to her.

The Senator, before he left took a moment to go and have a word with Karasin the Icon Painter (who had been the one to sublet the room the undead thing was staying in, the room with the disturbingly unnoticeable series of tenants). The conversation was very quiet and quite private but the tone was very firm on the Senator's part.

Vishi asked for instructions and was told to stay at the Insula by his master.

VOSTOR: I don't know why my parents gave him to me, I really don't.

The people who resisted getting closed down early the most were the bar staff.

JOMES THE BARMAN:: There's no need for this. We can just give them more booze.

JARATHIR: No, you will follow orders and you will close. Or you will be spending some time in the infirmary and I will close your shop for you. I'm sure I'd make a reasonable attempt.

He focussed on his Death Rune and gave the barkeep a very disturbing smile.

JOMES: Pull everything from the ovens. Everybody! Drink up! Don't you have homes to go to?

When the bar's patrons wanted to know why they just couldn't stay there and drink up Keanus unable to find a good argument knocked over their beers and declared their

evening finished.. And then they went around the rest of the shops.

They overheard the Janitrix agreeing to honour the Senator's promise that the Icon Painter could sleep on her couch. After they'd got everybody in and the gates locked she told the soldiers to get on the roof and stand a watch to keep an eye of developments in the nearby streets.

JANITRIX: I don't suppose we'll have to fight but keep an eye out. There's going to be looting.

JARATHIR It's a crowd. It's a panic. And the ultimate worry about who is in charge.

JANITRIX: (*Firmly*) The Goddess is in charge.

JARATHIR: Yes, but some people out there might not see it.

JANITRIX: Well, some people are wrong. We can demonstrate that to them.

The other three decided to walk in front of and beside the two-horse carriage, resolving to jump onto it if they needed to go faster than walking pace.

Eshan put himself at the front with the others at each side and after going just a short while they were called on to halt by a phalanx of some sort of troops. He didn't recognise the uniforms well enough to recognise the unit.

The junior officer calling on them to halt looked a bit old to be a junior officer but he had about twice as many men as the Senator's improvised guard.

JUNIOR OFFICER: There's a curfew.

ESHAN: I know that's why we're taking the *Senator* back home.

JUNIOR OFFICER:: Senator you say. Well, pass on your way. Sir. My Lord.

ESHAN: Thank you, sir.

JUNIOR OFFICER: You don't call me sir, I call you sir.

If his rank badges were anything to go by he was recently demoted from a higher rank. His face bristled with resentment.

The Senator wondered if some commander had got above themselves, there having been no general proclamation of a curfew.

They headed home and Eshan studied the group's flag as they passed but had no better luck identifying the unit.

They got through the city gate heading west towards the Senator's estate and vineyard. Ahead of them they saw, spreading either side, a large group of soldiers. Cavalrymen, auxiliary (i.e. non-Lunar or colonial). Troops. They had broken free of their camp and were busy looting the supplies in the encampment.

Going around was contra-indicated. The only good ground for their coach was the road through the disorderly camp.

VOSTOR We could tell them to stop.

ESHAN Oh, yes! All three of us. You two have more battle experience than me...

VOSTOR Walk through and let them try it would be my advice.

Eshan looked desperately for an alternate way around. But the road went right through the three sided argument between three factions: The Pro-Looting Troopers, the Supply soldiers and the I'm-Just-Keeping-Out-Of-Trouble-And-Don't-You-Dare-Try-Looting-Me soldiers.

So Vostor and Sandene put up Bladesharp on their main weapons. Eshan put Strength on the Horses and the three soldiers got onto the coach. The coachman struggled with the horses, suddenly more vigorous but kept them under control. Eshan used his Command Voice and the two soldiers waved their magically enhanced weapons in the faces of anyone coming close enough.

They scrambled pass and to the far side of the encampment. By the time the spell wore off the horses and they had to pause the rioting soldiers were well behind them. In the Light of the full Moon above, they saw the country lanes clearly and made their way safely to the gates of the estate. The gates were open. The lamps weren't lit. They approached with caution.

Meanwhile the two guarding the Insula had armoured up, with Vishi bringing them the needed equipment from their rooms. Jarathir strung his bow and they looked out and down upon people panicking and doing other unwise things. At one point somebody tried to break into a shop and Jarathir let an arrow fly at him.

VISHI: *(Right at his elbow just at that moment)* I have some hot cocoa!

JARATHIR: Thank you.

KEANUS: Much appreciated.

VISHI: I picked it up at... Never mind. Gosh this is interesting isn't it. I can understand people being disturbed but I can't understand going...umm.

JARATHIR: Madness. Not the good sort.

VISHI: Is there a good sort? What sort of things could be good about Madness.

JARATHIR: Divine berserkers.

VISHI: And when you run out of madness you die.

JARATHIR: Death in service is a good death.

VISHI: I have been told that sir.

JARATHIR: Everything inside calm?

VISHI: Yes. I passed by the Janitrix's quarters and I could hear her having a very intense conversation with somebody who was rather upset.

JARATHIR: You do tend to notice a lot, don't you?

VISHI: You have to if you are a slave sir.

As he was turning to go, there was a scream from behind *that* Insula over *there* and then a gurgle.

DRAK: I'm assuming a really bad plumbing accident.

It was the scream of a female person and it choked off. Jarathir observed that he could probably get a look down the street between the buildings if he climbed out up the struts supporting the water tank.

DRAK: Hmm, Climb augmented by...

GRAHAM: Augmented by Death because if he fails that's what he'll get..

GM: Augmented by Honour?

Keanus thought about casting Detect Undead (again) but the far side of that building was out of range.

VISHI: Excuse me, sir!

And he nimbly climbed up the water tank strut and peered into the distance.

VISHI: There's somebody standing over a woman who isn't moving.

JARATHIR Are they wearing a black cloak?

VISHI: A cloak with a black hood.

Keanus felt his Hatred of Undead fighting his Honour which would require he stay put and guard the building.

JARATHIR Vishi, run down and tell the Janitrix we may have seen her problem tenant and ask for her instructions.

A short time later a cry of "Get down here, you lubbers!" rose up from below and when they got to ground floor level they found her

dressed in her old uniform (and quite splendid it was too).

JANITRIX: Follow me. Vishi lock the door behind us.

Jarathir sent his bonded avian companion Redwing to scout ahead of them. When they got to the corner of the street Vishi had seen the fallen woman on there was nothing to be seen except signs of a scuffle and marks of blood. Jarathir followed the tracks and Keanus's Detect Undead got a bearing at the extreme edge of the spell. Redwing came back to say "Carrying body. Something wrong. Not sure what."

As they began the pursuit the Janitrix moved ahead of the young soldiers with incredible speed for someone who they had heard complaining about their arthritis.

She firmly instructed them to "Buck their ideas up!" along with vivid bits of her Senior NCO's vocabulary. Keanus meanwhile had somehow managed to get disoriented in the broad, well laid out streets and not have an idea where he was. He kept following the Janitrix nonetheless. Jarathir on the other realised that they were heading towards the Park of Sevenfold Enlightenment where he had had a moment's Illuminating insight the previous afternoon.

.
(I'm afraid that I skipped that detail in last time's write up.)

JARATHIR He's headed towards the park!

JANITRIX: Yep! Gbaji Park!

Which was not what he had heard it called earlier.⁸

When they got to the park, Jarathir looked around to try to figure out the way the paths

honours those who achieve his form of enlightenment.

⁸ Gbaji ('The Deceiver') is a hostile nickname for Nysalor, the god of Illumination from the First Age. The Lunar religion considers him a Good Thing and

twisted and turned. And when he did so he suddenly got the feeling that paths were somehow connecting to parts of his brain. This was not the first time he had experienced mystical whibble-wobble in connection with this park.

It did not help with the current project and a fist from a person smaller than him slapped the back of his head.

JANITRIX: Don't dawdle! Which way have they gone?

He then managed to pick up the track. The paths were white stone and drops of blood showed up clearly. The amount of blood loss was slightly worrying.

The three of them came to a halt when they saw ahead of them a figure carefully laying down a body and removing a cloak from the body. The standing figure was that of a woman and as she stood up from removing the cloak there was a strong smell of decay on the air. She wrapped the cloak around herself. The body on the ground was that of another, smaller woman... The body on the ground did not have a head. Keanus spotted that the standing woman had a bag with something in it... About the size of a head. Or a large melon. Or a bowling ball.

(I'd just like to say I impressed myself with the set up to this scene. I can actually make it both flow and creep. The Plain People Of E&A will be along in a minute to accuse me of vanity.)

As they started to run forward, the scene shifted back to the country estate.

The carriage had stopped. Vostor put down his shield and took the lantern from the side of the carriage. Eshan stepped towards the centre of the courtyard from where he could keep an eye on the carriage with the civilians in it and maintain eyesight on his men as they entered the house.

He heard from the carriage Faleria say "Father, there is something I have to tell you" and then her voice became too quiet for him to follow.

The two troopers scouted ahead and heard something moving in the house and saw ahead of them the glowing hands of someone using red Lunar magic

They moved forwards carefully but approaching in heavy armour is never the best way to be stealthy. Sandene made it. Vostor bumped into a statue.

They saw someone standing over a desk rifling through papers.

Sandene took aim and let a sling shot fly at his head. He was hit directly between his eyes having turned towards the sound of Vostor hitting the statue. He fell backwards and something flittered about the room. Sandene didn't notice this and ran towards the fallen man. Vostor, arriving at the middle of the room did see it flittering about the rafters when it unleashed a burst of magic down at Sandene. Whatever it was it caused her to curl up into a ball and whimper in the corner.

Vostor strode over to the desk and found the masked man lying on his back. Something fluttered down onto his face and a wham of magic caused him to stir and start to try to get up.

Vostor put the lantern on the desk and reached to grab him by the shirt... and found he wasn't there still.

Outside Eshan had spotted the flash and correctly identified it as Rune Magic. He put up Shield and ran in.

VOSTOR: Surrender!

THE BAT MAN: *(Trying to use his gravelly voice himself)* I think.. *(Suddenly goes*

squeaky as an after effect of being bashed in the head) NOT!

He was trying to move out of Vostor's sight and succeeded in slipping into the shadows. Vostor tried to swipe at where he thought the fellow was but just succeeded in parting his hair. Eshan coming into the room saw the intruder outlined in the doorway out into the moonlit garden. Rushing forward he struck at the retreating malefactor but it bounced off his armour and the next thing he knew his opponent was growing, large, bat-like wings and starting to rise into the air. Vostor spotted the small bat fluttering after him.

DRAK: The Bat Man has a bat familiar.

Much more reasonable than a Robin.

Vostor struck him on the leg and with a mighty slash took his leg off. Eshan tried to use a Mindblast on him but it failed to work.

A moment later there was a woosh as he called upon A Secret and Abominable Name which rescued both man and bat teleporting even the severed leg away.

The only thing left behind were a few drops of blood.

They went and got the Senator who took a look at Sandene and gave his opinion as it being the aftereffects of a Madness spell. They put her on a couch to recover in a few minutes.

GRAHAM: We'll leave her some grapes.

DRAK: There have to be grapes. It's the law.

The servants that they found were unconscious, probably due to drugged booze.

Vostor, despite being unable to read, decided to be nowhere near the room which had been ransacked just in case he should see Evidence Of Something. He spent his time making the

servants comfortable and bandaging their wounds which he did incompetently.

Meanwhile back in the park:

JANITRIX: You there: stop!

The figure turned. It looked like a very beautiful young woman in a black cloak. Jarathir and Keanus ran towards her both of them raising their weapons to strike. It glanced at Keanus and as he looked into her beautiful eyes.... and kept looking.

Jarathir Swerved past his suddenly immobile comrade and struck her in the chest. It went deep and interestingly no blood spurted out. Jarathir had been expecting that (he said) and then the head came off and transformed into a giant spider that leapt at him trying to bite.

He parried and wounded its legs some of which had just emerged from deep in the body of the woman. There was discussion of the advisability of introducing SAN checks to this campaign.

DRAK: It's all right it's not really eldritch if penguins aren't involved.

KEANUS So beautiful... So many legs...

The head-spider began to scuttle away and the news that it now displayed a 40% penalty to his caused the Janitrix's Hate Chaos passion to kick in.

JANITRIX: Hit it! Hit it!

Jarathir cut through its torso with a mighty blow. And again there was calling out to a divine patron for aid. Jarathir and only he, heard the name 'Rashorana' in a whisper

GM: Would you care to see what it just rolled on its Divine Intervention roll.

DRAK: Eighty!

GM: (Sternly) Zero Eight.

The Spider folded in on itself vanishing away and Jarathir gained an extra 1% in Illumination.

And then the constables arrived and asked just what was going on here, then?

They were a little suspicious at first but when they spotted the Janitrix it was all salutes and "How can we be of assistance to you, ma'am"

Examining the bodies left behind they found that the one that was suddenly decaying had been placed carefully and precisely in the centre of the crossroads and the bag held the head of the fresher body, explaining why the bodies kept being found sans topknot.

JARATHIR *That's* why it kept looking like different people when it came around to pay the rent! It all makes sense now.

Meanwhile...

The Senator and his daughter were concerned about what had happened to the documents and who had been surprised searching through them.

SENATOR: I've never seen him before but people have rationalised it as someone being a vengeful operative of the Crimson Bat Cult.

Both Vostor and Eshan thinking about it recognised that the name the Bat Man had called out was one of the divine names of the Crimson Bat.

SENATOR: The bat familiar is very worrying. The Bat Man *is* an operative of the state and is after me.

Vostor asked about the possibility of using the blood to find a person but the Senator said that if he was a Rune Lord of the Bat, he wasn't sure any Lunar cult could trace him.

The Bat, it was established later, was currently on the Moon awaiting sufficient sacrifice to

re-summon it to the Mundane World. It was never summoned in the Lunar Heartlands but always to the borders.

VOSTOR: Do you know what he was looking for? Given all this paperwork I have carefully not looked at.

As Sandene came round she was asked if the Bat Man spoke in her presence.

SANDENE No, the conversations we had were "Thwok!" "Erk!" "Thunk" Then howl and gibber.

The Senator and his daughter drew Eshan out into the gardens for a private word.

SENATOR: My daughter was feeling you out about your relationship to Fazzur Wideread. I would point out that associates of Fazzur Wideread are currently not in favour at the court.

ESHAN Not at all?

SENATOR: Not at all. He is under a cloud. Now, I think that is purely the result of slanderers among the Provincial Government trying to diminish his political achievements in order to promote their own favourite.

ESHAN Politics. Above my level to understand.

SENATOR: Now, I happen to know that a young officer coming north from Tarsh was entrusted with a package, let us say, from the General. I also happen to know that the person who was here tonight snatched up the person who was to receive the message and if the officer who had that passage does not trust someone who is saying he is a friend of the General he had probably best destroy that package unopened. If other hand if he were to hypothetically to trust someone...

This came down to a roll of Eshan's Insight (Human) which told him the Senator wasn't actively lying and that he was slightly ashamed of setting his daughter on him.

SENATOR: If you were found with that upon your person, it might go the worse for you.

Eshan let himself be persuaded and drew the package out from under his breast plate.

SENATOR: Thank you. I owe you a great debt.

He handed the package to his daughter who took it and excused herself, heading back into the house and then upstairs.

SENATOR: It might be as well if you hang around till dawn. Please consider yourselves to have a place to stay, however long you may be in the city. I would like to reward all of your people.

There was a lot of exotic booze. They sampled a lot of it and only Sandene stayed awake till dawn.

The Senator suggested they expedite their business in the capital and get back to the front as soon as possible.

When they got back to the Insula, about dawn and riding inside the coach, they saw their two comrades and the Janitrix trudging up to the gates and being let in by Vishi. They had been interrogated within an inch of their lives by several persons from the Grey Guard.

SENIOR OFFICER: *That's* what was going on!

MORE SENIOR OFFICER: Yes, but it's not dead.

The Gbaji Park Murders (it turns out) had been going on for some time and bodies without heads and with lots of decay and injury kept being found at the crossroads in the park.

DRAK: It's a very subtle way of illuminating investigators. They go: There's a pattern to this...

Inside the Insula, there was an argument going on between Vishi and the Baker when the Janitrix called out to open up. The Baker seethed and went and to start his day.

MURTIN PILLINI THE BAKER: The young man has not been helpful!

JANITRIX: He's been Very Good.

VISHI: Good morning, sir. I'd like to fall over now, please.

JARATHIR We actually saw some action. Unlike some people.

Over a midafternoon breakfast, Eshan talked about hiring someone to find out what was going on:

VISHI: Excuse me sir, but there is a professional Informer doing business out of this building. Just thought I'd mention it.

KEANUS An informer? You mean a detective?

VISHI: I supposed that would be a good word for it. Detective is what the Lhankhor Mhy cult calls them. Up here in *civilized lands*⁹ they call them 'informers' because they inform the courts when people do wrong. For a reward.

Eshan had an appointment to go back to the Office For Detached Service. Before setting off he decided to see if the Informer could be of any assistance.

Unfortunately, Jarathir had been clearly told by the authorities not to discuss the events of the previous night and Keanus on the other hand had been so dazed that he could do nothing but mutter "So beautiful" when asked to describe what happened.

⁹ It was very hard to tell what he was being sarcastic about when he uses that phrase but definitely something

So he went to see the Janitrix and she sighed and said that she had better warn the informer about what was going on.

On the floor above Apartment V/2 had a plaque that said STRELLO and beneath 'Come In'.

Once inside there was a room with a potted plant and some furniture and a sign that said 'Wait' but the Janitrix mercilessly went and pounded on the bedroom door and got the tenant out of bed.

An unshaven person, who looked like he hadn't slept in a week and smelled like he had drunk himself to sleep appeared.

STRELLO: Never heard of anything like that but it's probably some sort of unique chaos thing. They like to be creative. If it called upon Arachnea then it's probably inhuman in origin.

ESHAN And Rashorana.

STRELLO: Well, I'm not illuminated. Not like him down the hall. I can't tell you what the theological implications of that are... I think it's time to go and have a word with the bar-keeper.

The bar-keeper was the person who originally got the subletting of the apartment set up. The Janitrix's stare and the informer's talents proved that the barkeeper was zapped by whatever had hit Keanu. "He kept burbling about how beautiful she was."

He then he pointed out to the Janitrix that she saw several different persons and though it was her duty to report that sort of jiggery-pokery to the Senator she didn't do so.

JANITRIX: Oh.

STRELLO: It has several Chaos gifts quite apart from the ability to rip people's heads off and take over the remains. Question is: do you

want me to bring this to the attention of the authorities? Because once they know it's been going through this building, nobody is going to be safe from being investigated right up the wazzoo. Including you, including me. If we point out to them where it's been staying... Do we keep this quiet?

JANITRIX: Nobody would know... Each of them looked harmless.

She resolved to ask the Senator

STRELLO: Not all the people in this building are fully law abiding citizens. But none of them are insane murderers or conspirators against the Empire. That I've noticed.

DISTRACTIONS: How early you have to get up to bake croissants for breakfast.

The Mechanical Tiger of Tipu Sultan: a clockwork toy which growled and ate a model British soldier¹⁰. *GM: I mention this to impress you with my great worldly knowledge that you probably already knew.*// There was discussion about whether someone as dedicated to Death as Vostor could indulge in the pleasures of the flesh. (In this case drinking.)

GRAHAM: Look, I'm killing off brain cells here!

IGGY'S THEME: A FEW OF MY FAVOURITE THINGS

What are your favorite RPGs to play, run, or just read?

Based on the amount of them I get to play then GURPS and RQ are my favourites of all time. (With a third blip for other d100/BRP games.)

I tend to read through RPG rules I've collected from the BUNDLE OF HOLDNIG before going to bed. I often read them until the enthusiasm fades. I don't get to play many of those.

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tipu%27s_Tiger

I like Greg Stolze's writing despite the amount of his own voice he inserts into the games. I even collect and re-read TERMINATION SHOCK which I very much doubt I will ever get to run again with my main groups. ("We get to roll three different sizes of dice in three different colours and it's not the same size/colour combination for all players? Sheesh!")

I have a lot of ARS MAGICA. Maybe when they deliver the new edition I'll get to run it again.

I have a lot of games that I read for the setting and despair of the system. I think EXALTED is at the top of that list.

Games that are a pleasure to run... hmmm. A lot of the new games I buy are fun for the first couple of times when they are fresh and go flat when I realise they are limited in ways I don't like.

I think I have a set of generic GMing skills which I apply to all my games. This sometimes leads to my players complaining I'm suppressing the real spirit of the game.

COMMENTARIAT ON E&A 3

ROGER B_W: Welcome, welcome! One of us! (Gobble, gobble!) // I think we need a cabal name. The West of London And Environs Mob, maybe // Is 'rotefant' ruder than Extruded Fantasy Product which is what I heard it called back in the last century? I briefly fell into reading LitRPG which I think could make something interesting about finding yourself in a world run by something like a computer game engine but seems mostly to be about explaining the protagonist's motivations and importing vast screenshots. // **RYCT Me:** I was indeed thinking of the Gay Uncle hypothesis when I wrote that. //

JOHN REDDEN: // **RYCT Me:** Yeah, I am starting a lot of political rants and then refraining from posting them just now.

GABRIEL ROARK: RYCT RILEY: I too feel that dividing up DnD hit points into Physical and Luck would work best. You only get physically hurt when your Luck runs out. Perhaps the Physical grows with a small bonus based on CON at each level and Luck grows with the dice roll. Perhaps there should be different refreshing spells for both? Different rest periods for both.

Re Me About Roger: I was told later that the thing the group I was in did faster than the others was not figuring out what sort of being the alien was but deciding to exit the system and leave it alone. I'm going to take that as being complimented on my prudence.

CLARK TIMMINS: Four nicely flavourful Things!

AVRAM GRUMER: I am uncertain about QUESTWORLDS though I have used it for one offs. MOTHERSHIP I found ingenious but too depressing for a campaign. Deep Space, Eldritch Horrors *and* parasitical super-capitalism? *Sheesh*

MYLES COCORAN: Ah, your poor neck! I too like PROJECT L and have recently acquired SQUARE ONE which is a slightly simpler game in the same vein. Re GRAHAM: While some of his behaviour is personal style, the forgetfulness is I think genuine British incompetence.

PATRICK RILEY: : RYCT Me: It's partly a self insert and partly a Doc Cross insert. Between the two of us we should be able to meet and Old Coot quota!

HEATH ROW: Does Elon Musk know he's the villain in an RPG?

BRIAN C MISIASZEK: RYCT Me: I must make a note to include the Purple Elephant aspect of Uncle some time soon.

IS THAT SIXTEEN PAGES ALREADY? HAVE A RAEBC THE REST OF YOU. NO HAVE A RAINCHECK: I'LL TRY TO CATCH UP AND COMMENT NEXT TIME.

OVERLORD'S ANNALS

ATTRONARCH, THE EXALTED OVERLORD OF UNCONTESTED VASTLANDS

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IN THIS ISSUE

OVERLORD'S ANNALS is a monthly zine in which I share session reports from games I either run or have participated in.

Sometimes I also share our house rules and other reflections too. Art is primarily from players—see attributions for details.

In this issue I present three session reports from the *Conquering the Barbarian Altanis* Dungeons & Dragons campaign.

Adventurers explore Midway and its environs—and adventures just keep finding them!

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS CAMPAIGN

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

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

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

ATTRIBUTIONS

Text copyright © Attronarch, 2025. *Library Delving* and *Big Hug* illustrations by IdleDoodler. *Tunnel Delving* and *Stone Slab* illustrations by kickmaniac. Scrolls by Attronarch. Typeset in L^AT_EX with Charter, a print-friendly typeface.

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 85

Adventurers

Hagar the Hewer, dwarf level 2. Imagine Conan as dwarf.

Ambros, cleric level 2. Follower of Aniu, Lord of Time.

Bob the Dwarf, dwarf level 1. Midget with big beard in search of an adventure.

Vyrkainen, elf level 1. Has stunning long, flowing black hair which attracts many fair maidens who exploit his generosity and leave him destitute.

Dewsnap 2nd, Airday

"Kyle manor? Yes, just follow the north-west trail. You can't miss it!"

The guidance was true, and the adventurers had reached a three-story estate surrounded by acres of farmland, hunting grounds, and an orange groove after a brief walk.

"We are here to offer our help to esteemed Lord Kyle!"

Vyrkainen, the newest recruit quickly demonstrated his worth by applying his famous (notorious?) silver tongue. The elf showed up in Midway looking employment for he was left coinless after his latest fling in a thorp nearby. Hagar the Generous spent a good amount on getting the elf better armed, armoured, and equipped.

"Welcome to my humble abode!" a man in his early twenties greeted the party. "Please, join me for supper. I'd like to learn more about your accomplishments and adventures. Hold back no detail, my good friends!"

Kyle family is the most affluent one in the fifteen mile radius. Young lord recently took over after his father passed away. His politeness and openness was in stark contrast to treatment given by Hara's most powerful families.

"I had my face bitten off and I survived." Bob boasted.

"Uh, ignore my friend over here..." Hagar interjected, and shared his exploits of breaking the spy ring in Hara, surviving many expeditions to various dungeons, and more. His humbleness and insistence to give credit where credit is due made lord Kyle cheer and rain compliments upon the dwarf.

In turn, Vyrkainen made sure to praise and encourage the young lord at every opportunity. As the wine was flowing so was the conversation.

"Friends, I've recently discovered my family owns the Cedarwade keep. Yes! The fort that held back barbarian hordes in olden days! That one!"

"Alas, woe is me! I have sent my men to inspect it and they were shocked to find it inhabited by disgusting hobgoblins. They wouldn't return no matter how much I offered them!"

"Friends, is that something you could take care of? I'd be immensely grateful for that!"

"Dear Lord, of course!" Vyrkainen chirped "Now, if only I had some sort of ranged weapon for this dangerous mission... A bow perhaps..." he continued.

"Master Elf, worry not!" Kyle boasted, nearly falling off the chair "You shall have my finest hunting bow! And one—nay!, two full quivers!"

"Your generosity knows no bounds, my Lord!"

Young man was quite inebriated by this point, unlike the dwarves who kept guzzling whatever alcohol was made available to them. Unfortunately, that also meant that they weren't able to learn more about the keep.

"Friends, I must excuse myself. I had too much drink, too much excitement. You have greatly regaled me with your tales. Please, stay the night. If you so desire, tomorrow you can look through the archives and see if you can find anything of interest about the keep."

Indeed, adventurers accepted the Lord's offer, slept well, and spent the next day rummaging through old parchments. They found out that the keep is at least a hundred years old, has rectangular shape with four towers on each corner and gatehouse facing south, and is designed to be efficiently manned by 24 persons. There should be a well connected to underground stream, as well as a small underground dungeon. It was not clear if the latter had been built or just planned.

Dewsnap 4th–7th

Following the trail upstream river Cedarwade led the party to the Lord Kyle's keep. It was just like on the plans: a square-shaped fort with four towers and a gatehouse. What wasn't on the plans is that it is situated in a clearing approximately 300 yards wide.

The party kept a low profile and circled the keep sticking to the treeline. Thus they found out that each tower is manned with two humanoid shapes holding long-shafted weapons, and that the gatehouse doors are missing. The opening was blocked by two wagons parked sideways.

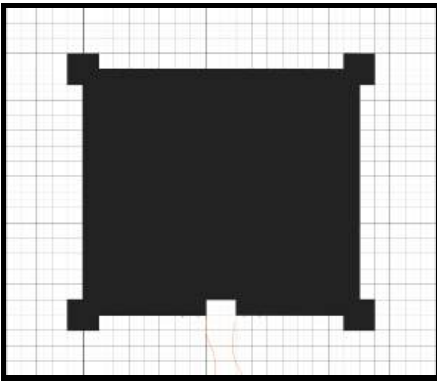
Adventurers found a safe spot to camp and keep an eye on the fort. They spent three days observing it. By doing so they learned that there is more activity during night than day, that sometimes smoke comes out of north and west side, and that tower guards operate in at least three shifts.

"Don't they go hunting? Or anything? How weird is this. . ."

During that time no one came out of the keep itself.

That is, until the third night, when two humanoids came out and stopped some fifty feet away from the gates. They prodded the ground ahead of them, covering area roughly 200 feet wide. And then they returned to the keep.

Feeling like they learned enough, the party headed back to Midway.



Dewsnap 7th, Waterday

"I don't trust Lord Kyle. What if he was misinformed? What if these are just some innocent blokes that moved in and are making an honest living?" Bob shared.

"Whatever the situation, they are obviously quite organised. They have watches, they have blocked the entrance, and from the last thing we've seen, they might have also set up traps."

Vyrkainen was the one to report the state of matters to Lord Kyle. Young man stroked his temples, frowning with great worry.

"Friends, these are not good news. How do we solve this? Can you take care of this?"

"Yes!" the party reassured him. "But we will need more resources to get it done."

"Whatever you need, I'll cover the expenses. You will stay at the Lonesome Drake Inn. For equipment go to Osgood, just tell her I will take care of the bill."

The party left Kyle estate and headed back to Midway. There were plans to be made.

"Hey, I want to visit this store. Maybe they have things that would help us see better." Bob pointed.

This store being "Tinker's Trinkets," run by Tinker the Gnome, a retired adventurer hailing from Ractuan. All he had to offer was overpriced junk and a promise to "show you the good things" but only if they pay the showing price first. Such generous offer was quickly shot down by the party.

"Could you get us a spyglass?"

"Of course! You pay now and I get it for you!"

"When?"

"Oh, who knows? Maybe tomorrow, maybe in a week, maybe in a year!"

"Bah, forget about it."

"Your dwarven friend here. . ." Tinker pointed to Hagar "Yes, the one with big muscles. . . Would you be willing to sell the spear?"

"No, thank you."

"Come on, I'll give you fifty gold coins and a magical ointment which makes you see further!"

"No, thank you."

Adventurers retreated to rest and wind down at the Lonesome Drake Inn. Alas, no rest to be had there, either!

Boris, the proprietor, asked if they could help him with a problem. After they nodded, he invited them to his room, to speak in private. Then he had to suffer a bunch of sexual innuendos, before sharing his issue.

"Uh, I heard you are working with Lord Kyle. My problem is, uh, smaller, but still. . . You see, I was renovating my cellar, and, uh, how to say this, I, hm, uh, I. . . I found a secret doors behind a heavy closet. They are thick, reinforced, had a padlock and bolted bar."

"Of course, we would be happy to help. But we must discuss compensation, our dear friend."

"Yes, yes, of course. Would fifty gold coins suffice?"

"To open the doors? Yes! But, if there happens to be a pile of unguarded treasure behind those doors, then we claim half of it!"

"What! This is my cellar! Thirty percent and no more!"

"Forty percent and we have a deal!"

"Fine!"

Bob yawned audibly.

"OK, we'll look into it the next thing tomorrow."

"Nooo, can't you look into it right now? Please? Come on. . . I haven't been able to sleep ever since I found the doors!"

"OK, OK, stop whining. We will do it right now."

"Great! Please follow me!"

The doors were just as Boris described them.

"Now, these look like something designed to keep something in!"

"What. . . why would you say that?! Oh my!" Boris went pale.

"Calm down, we will take care of it."

Hagar broke the padlock with a mighty swing. Next he spent nearly an hour bending and banging on the bolt. All the while Bob kept an ear to the nearby wall, trying to hear if anything makes a sound on the other side.

"Broken!"

Adventurers pulled the doors open... A whiff of stale, damp air came at them. A low, dug tunnel presented itself. Not a fifty feet in, and the tunnel broke into a natural cave tunnel perpendicular to it.

"Left or right?"

"Flip a coin."

"Left."

The party moved, followed by Boris carrying a lit torch.

"Wow."

"Whoa."

Boris gasped audibly, and went even paler than before.

They stood at the ledge overseeing a large cave; larger than their torchlight could reach. The floor was littered with bones, skulls, totems, and fetishes. Every ten feet or so was an upright spear with a skull on top and something hanging from it.

"This is perfectly normal, calm down Boris. We will investigate."

The party backtracked and explored the other direction.

This time they ran into a bunch of boulders blocking way forward. These were obviously brought here from somewhere else.

"I see something..."

Indeed, a top of the door frame could be seen behind the boulders.

"There is something carved above the doors..." Vyrkainen spotted.

"Great, you are good at languages. How about you go read it?"

"Who, me? Sure, why not."

The elf got on all fours and begun his climb. The dwarves followed.

"It's an orcish script... language too..."

"What does it say?"

"Turbish. That's an orc name."

Is this a tomb or a throne room?

Only one way to find out.

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 86

Adventurers

Hagar the Hewer, dwarf level 2. Imagine Conan as dwarf.

Ambros, cleric level 2. Follower of Aniu, Lord of Time.

Darius, cleric level 3. Follower of Dacron, God of Craftsmen.

Rorik, fighter level 2. A fighter.

Bairstowbury the Chaotic, halfling level 1. Remarkably muscular for a halfling.

Galepurse the Hapless, cleric level 1. Woefully unsuited for life of adventuring but desperately needs coin to grow his following.

Dewsnap 8th, Earthday

"Has anyone spoken with the innkeeper, Boris?" Bairstowbury inquired. Negative replies did not surprise him too much.

On the previous evening Hagar, Ambros, Bob, and Vyrkainen, broke open barricaded doors in the cellar of the Lonesome Drake in.

There they discovered a passageway blocked by boulders as well as a chamber littered with bones, fetishes, and broken spears.

To say that the innkeeper was distraught would be an understatement.

"Well, let's question him now, shall we?"

Little did they found out from the poor innkeeper. He had bought the Lonesome Drake two years ago, for a "great deal." Previous owner was quick to sell, and left Midway a week after the handover.

"All I remember" Brynna, the barmaid whom had worked for the previous owner, and who now works for Boris, grunted as she carried a cask of ale "is that old Thurman one day just decided to sell the inn. He came storming from the cellar and was as pale as a lily-white corpse! Never said a word about why he is selling. To be fair I never asked either."

Satisfied with finding out nothing, Hagar, Ambros, Darius, Rorik, Galepurse, and Bairstowbury descended into the cellar.

"Large cave or boulders?"

"Boulders."

Hagar the Dwarf acted as an overseer, while five other adventures heaved and puffed whilst clearing the path. Four hours or so later, and the doors spotted beyond the boulders were now easily accessible.

If only they'd open. Several members tried, all bouncing off. Then Hagar the Hewer stepped forth, rolled up his sleeves, and slammed the doors with all his might.

Not even a budge! Nor a shiver! As solid as if they were granite!

These doors confounded the adventurers for quite some time. How could plain wooden plank withstand such awesomeness? How?! They were checked and rechecked for traps, for mechanisms, for construction trick, for all kinds of trickery.

But no matter how hard they look, all they could find is nothing.

"Cut 'em down!"

One of the adventurers ran upstairs, and then to Osgood's general store, grabbed a large hatchet, and then ran back and handed it over to highly motivated Hagar.

The doors were reduced to splinters in matter of minutes.

Beyond them was a large chamber, some eighty by sixty feet, dominated by a large stone sarcophagus in the middle.

Its lid laid next to it, broken.

Scenes of pig-faced stickmen triumphing over other stickmen adorned its sides and lid.

A smashed skeleton rested inside.

No treasure, no weapons, no spoils of war befitting a burial place of such accomplished individual.

"What are these?"

"They look like... books?"

Indeed, neatly arranged towers of books were lined along the south wall spanning some eighty feet.

Easily several hundred books, all bound, lettered, and carefully placed.

"I can't read any of those!"

Several adventurers checked a dozen or so books, all in unfamiliar script and language.

Judging that those are of little interest, the party retreated upstairs to rest before returning next day.



Dewsnap 9th, Fireday

The party descended once again. This time they followed the north-east tunnel, leading to a ledge overhanging a large cavern littered with bones.

"Hammer in two rope ladders."

"Done!"

"Now let's descend two by two. Who goes first?"

Crunching bones echoed loudly under Hagar's heavy feet. They were indeed in a sizeable cave...

Spears with skulls on top of them were spaced every ten feet or so in every direction. Floor was completely covered with bones, skeletons, broken spears, arrows, shields, necklaces and fetishes of all kinds. Skulls were snout-faced, indicating that orcish heritage. Some of them had painted green eye on them.

No matter how softly adventurers tried to move, every step landed on something crunchy.

"Let's follow the cave wall to canvas the size of this cave..."

And so they did.

"AAGH—" Galepurse's scream was cut short as he was enveloped by a large musty cloak he stumbled into. Bairstowbury jumped back; Rorik turned to the cleric only to see him completely covered with black leathery matter. Hagar charged the living cloak, and hit it with all his might.



Galepurse cried in pain, for he too felt the might of Hagar's blow. He twitched and twisted and writhed whilst his friends tried to beat on the cloak.

And then he stopped.

The cloak unfurled itself, revealing its true nature. A large manta-like creature perched itself up, dropping grisly remains of Galepurse the Hapless to the ground.

The monster leaned backwards, paused for a brief moment, and then unleashed a high-pitched shrill hereto unheard by any of these unlucky souls. Cave amplified the horrific sound tenfold.

Darius failed his dignity check, and fled for his life. He sprinted over the skeletal remains of hundred orcs, climbed the rope ladders, ran to the cellar, up into the inn, straight to his room, and then under the bed. There he remained.

Rorik, Ambros, and Bairstowbury were paralysed with fear. Their bodies were as stiff and solid as when one is touched by ghoul.

Hagar was now the only thing standing between the beast and its feast.

The monster lunged at the dwarf—and missed!

The dwarf countered with a flurry of blows—all failing to penetrate the monster's thick skin!

Carnivorous cloak attacked once more—but was wrestled off by the dwarf!

Hagar skewered the beast straight through, making it ooze thick, purple ichor!

The monster moaned and flapped backwards and upwards, far out of Hagar's reach. Then it turned around and flown off into the darkness, southwards.

Hagar stood there, braced, ready for its return.

He waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Rorik, Ambros, and Bairstowbury slowly regained composure.

Some of them were perhaps slightly embarrassed by the whole encounter.

"There was a large shield leaning against the east wall that I spotted just before the whole incident... Shall we check it?"

Indeed, underneath the shield were poorly hidden sack of coins, a rusty iron scroll case, and three arrows wrapped in silk cloth.

"Wow!"

The sack clanked, containing four hundred thirty five gold pieces and a garnet ring.

Arrows felt special, but nothing much could've been gleamed from their look alone.

The scroll contained a parchment with note on one side, and scribble on the other.

The note said, in Common:

"Roland, please wait at the Drake. Matters to attend to in the north. PS: Sorry to use the map, but Myonga has a copy anyway."

The other side was a collection of squiggly lines going in various directions. Some crossed each other, some never touched. There were four circled areas on the map, each with a different note next to it:

- LP! 3 keys
- Orcs
- Lake
- Pillars? Good resting place

Survivors picked up the cleric's remains, and retreated back to the inn. There they found out that Darius had failed his dignity check more than once, for he has thoroughly soiled himself.

Good people they are, they shared gold coins as previously agreed with Boris.

✱

Having had a good, hearty lunch, the party went back down. Except Darius, whom had remained under the bed. Was it out of fear or shame, nobody knows.

Either way, Hagar took the lead once more. Adventurers moved with much more care this time, paying special attention to any random cloaks hanging anywhere.

In the timespan of eight torches, they circled the whole cave, and discovered three more tombs. Each tomb had two sarcophagi, broken open, and were devoid of any treasure.

A tunnel on the south side of the cave slopped down and led to sounds of running water. The party braced themselves and descended.

They travelled for hours, navigating the cave tunnel of varying width and height. They often had to avoid stalactites as well as stalagmites. From time to time they'd encounter moist walls and ceiling; porous cave walls were letting through water that was running above them; or so Hagar thought.

They went on and on and on, following the winding tunnel.

When the lamp went out, they refilled it and continued.

When the lamp went out second time, they felt tiredness set in.



"Should we camp here? Or go back?"

"It's not very pleasant, but yes, we could camp."

"What if Boris collapses the tunnel leading into the cellar? Remember that he was really anxious."

"Huh, that's is something to worry about!"

And with that the party turned around and hurried back.

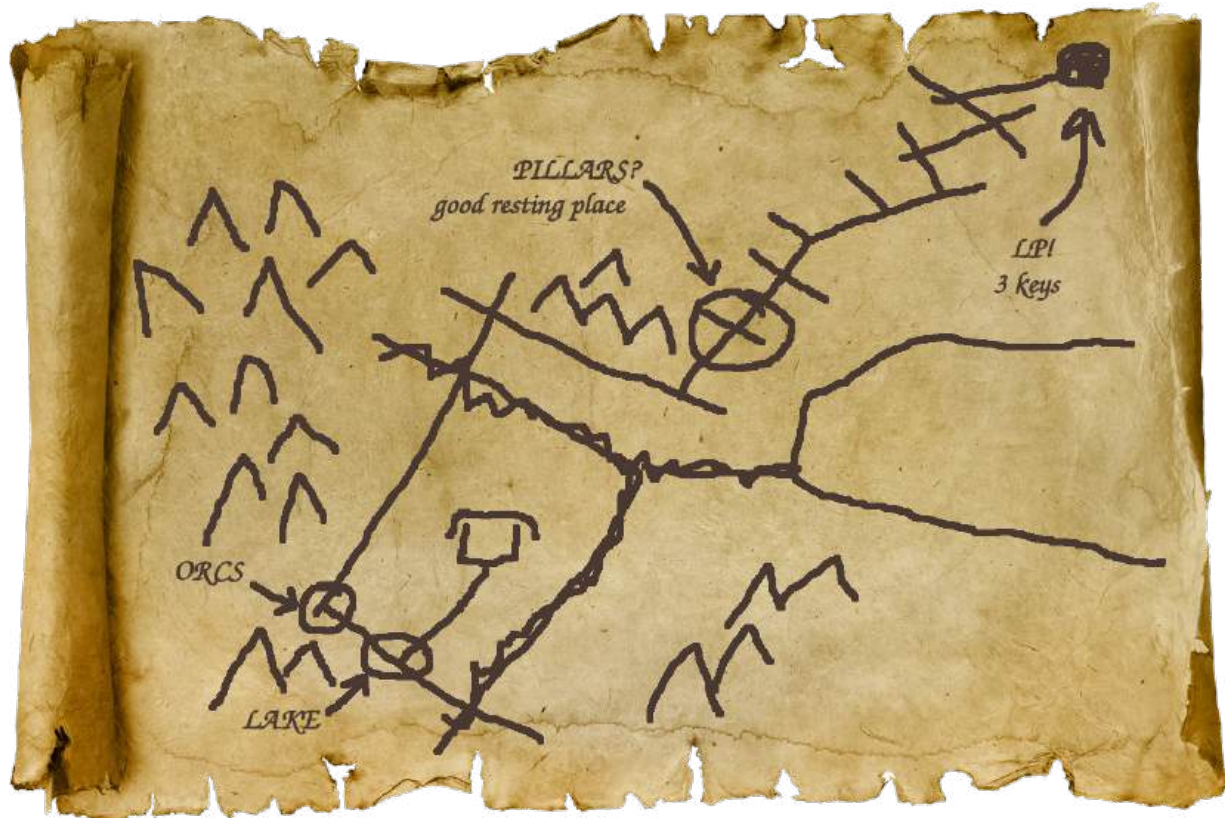
They arrived at the cellar on the morning of Dewsnap 10th, Spiritday.

"Where have you been?! Thank Anu and Mitra for your return for I was about to summon constable Wershaw to seal the cellar! Now that you are back and safe... Have you maybe found any other treasure?"

Will adventurers tell him the truth this time?

*Roland, please wait at the Drake.
Matters to attend to in the north.*

PS: Sorry to use the map, but Myonga has a copy anyway.



CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 87

Adventurers

Darius, cleric level 3. Follower of Dacron, God of Craftsmen.

Rorik, fighter level 2. A fighter.

Hagar the Hewer, dwarf level 2. Imagine Conan as dwarf.

Ambros, cleric level 2. Follower of Aniu, Lord of Time.

Heran Marod, cleric level 2. Bearded, aging man with shaved head. Follower of Umannah, the Sun God, The Radiant Death.

Bob the Dwarf, dwarf level 1. Midget with big beard in search of an adventure.

Dewsnap 15th, Spiritday

Adventurers have been resting at the Lonesome Drake inn for the past week—ever since they've overexerted themselves in endless tunnel underneath it. Darius regained his courage, and was now working on reclaiming some of the lost dignity as well.

Bob the Dwarf went back to Hara to procure delving supplies: a dozen or so oil flasks, and seven packages of iron rations. There he met Heran Marod, a Cleric of Umannah looking to purge some evil.

The party spent the day drinking and discussing their next step. As sun began to slowly set, all six dispersed throughout Midway with one simple goal: collect as much rumours and intelligence as possible.

Bob visited the wine shop owned and operated by Regis Baum. It was a two story affair with an attached tower. The proprietor was most polite, especially after receiving several compliments on the Midway Red from the dwarf.

Unlike Regis, his wife Winifred was much colder to Bob. In fact, even that would be an overstatement for how hard she ignored the dwarf. Bob couldn't help but notice how out of place Winifred was in her emerald green silk dress and stunning diamond pendant around her neck. Even the wives of Alyrian merchants in Hara show more modesty!

Rorik visited constable Wershaw, a hardy man beaten with an ugly stick. Constable was proud of the militia he had drilled, even though they were nothing but peasants with spears. He also shared his grievances with Haran forces.

"What do we pay the protection money for? There have been more and more sightings of barbarians just south of the river, caravans plundered left and right, and not to mention that dilapidated fort our Lord wanted us to 'take back' for him. No, I said! No! I will not allow fair men of Midway to die for some noblekids vainglory!"

Heran spent the evening studying parchment retrieved from the iron scroll case the party had found a week ago under the rotting shield in the cave beyond the cellar.

On one side was a scribbled message, which read "Roland, please wait at the Drake. Matters to attend to in the north. PS: Sorry to use the map, but Myonga has a copy anyway."

Does Drake refer to this Drake? Who are Roland and Myonga?

On the other side were drawing of squiggly lines going in various directions. Several intersected. There were four circled areas, each with a different note next to it:

- LP! 3 keys
- Orcs
- Lake
- Pillars? Good resting place

Hagar and Ambros strolled down the docks and warehouses. Most of the workers had already left, and those that were left were either drinking, tired, or both.

They hadn't learned anything new—everyone was complaining how the trade started drying up, especially since gnomes of Ractuan stopped sending raw goods as much as they used to.

"And why should they? Every third barge was raided! And I heard that the Red Queen didn't even want to speak to their envoy!"

Darius visited Culwert's Perfect Armory. Culwert slammed the doors in his face. "Come when the sun is up!" So he went to Odger's Excellent Arms, run by Culwert's brother.

Now Odger was much more chatty and welcoming than his brother. He lamented how his dwarven craftsmanship is not fully utilised in Midway, since he mostly makes simple weapons like spears and axes.

"You say you are an adventurer? Yes? Yes! Every adventurer must have a weapon befitting his status! A year or so ago I made a spectacular greatsword for a powerful warrior. It was majestic! Per the owner's request, I also inserted two shiny pearls in the pommel. He wanted his foes to see their dying throes! A bit cruel maybe, but hey... Who am I to judge?"

With a little bit of prodding, Odger divulged that this warrior was named Myonga, and that he was one of the leaders of an adventuring party that spent few weeks in Midway approximately two years ago.

Dewsnap 16th, Airday

Following intense discussions, the party has decided to fetch few more books from the tomb. Then they collapsed the tunnel leading into the cellar. Hagar and Bob managed the whole operation with great success and no injuries. Boris was immensely grateful and he threw a big feast, inviting many locals to the Lonesome Drake.

"Excuse me Ser, but is it true you are an adventurer?"

A rotund man covered in sweat approached Darius moments after the midnight. His belt buckle looked as if it was about to give in any moment now. Sweat stains covered the man's chest, armpits, forearms, and thighs.

He held a coarse sweat rag in his left palm, yellow from use. Much to Darius's dismay, the man also had poor understanding of personal space, and was withing kissing distance of the cleric.

"Where I come from it is customary people introduce themselves to each other."

"Apologies, ser, I meant no disrespect! I am Dubalan the Goatherder!"

He wiped between each sentence. Darius subtly signalled to other adventurers to gather. They soon surrounded the oblivious goatherder.

"I heard gumptious folk like you go to dangerous places and recover many, many riches from them! I am much too cowardly for such things, but you might be interested in something I discovered on one of my treks!"

"Brother, you should've prayed for Detect Evil." one of the adventurers whispered into Darius's ear.

Dubalan offered the party to take them to a sinkhole he had discovered at the foot of Ghinarian hills, not even a day away from Midway. He recognised some of the symbols as those from the long gone Empire of Kelnore.

Rorik casually walked to the constable Wershaw to inquire about the character of this goatherder.

"Dubalan? Yes, he is a fine man. Sometimes a bit too funny and naive for his own good. Why?"

Evading his question, Rorik returned and informed the party that the man checks out.

"So, what do we get for our hundred gold coins?"

"I'll take you—personally!—to the sinkhole!" Dubalan exclaimed, sweating profusely "and I'll wait for you to come out! And then I'll take you back to Midway! Heck, I'll tuck you in and feed you some milk if you want!" he wiped his forehead and neck.

"Wow, this guy has some mommy issues..." somebody whispered.

"We have a deal Dubalan."

"Grand!"

Goatherder extended his arm, with palm as wet as if he had just put it in a bucket of grease.

Darius reluctantly shook his hand.

"Greet us in front of the inn in the morning."

"Yes, Ser!"

Dewsnap 17th, Waterday

"Mind your step! It's difficult to spot due to all the bushes and overgrowth, but it is just ahead. It is a deep fall, so tread carefully."

As promised, Dubalan led the party to the sinkhole. It was a vertical chute, some thirty by fifty feet, approximately hundred feet deep. A decrepit spiral stairway made of stone slabs protruding out of the stone walls descended downwards.

Dwarves improvised an anchor from twelve iron spikes, tied two ropes together, and then descended one by one.

Adventurers took great care and no risks. Two hours later, and all of them stood at the foot of this hole.

Ahead of them was a framed stone slab. Above it were symbols that indeed matched those of Kelnore Empire. Letters were difficult to read and understand. Great many Wilderlands languages descended from Kelnorian, and even though one could argue that it was in essence Auld Common, it was still too difficult to decipher at glance.

There was a mention of king or some sort of royalty though.

"Ooooooof!"

Hagar and Bob heaved as they failed to push the slab forward.

"I'll give you a hand!" Rorik jumped in.

What a useless hand that was.

"Step aside!" Heran stepped in.

"Huh, I guess I am getting too old!"

Another useless hand.

"Push! PUSH!"

Finally!

Progress!

The party pushed the stone slab ten feet forward, before running out of steam.

Heran's torch illuminated a chamber made of hewn stone. Metal squeaked as two skeletons dressed in chain-shirts moved towards the party.

All three clerics summoned the power of their deity, forcing the undead to flee. Hagar cut one to pieces, while Ambros smashed the other.

Sealed doorway blocked their way forward.



As the party argued how to resolve this, Hagar took out his warhammer and smashed right through it. The opening was clear, but the hammer was for garbage.

Adventurers took the stairs down, entering a large, sixty by sixty chamber dominated by a fireplace and eight stone sarcophagi. Purple fire burning in the fireplace illuminated nearly half the chamber. Various symbols and motifs were on the stone coffers, all quite regal in nature.

Naturally, the party opted to open the closest sarcophagus. Inside was a skeleton clad in ornamental plate

mail, with a shield on top and a long sword to its side.

It did not rise to attack. So adventures relieved it of all its possessions.

The same was repeated with the sarcophagus opposite of this one.

The lids were quite heavy, so it took either four average men, or two above average men. In other words, Hagar was taking of one side all by himself, while Rorik and Bob had to combine forces on the other.

And then Hagar heard the sound of stone scrapping on stone.

And then he smelt burning flesh.

IN NEXT ISSUE

A crypt, a barrow, a temple, and exedra.

Twisting the Rope #4

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The beautiful warm weather, right before the end of everything forever

The school/college term has started and both my kids are back to third-level education, with the associated uptick in transportation from the dad-taxi or mum-taxi.

The university where I work is full to the brim again with students. After the quiet of summer it's invigorating to see the students back on campus, milling about as they look for lecture halls, all dolled up as they think college students dress ready to go clubbing at the drop of a hat.

IgTheme: What is your playing style or what do you look for in an RPG session?

As a GM my playing style is relaxed. There's a lot of winging it. I try to listen to the players and reincorporate their ideas. As a player I try to pick up on the GM's hooks and pass the spotlight around whenever I can. In either case, roleplaying is primarily a socializing activity, and well leavened with humour.

In my youth I had a far higher tolerance for mechanical complexity, but now I want games I can play with low mechanical handling times that answer the questions 'what happens next' and 'do I succeed' with enough meat to be more than a coin flip but then get out of the way to let the players engage with the setting and characters.

I'm looking for player engagement in a session. If I have to lead the PCs around from encounter to encounter I quickly grow bored so I want to create NPCs and events that encourage the players to ask questions and to want to know more about what's going on.

Mutterings

I don't have any game reviews this month, but have played a few favourites with the University games club that I enjoyed coming back to. *Century: Spice Road* got to the table with its remodelled version as *Century: Golem Edition*, and I enjoyed the tactile quality of the shiny gems that serve as resources in the game. *Scout*, the clever trick builder from Oink Games, saw some play and we had, of course, the usual swearing and (enjoyable) frustration of several games of *6 Nimmt!* as well.

A Mausritter Campaign

This is the continuing write-up of the Mausritter campaign¹ I am running for my gaming group since 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 and their players are:

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

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

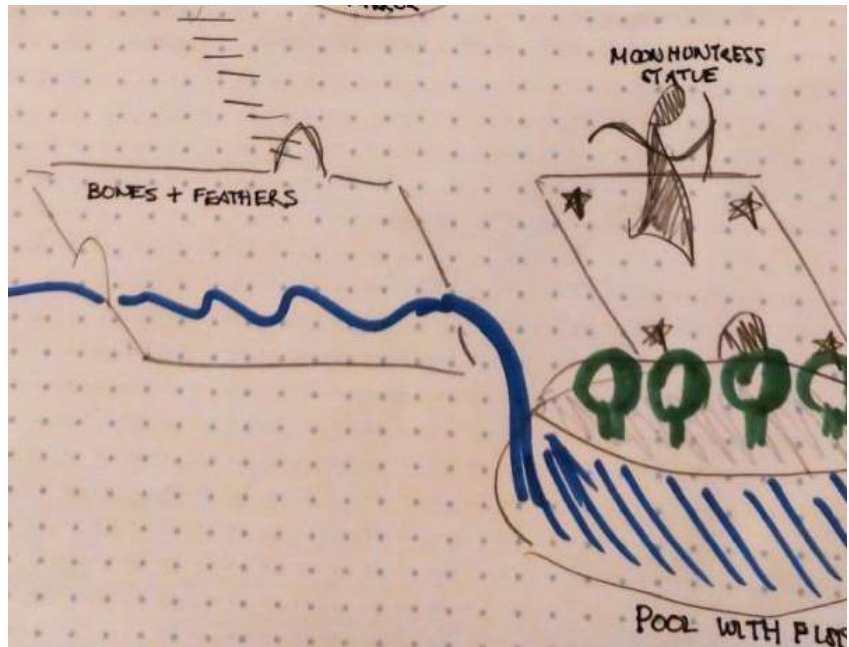
Gwedolene, an ale-brewer, sometimes accompanied by Vicent, a drunken porter-mouse, played by Kate.

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

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

The sudden appearance of Winter Ash terrified the player-mice briefly but they gathered their wits and responded to the intimidating faery. Gwen stammered an introduction and offered the comb and beer she had brought from Oak Home. These were graciously received and the frosty air around the pool thawed slightly. Ever practical, CanCan asked Winter Ash if she needed help with her mushroom problem, with a nod of thanks to Simon Frog for that information. This offer seemed more to the witch's liking and she deputized Simon Frog to take the mice to examine the mushrooms and assess what they might be able to do.

Behind Boulderface, there was a well concealed entrance to a large chamber. A rivulet from the pond meandered across the dirt floor of the space to disappear into a small sinkhole in the far wall. Stairs led up and away from the chamber on the left hand side. The floor was strewn with bones of woodland creatures, feathers. The unmistakable scent of owl lingered in the place, the bird of prey long absent but the scent still worrisome.



¹ <https://mausritter.com>

“Down that sink hole there is a pool, flanked on one side by large mushrooms. Their spores fill the pool room with an unpleasant choking haze,” Simon said, “but it doesn’t seem to bother Wax and Wane.”

The player mice were instantly curious. “Who or what are Wax and Wane?” they asked. Simon then told them of the two large carp fish living in the pool of the moon. One white as the moon herself, the other black as the night the moon nestles in. “Nasty oracular fish they are, always predicting gloom or worse,” he added.

With CanCan’s help, Odette was lowered into the sinkhole to look about. The air immediately filled her lungs with a smoky choking sensation but she was able to confirm Simon’s description of the pool and the looming mushrooms like sentinels on the pool shore.

Now the mice got to work. Ambrose and Sky fashioned climbing gear from a fishhook and rope, while Gwen soaked a cloth in beer to act as a filtering mask. Ambrose, ever the bravest or more foolhardy, donned the mask and his wireworker’s goggles, and gave the signal for the others to lower him slowly down the slippery rockface where the rivulet played and splashed.

Safely down they lowered a lit torch to illuminate the chamber of the pool. Two large fish surfaced near Ambrose and regarded him curiously. One white as the moon, the other black as the night, as Simon had described, but up close Ambrose saw each bore a dot of the other’s colour on the heads just between their eyes.

Gwen retrieved the climbing rope from Ambrose, and with her own mask carefully affixed, descended to the pool chamber to stand beside Ambrose. Together they spoke to the fish. Wax and Wane, the fish, were delighted to have new conversation partners. “We exhausted everything we could possibly say to one another decades ago!” In the course of the conversation, which wandered from topic to topic, the mice were able to ascertain the following: The mushrooms were deliberately placed to protect the Temple of the Moon from intruders by the old moon priestess, since usurped by Winter Ash. The temple itself lay behind the mushrooms past a sealed door made of oystershell. The presence of the fish was an unhappy accident, trapped in the pool after foolishly following the rivulet many, many years ago². The fish were originally an orange-y sort of colour, but the pool’s magic had transformed them in colour and size in the years since. Winter Ash was, in Wax and Wane’s opinion, a “bad sort”, and not someone they’d let anywhere near the temple if they had a say in the matter: “She has magic enough of her own without stealing the power of the moon to her machinations too.”

Gwen paused to wash her mask in the pool. The water seemed to refresh her and cleared the maddening itch in her eyes from the spores.

Odette, above listening to the conversation, called down. “We need to see that temple, methinks!” With another beery mask, she joined the two mice already in the moon pool room. The three mice then examined the door behind the mushrooms that Wax and Wane said led to the temple proper. After some

² Wax blamed Wane for this. Wane blamed Wax, and neither would admit an error.

fruitless efforts to budge the door, CanCan was summoned. “We’re going to run out of beer at this rate,” Gwen quipped, as CanCan made sure to have a double layer of well-soaked cloth wrapped around her muzzle. “I’ve met bad air down the tin mines. It’s not for me,” CanCan said, before setting to work with her miner’s pick. She prised a gap in the oystershell door and with two other mice, heaved the portal wide.

Inside a wondrous sight awaited. They saw a room with a vaulted ceiling, inlaid with silver traces depicting the night with glittering gems as stars. The floor of the temple was equally rich, with intricate lines of silver and onyx surrounding disks of hammered silver portraying the phases of the moon. In the centre of the room stood an onyx statue of a huntress, bearing an odd combination of human and owl features. All the mice present felt a tingling of magic, quiescent but powerful, waiting.

Comments on E&A 003

General comments: Misspellings of my name abound. I saw a Mules Corcoran, a Myles Cocoran, and a Miles over the last couple of issues. Without wanting to be precious about it, I’ve moved the name and contact details to the start of the ‘zine.

No *Mausritter* writeup this month unfortunately. I’m pressed for time.

Roger BW: Lovely to see you in these pages. I’ve listened to IRTWD on and off for years and I enjoy your media reviews on your website.

Re reactionless thrusters as terror weapons: A step up from the Kzinti lesson with fusion torches, eh? I liked *2300AD*’s stutterwarp drive as a mechanic for world (or universe) building, giving humanity access to the stars but not magically doing away with all the Newtonian stuff at close ranges.

I haven’t read the Bayern campaign and I’d be curious to know how it handles exploration and scientific endeavours. Some of my favourite SF is in the vein of discovery and exploration but it’s not something mechanically supported well in many RPGs. Joshua Newman’s *Shock: Human Contact* is some of the rarity, for example.

Typst looks fascinating and takes me back to the LaTeX days of my doctorate.

Pedro Panhoca da Silva & Camila Lourenço Panhoca: Re *Os 33 porquinhos*: The three strips method reminds me of children’s books with different animals or different uniforms being combined in peculiar ways. I’m sure that mechanic has been used in some animal evolution boardgame or similar.

John Redden: Re *Mouse Guard*: I have a copy of *Mouse Guard* I’ve never got to the table. From my reading it feels a bit more serious in tone, but that likely wouldn’t last with my silliness and my group’s comedic tendencies. The map element seems common to both, and meshes well with small protagonists in a big world, adventuring out to explore and discover their surroundings.

Re *Ticket to Ride: San Francisco*: TTR is a game series that runs and runs. I haven’t tried TTR:SF but I have played the Paris version, optimized for 3 players as well as most of the other variants online.

Attronarch: Do any of the players in your “Conquering the Barbarian Altanis Campaign” mis-name it Barbarian Atlantis? I’ve stumbled over it every time I read it.

RYCT me: Twenty-six players is an impressive number. Do you ever have too many players turn up for a session?

Gabriel Roark: I take your point on names in play reports. My group has never expressed a preference, but I’d anonymize the players’ names if asked.

I’m glad your group really enjoys the dungeon-stripping mentality and I can see how it could be fun but it doesn’t really appeal to my game group. It takes all sorts, eh?

Michael Cule: Re the Bayern campaign realization: It’s usually with a resigned sigh that the GM acknowledges a player who twigs a core secret or conceits early in a campaign. It’s balanced by the more common outcome of multiple sessions before the players realise something that the GM thinks is perfectly obvious and has been hinting broadly at between pulling out what little remains of their hair.

Re the IgTheme: I agree with reserving the right as GM to complicate things to keep things rolling. I don’t like to overprepare, and happily follow along if the players make their own plot and complications, but if the session lags I will throw in complication to liven things up. I’m guilty of transgressing the rule of conservation of NPCs though, so am plagued with off-the-cuff NPCs I later have to reincorporate when a

RYCT me re *Traveller’s* Aslan and Vargr: The Vargr as transplanted from Earth like Humanti gives them a (semi-)pass in my book, but the Aslan long struck me as the weakest Major race conceptually. The K’kree and the Hivers feel more convincingly alien to me. I wonder if the male/female Aslan split came from C.J. Cherryh’s Chanur novels. Marc Miller’s Aslan might pre-date *Pride of Chanur* (1981) but the *Traveller Alien Module 1: Aslan* book was later, published in 1984.

Clark Timmins: Nice work with the four ‘Things’ from the pulps. The four would all fit well into a *Call of Cthulhu* game. The ‘Strangling Thing’ reads more like a M. R. James creature, perhaps. Had you previously read the stories you drew the creatures from or did you stumble across them as you browsed archive.org?

George Phillies: RAEBNC

Dylan Capel: Re *Questworlds*: I played a fair bit of *Hero Wars* and *HeroQuest* or variants thereof many years ago. I’m curious how *Questworlds* differs from those older sibling games. I do think that all versions of the game benefitted from a one- or two-page simple summary of the rules.

Avram Grumer: Good to see you in these pages. I miss *Making Light*. Your choices of typeface and layout are pleasantly nostalgic.

I looked up *Tiān Dēng* on Sean Nitter’s blog and the Evil Hat site. It looks like a fun game. I hope it sees publication soon. I ran a campaign from 2019 to 2022 of *Offworlders*, another space freighter crew PbtA game, with a similar vibe. Is there anything that stands out in *Tiān Dēng* that grabbed you as particularly appropriate or support of the Cowboy Bebop or Firefly style of game?

Nice work on re-using your character Harmony Qián in the Scum and Villainy game. It's good not to waste a promising character concept. How does Scum and Villainy handle the downtime phase from *Blades in the Dark* beyond ramping up the opposition for the next session? Are there long-term goals for the PCs to pursue?

Re a BRP character sheet as a list of stuff your PC is bad at: I agree. It's a problem with many skill-based game systems, and sometimes fudged with advice not to roll except for moments of peril etc., which feels like a cop-out to me.

Pum: Re AI art and AI more generally: I agree with you and see most of the current LLM-AI expansion as pure greed and a power grab from the already exorbitantly wealthy. The huge electricity and water requirements are equally upsetting. In Ireland, it's estimated now that about 25% of the electricity generated in the country is consumed by data centres, while the rest of us pay one of the highest rates per kWh in Europe. Fucking madness.

RYCT Heath Row re solo RPGs: I've enjoyed some solo roleplaying, but find keeping up momentum is a problem for anything beyond a vignette style game.

Mitch Hyde: I'm glad you liked the map. I love that your chosen font for your comments is a tribute to the old AD&D typeface and layout.

Patrick Riley: Re IgTheme: I appreciated that you drew a distinction between "what my character would do" and being constructive to the game experience. A few times I've encountered players who hide their selfishness behind "it's what my character would do" and it's distinctly unappealing.

Re Anan carrying three or four polearms: That's really one of the golfbag of weapons as was a popular dig at *Runequest* back in the day.

Re the yellow ladies: I love the image of crumpling up paper minis as the foes are defeated.

Re the GM's screen photo: That's a massive GM's screen. Is there much on it that gets referenced in a session or is it more for hiding copious GM's notes from prying eyes?

RYCT Patrick Zoch about sharing maps with players: In our current *Mausritter* game I freely share the map with the players and keep a separate note of things not appearing on the map to surprise the player mice as they encounter them in play.

Brian Rogers: I'm delighted to hear you and your family have taken to *Ticket to Ride*. There are several versions of the game, with various twists, and some are specifically designed for 2-3 players. Our gaming club has made good use of boardgamearena.com, a website that allows people to play hundreds of games online with some excellent adaptations of all sorts of boardgames. The university club meets every second Tuesday night on the site and plays a bunch of different games of varying complexities. You can search with filters like casual, 2-player, and get a list of games that might appeal to you and your wife.

Dyson's *Megadelve* is a great resource to kick off a dungeon crawling adventure with whatever your preferred ruleset might be. I love the sound of the various

gods you and your players created. A pantheon built with a mix of random rolls and player input is usually more catchy than the GM's ideas alone. There is real beauty in a player grabbing an idea and running with it at the table. I remember Peter in my group really getting into the Cleric role in the *Dungeon World* game we played back in 2013. His enthusiasm for the gods and the essentially random pantheon we created drove a lot of the latter part of the campaign.

Re 711: I assume that amphetamine was readily available to make up for the missing hours of sleep 711 lost by being out of the prison all night when he should have been sleeping. It's not a stretch to think that most of the pulp detectives in the Shadow or Batman vein were tripping on painkillers, uppers and whatever else got them through the repeated beatings, late night stakeouts and assorted psychological traumas from their vigilante lifestyles.

RYCT Mark Nemeth re varied art styles: One of the problems I have with WotC D&D 5e art is that it clearly formed the training set for a lot of the image generating AI output and all feels samey: supersaturated colours with over the top combat scenes. I'm bored by it.

I do like the occasional book with a single artist or a small handful of artists with a consistent style that serves the setting. A lot of the new *RuneQuest* art in the *Cults of Runequest* series works for me on that basis.

Patrick Zoch: Re personality tests in leadership courses: I've met that too, and a work colleague reports from a recent course that such tests still raise their warty heads today. I accept that some people may benefit from the self-reflection that follows from the testing and may actually improve as leaders, but agree with you that for the most part such tests are weak predictors of personality, and knowing a personality type doesn't alter one's responsibility to engage with co-workers fairly and with consideration of their skills beyond a short-hand personality summary.

That said, personality traits have plenty of applications in the roleplaying arena. I enjoyed *Pendragon's* personality traits and passions, and even something simple like the four classical elements in *Everway* gives a useful thumbnail of an NPC to kickstart a characterization.

Heath Row: Best wishes for settling into a pleasant way of life in Portugal. I'm not confident I would fare well learning a new language in my 50s, but it sounds like you relish the challenge. I hope that Portugal and Ireland, both traditionally countries on the periphery of Europe, hold onto an inclusive, democratic ethos even as the light dims in other nations.

Mark Nemeth: Re the rule capping extra dice on *sorcerous blast*: I get the feeling that some rules are thrown in just because the designer felt some restriction was needed, without looking at the actual likely use of the spell in game. If you're using exploding dice, lean into it and allow the occasional blow-the-top-off roll. It's far more memorable.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek: A beautiful photo of the moon, if also a sad one due to the pollution that made it possible.

You “accidentally” bought two hats? Sounds like my accidental consumption of apple pie for breakfast.

The real-life horrors of Mazorra eclipse so much of the cosmic horror in the Cthulhu fiction. I would find it hard to use the setting in a game. It’s too depressing. Good work on the research and the NPCs though.

Re contemporary anti-fascist mass media: I despair of the state of mass media newspapers and other news outlets. So intricately bound to billionaires and their twisted agendas, once trusted news organs so often parrot some tech-bro or extreme right wing line. This is not the 21st Century I was promised as a boy.

Jim Eckman: Re the IgTheme and playing Thrud the Barbarian: I don’t often play ‘dumb’ characters, but for the less bright NPCs I portray as GM I like play them as jumping on whatever idea comes to mind first, or agreeing with whoever makes a suggestion to them first. Not much thinking through consequences that way.

I’ll stick my oar in with SF game system recommendations too. Our group enjoyed the Fate-based *Diaspora* hard SF game, a starship heist with the *Star Wars D6* system from West End Games, and *Offworlders*, a PbtA-derived *Traveller* homage with strong “Firefly” roots. In school/college I played the FASA *Star Trek*, *Paranoia*, *Ringworld*, and a lost space prison/colony using the *Over the Edge* rules. Of the games I’ve read but not played I liked the SF world and universe building of *Eclipse Phase*, *Sufficiently Advanced* and Sarah Newton’s *Mindjammer*.

Lisa Padol: RYCT to Brian Rogers: I love the idea of *Eyes of the Stone Thief* as the Moby Dick of dungeons. There’s always so many things to try and so little time!

Re the kitties and the weather: They often lead me to the back door, take a look at the weather and reject it, then lead me to the front door to see if the weather’s any better out there. One day it’s going to be and they will be surprised but until then they’re just disappointed with the level of service the two-leggers provide.

RYCT Patrick Riley on *Over the Edge*’s HP recovery vs. the *D&D* short/long rest: Tweet’s mechanic is so much simpler and easy to use. There’s the added complexity in *D&D* of spell slots but I’d take the simplicity of HP recovery (and the extra Clerical spell slots from heal spells no longer needed) over the juggling of short and long rests any day (or equivalent 24 hour period /s).

RYCT me: The man in a frog’s body was under a faerie curse. Don’t spy on fae witches at their bath. It’s a lesson for all of us.

Re personal names in write-ups: I’ve been with the same group for over 20 years now so I forgot that other people have different experiences and needs in putting together their write-ups. No one is better than the other, just different. I’d certainly leave out anyone who wanted to be anonymous.

Joshua Kronengold: A belated Happy Birthday, and I hope you’re well recovered from Worldcon.

I’ve moved my name to the sub header under the title. I hope that’s less confusing.

The Flip 3 card in *Flip 7* is a proper gamble if you play it on yourself. Some people like it, some will never play it on themselves. Of course, if you're the last player in the round and you turn a Flip 3 you're stuck playing it on yourself. In my experience people play it on themselves more often than a strict reading of the odds would suggest. I guess my gaming peers aren't particularly cut-throat.

As you said to Gabriel Roark, falling behind in comments or feeling impostor syndrome comes with the territory in an APA, and whatever comments people can supply are welcome! I admit to ego-scanning with the best of us, and sometimes give 'zines without comments to a quick scan instead of a deep read. Comments are the lifeblood of an APA, and I hope that applies in these pages as we continue.

Mark A. Wilson: Sorry to hear that your girlfriend got laid off. I hope she finds a suitable position soon. Job hunting is a proper pain in the backside.

Alice is Missing looks like a fascinating game/scenario. I saw "Shut Up and Sit Down"'s review on Youtube of the game some time back and was intrigued but I doubt my regular players would be interested in it. I suspect there are lots of games and game-adjacent ideas that could use instant messaging as a core mechanism, and I don't doubt that some of the gamification planners for critical incident response, war college wargame scenarios and international cybercrime response have done just that.

Vassilakos, Collinson, and Rader: RYCT Jim Eckman re fast sub-light travel in the interstellar medium: Nature keeps finding ways to tell humanity to slow down. While the local ISM around Sol is probably lower density than the immediate exterior of the local bubble, as it appears to be a swept-out region post a neighbourhood supernova, but it's still more than dense enough to make relativistic collisions a concern for high velocity interstellar travel. If I remember right, Alastair Reynolds had lighthugger high sunlight vessels with great big lumps of ice at the front to ablate and absorb the collisions. Of course, the more mass your ablative shield has the more mass you have to accelerate, the more fuel to accelerate with, etc. Better just stay at home and send out disposable probes.

Science fiction writers and gamers alike have to face up to choosing realistic physics or fast travel but not both, unfortunately.



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De Ludis Elficis Fictis

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September 2025

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Recently I have mostly been ...

... continuing to play in Michael Cule's Wednesday evening game of Runequest with the High Wycombe group. We are Lunar squadies of the 2nd Furthest Foot, visiting the big city of Glamour and still waiting to receive commendations from the Red Emperor. We have recently learned that our unit, the 2nd Furthest Foot, was wiped out at the Dragonrise. There was a week of mourning, during which my character went on an extended mourning binge (I was absent one session), got captured by persons unknown at the time, hooded and tortured for information about our senator friend, his family, and someone referred to as "the bright one" – fortunately I actually knew nothing to reveal. I was eventually rescued by my compatriots before I could be eaten by a nasty spider head thing we had previously encountered. We were taken to the mansion of the Master of Circuses, a senator Longvale, who congratulated us on the services we have performed for the city recently, and informed us that we might feature prominently in the forthcoming parade for the emperor. Our commander, Eshan, thought Longvale's accent sounded suspiciously similar to that of the Manbat that they had previously encountered.

Later, our friendly senator came to us for help, as his daughter had gone missing. Praying for guidance he got a vision of his daughter with "the bat", and we headed to Longvale's mansion. During a short encounter with Longvale in his courtyard, my character recognised Longvale's voice as that of the torturer, and the encounter ended quickly with Longvale incapacitated minus an arm (of course, because Runequest combat!) It was later discovered that senator Longvale was the secret official Feeder of the Crimson Bat, and leader of the cult – something he apparently chose, and is therefore, presumably, crazy. We were investigated by The Black Tribunal for senatorial assault, during which Vostor (Graham) was fined for contempt (of course.) Our senator friend provided a lawyer for us, and the tribunal referred the case to the Supreme Court, where the Emperor found in our favour and stripped Longvale of his title of Master of Circuses – whilst the Crimson Bat is a Lunar Cult, sacrificing citizens of Glamour to it is apparently going too far. Our senator friend was made the new Master of Circuses, with immediate responsibility to organise the parade and festivities for the emperor in only a week! Our merry band was commended for our services to the city and

emperor by being assigned to assist the new Master of Circuses in his unenviable task!!

In other news, this month has been somewhat frantic, as, whilst upgrading my PCs CPU, I managed to break my Windows 10 install and so "upgraded" to a fresh install of Windows 11 (it feels more like a downgraded, as several features I used and liked in Windows 10 are gone in 11 😞.) Whilst re-installing and re-mirroring the Google Drive app, it managed to utterly mess up my drive, and it has taken a couple of weeks to get that all back and working correctly, somewhat interrupting or delaying my other activities. Google support was helpful, and as of the last week or so, all seems to be fine once again.

Near the end of August I had the pleasure of attending a party at a friend's castle (for the benefit of our colonial cousins, yes, of course everyone in Europe knows someone who lives in a castle 😊.) Here are some pics, as they may be of interest to those who like to play pretend elf games:





The last pic is the great hall, which I imagine would be a great place to play a fantasy RPG or LARP. The castle is actually a modern folly, built in the 1990s, and features a moat and drawbridge. It is sufficiently remote to get no mobile phone reception, but does have fibre internet connection and wifi.

Wow, the last issue was big! Well done everyone. I don't think I'm dyslexic, but I certainly struggle to get through anywhere near the volume of reading that others here seem to easily.

Recent board gaming has included *Troyes*, *Scythe*, *Railways of the World*, *Dune Imperium – Uprising*, and *Terra Mystica*.

Comments

#2 Mark Nemeth: re too much exposition? No. And maybe. Well, I think it depends. You say it like creating scenarios that require more exposition is automatically a bad thing; if it's a good scenario and that extra exposition is required, or enhances the game experience, then I don't see a problem. If you have players with short attention spans that zone out during long exposition then maybe you need to tailor your style to match your players, or find players that like more exposition, if short exposition scenarios are not fun for you. Personally, it sounds like more exposition would give more feeling of depth to the session or campaign, which I would count as a good thing. From a tactical POV I would rather know too much than not enough about a situation my character is getting into.

Ultimately, are the players enjoying the sessions, or complaining about too much exposition? If the former then all is fine; if the latter then maybe modify your style a bit. Also, are you enjoying the way you're doing it? There is no objectively "right" way of doing that sort of thing, and the fact that different people have different styles is part of the appealing breadth of our hobby.

#2 Heath Row: re revised rule mistakes, I remember playing D&D at university using an

informal mish-mash of original D&D and 1st edition AD&D – each GM had their own ad-hoc house rules to handle it and no one worried about it much, after all, the GM was always right!

#3 John Redden: I never received an A&E refund either – I'm not bothered, it's just a few bucks, I imagine Lee's need is greater than my own, and the last thing she probably needs to be doing is that kind of trivial admin task.

#3 Gabriel Roark: re "A pox on the current administration!", hear, hear. I'll refrain from further comment as I do not wish to trigger political discussion or disagreement in these pages, except to mention that I think it is appropriate for non-USAns to express opinion on US politics (preferably in other fora), because the US has made itself so very influential pretty much across the entire world, particularly financially and militarily, and seems to like to think of itself as "Leader of the Free World."

RYCTM re infravision, it later occurred to me that even if infravision is just extended range of vision into the infrared, the ink would not show up in infravision and it being dark they wouldn't be able to see the map with regular vision either. I'd just never heard it explicitly stated like that, and I think my experiences have had a more relaxed attitude on this.

#3 Myles Corcoran: re *Project L*, I discovered it at StabCon a year or so ago. Yes, it's a very nice little puzzle game – I enjoy it a lot.

Another lovely *Mausritter* write up. Is this a published campaign or something of your own invention?

RYCT Dylan Capel re online gaming making impromptu stuff a bit harder to pull off, I bought a graphics tablet to use with Roll20 in the hope that it would allow me to scribble off-the-cuff stuff more easily. It showed promise in tests, but I didn't get a chance to use it in anger.

RYCTM, nice innovative ideas about dice mechanics; I shall file that away somewhere to perhaps use should the opportunity arise. Interestingly related, Angry GM¹ did a piece just this week on an initiative system using different size dice depending on weapon, character and circumstantial speed – characters act in initiative dice order from 1 upwards, fast rolls d4, slow rolls d12, and inbetweens roll d6, d8 or d10.

#3 Mitch Hyde: Nice retro fanzine style art.

RYCTM about seeing the map of the teleportal dungeon, alas I have lost it. I recall that I used a number and letter indexing system, and there was some disagreement amongst the players about the exact system we should use. The map was pretty

¹

<https://theangrygm.com/fixing-initiative-because-i-want-to-p-art-ii-angrys-recovery-time-initiative-system/>

chaotic, as it was done as we went through the dungeon, feeling somewhat disorientated, without knowing what it would end up looking like overall.

Re infravision, thanx for the clarification. Re AD&D creatures with infravision emit infrared rays from their own eyes, which will be “very brightly glowing red when observed by any other creature with standard infravision”, my CCTV cameras have infrared lights which bleed over a little into the visible spectrum (or I can see a little into the infrared perhaps 😊) and they curiously appear pretty much white when I look at them at night; I expected them to appear red-ish.

#3 Patrick Riley: nice write up. I particularly liked your list of quests – noted for future inspiration.

#3 Mark Nemeth: re easy owlbear kill, it is surprising events like this that I love about the story that emerges from what the PCs try to do and what the dice and other factors say actually happens. I love it as a player and as GM; even as GM I want to be surprised by some of the turns the narrative takes. It is often these things that people will fondly recall years later, rather than when the party defeated a well balanced foe with a routine and unremarkable melee. Of course these variances run the risk of going against the party, but there's the risks of adventuring! Yes, good balancing of encounters is important for avoiding egregious instances of this. Also, I like to have scenario or system ways for the PCs to run away, or otherwise survive, despite “losing” an encounter.

Re your further comments on Exposition vs. Action: the most important metric of whether you are doing something wrong is whether the players, and indeed you, are enjoying the sessions – do they seem to be? Have you specifically asked them?

Re non-combat activity, games like D&D emphasise confrontation and combat very strongly in the rules, and so players may consequently expect it to be the majority of the play. Some players seem to live just to defeat foes and level up. Other players are more interested in the many other aspects of play that are possible in a roleplaying game. Sometimes players veer away from non-combat play because it provides little or no XP, whilst others enjoy it for its own pleasure despite getting little XP. Are your players getting XP for the non-combat stuff, or do they enjoy it even though they receive little direct XP? Perhaps they see the non-combat stuff as necessary and interesting pre-requisites to get to the combat climax?

I recall an occasion when I ran an adventure without a climatic big boss fight for players that were used to that kind of scenario formula, and they commented that it was a surprising, interesting and enjoyable change. Another of the players in my long running fantasy campaign recently commented that a big reason for his particular enjoyment of it was that the world “felt so real”, and I believe that is mainly due to

the amount of background I have developed, and the exposition of it that I have given. Also, my rules system de-emphasises XP, and so perhaps players don't feel obliged by the rules to do combat to get XP and advance.

#3 Lisa Padol: RYCTM about the GURPS Monster Hunters campaign purple fungus, yes, it was rather intriguing, but alas that campaign is still abandoned. I particularly liked that game because I had managed to create a character that had unique and somewhat awesome abilities to help in the investigation part of the plot, and also a somewhat awesome ability when it came to dealing with the baddies. Perhaps Mr Cule will feel inspired to run some more of it sometime – I still have the game recordings to refer back to, nudge nudge 😊.

Yes, we've been playing Runequest 7E. Did I say 6E somewhere, I didn't think so; apologies if I did.

#3 Joshua Kronengold: belated happy birthday, Josh.

RYCT Patrick Riley re shy and introverted LARPer, I'm very much aware that I used role playing gaming partly as sort of therapy for my shyness and introversion, and, I think, it was very helpful.

#3 Mark A. Wilson: Alice is Missing RPG sounds rather interesting, very serious and deep.

—===### Everyone else, RAEBNC ###===—

As I'm in a picture posting mood, here's a photo from our recent holiday to Japan of Matsumoto castle:



DREADSWORD 3

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No AI was used making this zine.

www.dreadlordgames.com

I've just returned from a rather hectic weeks holiday, so excuse the shortness of this zine, and the sloppiness with which it will be written. I had a long weekend gaming at the [Owlbear and Wizard Staff convention](#) in Royal Leamington Spa, which was most excellent. I ran eight hours of AD&D on the Friday. On Sunday I played in a great Helvéczia game, and later some Runequest. It was a merry old time with plenty of Guinness quaffed. I met some fantastic people. A full play report will be put up on my blog site soon enough.

After the convention I set about walking the windy Jurassic Coast for a week. The English weather came out in full force, and I was quite content that I'd paid for a cabin rather than using a tent. Bleak but beautiful; the best way to describe the Dorset coast in full storm.

Before I continue with the retelling of my campaign saga, I will have a brief crack at answering the ignorable theme for this issue: What are your favourite RPGs to PLAY, RUN, and READ.

AD&D

Its probably pretty obvious that I really enjoy both playing, running, and reading AD&D, and in-fact any of the TSR-era fantasy games and their modern retro-clones. For me its as much about the way the rules function as it is the play style, as the two interconnect on multiple levels. Without retreading many of my points from my first zine, I will outline of a few of my favourite elements:

- + Campaign focused, for long term play with many players, and player characters.
- + High level play works, and its mechanics are actually part of the fictional worlds functioning.
- + A World-First Sandbox is the assumed method to play out a campaign. Necessary if many PCs will be dipping in and out of play due to training, injuries, spell/item research, death or

resurrection (or failing their system shock)

- + Exploration focused. Every facet of the game is about discovering new areas and adventuring in them. As a byproduct, player agency is really important. Just consider how one interacts with a multi-faction, multi-level dungeon. Choices, choices, choices.
- + Magic is utterly powerful, yet carries great risk and weaknesses in combat. There is certainly a reason that classed NPCs are the most terrifying enemies for a party of adventurers to face.
- + The rules are abstract enough to allow one to get through masses of material, so that the amount of happenings in a single session of play could well equal many chapters of a pulp story. It also has the perfect amount of combat crunch to allow interesting tactical battles, with miniatures or in the minds eye!
- + Speaking of pulp action stories. AD&D is the only TRVE Sword & Sorcery game. Fight me!
- + It is written in High Gygaxian. Need I say more?
- + Whilst many fans and aficionados will claim to know the rules inside and out, after spending any degree of time gaming with them, one will become acutely aware than not a single one of them runs the game in the same way. Ha! Because AD&D has no by-the-book methodology because much of the text is open to interpretation (High Gygaxian again), or requires a ruling, it is the perfect home brew system that each DM must morph to make his own perfect game. Whilst Gygax tried and failed to create a unified system that everyone would play the same way, he actually handed us the greatest gaming toolbox ever made! Now you know this, peal with mirthful laughter the next time someone unironically tells you they run 1e RAW. But be not dismissive, for this very failure is a feature and not a bug.
- + There is a separation between the players and the DM. The game is mostly challenge focused. And being a back and forth between the two, almost anything within reason can be attempted by the players. There is a mutual understanding that there are difficulty levels in the game. It is a world of dungeon levels, of guarded treasure, of venturing through

untamed wilds. There are tiers of play naturally delineated in the world of AD&D. This should be explicitly known and abused by the players. This leads me on to my next point.

- + Its a game of Player skill over character skills. To keep PCs alive and kicking, a degree of system mastery and strong reasoning is required by the player. If the players want to make good decisions, they need to understand not only the games mechanics, but they have to have a holistic understanding about how the game world works. This is not like the system mastery that flourished under the d20 era, and into today, where the skill is in building a character to excel at certain tactics, or to slop together a busted synergy. The skill in old school D&D is about building plans and leveraging everything within your power to succeed. Its also knowing when to fall back. When to parlay. Its purchasing sheep as bait when you approach the tower of stirges. Its attempting to time an attack on a hundred men whilst they ford a harsh river. Both are recent anecdotes from my time as a player, BTW. Strategy over mere tactics! 'Tis the way I like it!

With all this being said, I do enjoy playing other types of RPGs. I'm not a one-trick pony.

- + **Call of Cthulhu** - I spent several years running this game exclusively. I have been a Lovecraft fan since before I knew what an RPG was, and upon discovering there was a game based on his works, I was sold immediately. Now, the running of Call of Cthulhu is quite different to the D&D, obviously, but it isn't actually that different. CoC was described by Sandy Petersen as a 'Fantasy Role-Play Game' where the PCs investigate the horrors and mysteries of the Cthulhu Mythos, then, through successful play, they acquire the spells and knowledge required to defeat more and more dangerous threats of the Mythos. That sounds a lot like finding treasures and magic items and going into deeper dungeon levels to me. It was originally intended to be played in long term campaigns with stables of multiple PCs. Only in this context do its rules for reading books, learning spells, and spending weeks at insane asylums make sense. Sound like a World-First Sandbox much? It is a classless system, but there is much progression, just as there is in D&D, only the progression is linked to investigation skills over combat abilities.

The chief difference is that because it is a horror game, the Role-Play pillar of the game is certainly much more important. Horror first and foremost requires suspense to be effective. For suspense to be effective the GM needs to have a good sense of pacing, and of description. The mundane reality of the world also needs to be believable before the weirdness is introduced. So talking in character, developing back stories, and general Role Assumption by the player is much more preferable. If the player can associate with his PC, and begin to really imagine himself in the world, then the pangs of terror will be all the more raking once the weirdness begins to unfold.

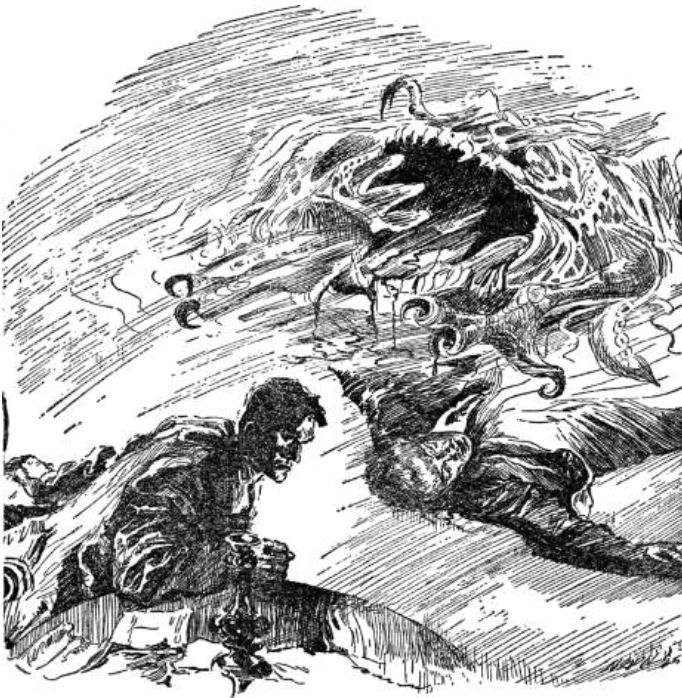
As you can tell, I have a lot to say about CoC, and perhaps I will delve into my thoughts on the game more in detail if it is of interest. I believe that the BRP system is great for this kind of modern day setting, because the roll under skill system is just vague enough to resolve any sort of plan that the players might want to put into action. Whilst additional mechanics by later editions of the game such as the 'pushed roll' and the spending of luck point are very effective at keeping an investigation moving forward, I personally find that they create a problem that PCs never really fail. If you can't really fail, then the 'game' part of the experience is diminished, and we move more towards simple collective storytelling. Its my belief that these later mechanics have arisen chiefly from the way that the game is most commonly played: the one shot.

A Call of Cthulhu one shot (usually a convention game) goes something like this:

- Insert unique or previously unexplored setting/peoples/period/crime:
- The investigators are drawn into a mystery by some generic evidence, with a twist, that points towards a crime, (or worse yet they are forced into the mystery by circumstance, though this can be done well).
- Evidence is uncovered or NPCs are interviewed, and there is certainly something strange going on, but it could well be normal!
- All roads lead to the showdown. Any evidence that is dug up railroads the investigators towards a pre-planned BIG TICKET MAIN EVENT where half of them are eaten by a globular giant worm (or something similar), and the other half go mad. The end.

Now, this is not necessarily a bad way to play the game. Is it certainly fun the first few times. But play a dozen of them and one grows infinitely weary. Mostly because in these scenarios there is very little one can do to 'win' the scenario. The GM will often flatly deny reasonable requests of PC actions. Or the most dreaded phrase imaginable may be uttered, "But your character wouldn't know that." Part of the problem with this play culture, is that it is quite antithetical to the genre the game is trying to emulate.

Horror, as I said before, requires suspense. Suspense is a slow burning build up of tension where the viewer/reader (or in this case the player) knows that something bad is about to happen, but the character doesn't. The 'big squid eats you all at the end' one shot game currently popular in CoC play culture, and proliferated by Chaosium, simply works against the baseline tenants of suspense. Its all over so quickly, and the tropes are so obvious. The themes of Lovecraft are also so antithetical to these one shot style games. I could easily begin to rave about HPL's themes here, but I must show restraint somewhere. What should be fostered is a return to the Petersen campaign game from the first two editions. A slow burn unravelling of a mystery that slowly gets more dangerous the deeper the investigators dig.



The Author depicted deep in contemplating CoC Sandboxes

Piece by piece it gets weirder, and weirder. Also simultaneously some of the investigators will learn powerful methods to battle these forces. And this magic or mythos knowledge comes with its own existential dangers and horror, and that's half the fun.

Anyway, I am a huge fan of the game itself, and see huge potential for in a Sandbox long term campaign, which I shall be trying out in the next year or so. Chaosium also still sells the 2e boxed set, which really is a fantastic work of design by Mr. Petersen. Highly recommended by me.

+ **Warhammer Fantasy Role Play** - I'm currently running a sporadic game of the first edition for some family who prefer, "more story in their games." We are a couple of sessions into the famed *Enemy Within*. Much like *Call of Cthulhu*, its a great investigation horror game. The low-fantasy background makes it very easy to insert weirdness without too much of a jarring effect, and you don't have to focus quite so much on establishing a believable baseline. The world-building is utterly fantastic, and if there were one RPG I would be happy simply reading, it would be this one. Some of the GM advice in this book is utterly atrocious however, advocating for changing dice rolls behind the screen is probably the worst offender. Outrageous.

+**Classic Traveller**. I have ran quite a bit of solo Traveller and played in a short campaign. This is probably the game I have the largest drive to really dig into and get to know better. I've been reading some of the fiction that inspired it: Dumarest Saga, the Demon Princes, Hammer's Slammers, and Space Viking.

Some RPG books I've recently bought and will soon read: *Helvéczia*, *Paranoia*, and *Stormbringer 3e*. Generally, if I read a system I try to play in a game of it, or run a one shot of it at least. This was how my WHFRP game started recently, and my solo Traveller game. Maybe I will share some thoughts on these systems at some point after I play/read them.

Now, I will continue retelling the dire expeditions around the town of Bayfry.



THE SAGA



After their almost calamitous last expedition into the Haunted Bordello at the hands of a gargoyle, a couple of players turned up at the next session and were making some plans. Since there were only two players, they were each allowed to take two PCs. There was Burspur the dwarven Fighter. Areh the Human Magic User. Taisto the Human Cleric. And Falaern Morfaren the elven Thief. All of which were Level 2 at this time. They also had a few light footmen to guard their horses.

The problem at hand was that they knew where a spell book and some very expensive other encyclopaedias sat in the dungeon. But they were being guarded by that squat stoney boy with wings.

As the two players discussed whether they should instead attempt to wipe out the badgers and finish mapping the remainder of level one, or proceed into some of the unknown areas of level two, a new caller slid into the chat. Now, this is partially my fault, but I either totally failed to record the players name and his PC, or I recorded it, but lost the note sometime after. Either way, a pleasant German gentleman entered our game chat and enquired if he might join the game. I said sure, what character did he have to hand? He replied that he had a 5th lvl Cleric that was available in the calendar. The other players were most excited, and their plans immediately shifted to convince him to join them in slaying the gargoyle. The mystery player agreed. We had an expedition on our hands.

The cleric had a magic mace, and Burspur had his magic longsword swiped from the evil elf Dinir. So they figured they had a good chance of victory. They discussed amongst themselves whether gargoyles were affected by hold person spells, or sleep spells. They made plans. They wrote down their prepared spells for that day and then wrote down their marching order. They proceeded to the haunted woods, and left their horses at a new spot with the guards. There was no resistance nor guards in the ruin. They walked through the trap door in the tower, down into the dancing hall, and north where they wished to enter the broken secret door that was once hidden by a tapestry.

All went smoothly, and the players gave a sort of tour of the place as they went. This of course was

only a few dungeon turns, as they proceeded at 5x speed using their map.

Then they approached the low vaulted chamber with the zombie guards. This led down to level two. The original players described to the new that when one wore the sign of a black cube they could pass the undead without them rising. They had a couple of uniforms with the symbol embroidered on that they could hand out. The new player reminded them that he would automatically turn zombies away at his level. Ah, but there were however twelve zombies in the alcoves, and so unless a twelve was diced on the turn attempt, wouldn't the others continue to attack? And also, in fighting the remaining unturned zombies, wouldn't this cause the turned zombies to return to fighting? "That depends on how the DM runs it," someone said. They looked towards me and I remained silent.

"Let's use the uniforms."

They donned them and proceeded towards the low vaulted chamber. And 'lo and behold, I dice a one on my random encounter die. I looked to my new encounter table, for a stocking of the first level of the dungeon had occurred. The PCs were about to meet the new inhabitants.

We rolled for surprise. There were no ones or twos. I rolled the distance - sixty feet. Beyond the light of their torch, they heard a great shuffling of boots, and the clank of sheaves of steel, and the squealing of a ... pig?

"Ores." Said one player, and they took their map and announced to me the defensive order of battle they would take. The positioning was awkward, with the low alcoves and pillars obscuring much of their view through the hall. They decided using a pillar to guard their rear, without giving much thought to it potentially pinioning them.

I noted what the enemy would be doing this turn. We rolled initiative.

I began: You hear a shrill but familiar voice call through the dank hallway. "Iron Duke, witness my revenges, cold as the walls of thy tower!" Shambling into the light there came the swollen pig-faces of orcs, greenish-blue of flesh, and wretched of stench. Twelve of them march forth.



HYDE

And behind them a familiar face. The evil elf Dinir, his presence much diminished, clad in scraps of porcine armour!

"And now to finish what we should have weeks ago!" Boomed Taiso's player. "Prepare to die, Devil worshipper!" And so the battle began.

The Orcs had the initiative and charged into the defensive wall. Burspur had his ranseur to hand, however, and so struck first, disarming an orc and negating its attack. The other orcs clashed heavily into the shield wall with their axes, swords, and flails. A few wounds were taken. The evil elf launched his magic missiles into Taiso, a heavy wound! They could now just make him out in the shadows of the eastern corridor. The PCs hit back and felled two orcs.

For round two Taiso announced a command spell, "retreat!". The 5th level Cleric announced the casting of silence on a sling stone, knowing the 5 segment casting time would not ruin the other's spell. Areh announced his sleep spell on the orcs. We diced initiative and the Party won. The evil elf made his save against the command spell to retreat. Burspur and Falaern parried and swung at the orcs to no avail. Areh's sleep spell sent seven orcs to sleep. The remaining orcs fought on with a strong morale check. Then, an orc almost ruined the silence spell with an attack, but alas he missed. Now Dindir cast his own sleep spell, we diced to see which characters would be affected and Woe! Woe! Woe! Taiso and Areh fell asleep on the cold flagstones. Then the clerics silence was cast near the end of the round.

In the third round the 5th level cleric announced he would throw the silenced stone towards the elf. Burspur the Dwarf and Falaern the elf stood back to back before their fallen comrades and swore to slay orcs! We diced and the party won initiative. The stone was thrown and we used the grenade-like missiles table on the DM screen. He overshot the elf and the stone silently skittered down the corridor. The elves spells were already spent however, not that the players knew this. Burpur and Falaern slew another orc. But the return blows did damage to them. Things were looking dicey! The elf Dindir charged into the fray to reinforce his orc mercenaries.

In round four the 5th level cleric announced he would march forward and swap with the thief Falaern, and the latter could begin to awaken his allies. Everyone else continued melee. The orcs

won initiative and did a nasty hit on Burspur. Areh was awakened first, the cleric moved forward and killed an orc.

In the next round the awakened Areh announced his second sleep spell, and this sent the remaining orcs to sleep. The advantage was now with the party. Dindir attempted to flee, his morale broken, but Burspur chased him down like a dog with his charge speed, succeeding a hit on the overbearing table, and then pummeling him into a cold and well deserved grave.

Luckily the party had a great deal of heal minor wound spells to hand, and they were still feeling confident about going down to the lower levels. The elf and his orc mercenaries had only a few gold coins on them but the players were well chuffed they had slain this old enemy, who was foolish enough to have returned to the dungeon.

They passed the zombies without issue. Down the stairs. They passed the statue of the vulture winged women, and then leapt past the trapped archway. They arrived at the gargoyle guarding the hallway. The brave 5th level cleric said that he would take on the beast whilst the others cleared out the wizards room of treasure. They proceeded with this plan. It was a good plan, but it came down to whether the cleric could outlast the 4+4HD creature with 4 attacks per round vs his 1. It got very dicey very quick. In short, Burspur had to run back to the clerics aid once he fell to around six hp (1HD), and after a gruelling battle the two adventurers managed to slay the beast.

The wizards chamber was pilfered fully. But rather than go on down the corridor where there were more doors, the party decided it best to retreat as they were now very low on resources. As a final parting gift, the 5th level cleric gifted the party two stones with continual light cast on them. These are still used by the party to this day, many months, and many games later. Maybe one day an enemy NPC might cast dispel magic on them, who knows.

The spell book and encyclopaedia of Devil Lore got a very good price from the town wizard Dagomon the Blissful. So ends this retelling. I don't plan on describing battles in minute detail often, but this one was a doozy!

Fight On!





THE DRAGON'S BEARD

OCTOBER 2025

© PATRICK ZOCH

DICE TOWER RETREAT 2025

Each September, my wife and I attend our annual board game event: The Dice Tower Retreat. As usual, we made our long trek from Kansas to Florida, visiting relatives along the way until the start of the event mid-week in Orlando. During our visit to my Father-in-law, we warmed up our gaming week with a couple of round of 3-way Cribbage. It is a game my wife's family enjoys and has played ever since she was a young child with her grandparent. I'm still not a fan of the game, but I play it as competently as I can because my wife enjoys it.

TUESDAY (PRE-EVENT) — We spent the day before the event in Orlando shopping and taking a tour of a chocolate factory. It was a small tour, but its coverage of the history of chocolate was interesting and we received a big bar of custom chocolate at the end. (It took us all week to consume our chocolate bars). The sampling of roasted cocoa beans during the tour encouraged us to buy a few bags of it at the end. Tuesday evening, the game library and event space was unofficially opened for early play. Naturally, we took advantage of the opportunity to get a couple of games in early.

River of Gold — I saw this game on the tables last year at the retreat and it looked beautiful. The central element on the game board is the river which is decorated in gold foil in an Asian wave pattern. Players are merchants allied with legendary samurai clans from the fictional land of Rokugan, loosely based on feudal Japan. The river is



divided into numerous spaces which are under the domains of the six clans of Rokugan. As merchants

move down the river, they may build new ports, gain influence with regional clans, collect goods, and deliver goods for additional benefits and influence. The game uses a simple roll and move mechanic, though the results can be mitigated by spending divine favor. The die not only provides a number for a move but also a clan symbol which determines which region a port may be built or which order may be fulfilled. New ports provide new goods and services to the other player with a separate benefit to the port owner. Several public game objectives can earn players additional victory points during the game. At the end of the game, influence in each region is scored, along with any additional end game scoring bonuses each player may have acquired during the game. Person with the most victory points at the end of the game wins. The game is fairly simple to learn; it feels like it plays quick, even at full player count; and looks absolutely gorgeous on the table. The game comes with a mini-expansion — variable player powers — that is easy to add and provides good direction for play decisions. However, each player only has two choices for their clan (player color) which feels a little limited. Hopefully, another mini-expansion will come out to add more options, and maybe two additional clan/color choices to represent the two remaining clans not available to the players in the base game.

Ticket to Ride Map Collection 8: Iberia & South Korea — Ticket to Ride was one of the first games in our game collection when we first got into the hobby. I've since played a number of the expansions (which I only own on Steam), but I am quite content with the original base game and the European edition. The Pennsylvania expansion is my favorite. When my wife discovered that the latest map expansion was for South Korea, she wanted to try it. One of the differences with this map set from other maps is that the rail lines are colored by region. While in a stand-



ard TTR game, the numerous lines connected to a city would be of different colors, in the South Korean map, most of the rails connected to a city were of the same color. Unfortunately, this meant more hoarding of a color than is normal for a game. For example, the Gunsan-Mokpo-Yeosu-Jinju line (in the south) was all orange. The blue lines were all up in the north. Claiming a line also meant I could claim a province score, which cost an extra train. Province scoring was an additional area control aspect of the game in addition to connecting lines for the route tickets. This map expansion also included “express train cards” of varying values 1-3, which could be spend one time each to count as essentially wild cards for the claimed line. The map design had a nighttime feel to it. It was a fine map, but my wife did not like the changes and would not look to play it again.

WEDNESDAY —

[Forest Shuffle: Dartmoor](#)— Last year we discovered Forest Shuffle at the retreat. We liked it, but the expansions that came out later elevated the game. All of it made it to our board game collection. Dartmoor is not an expansion, it is an entirely new game but just like the old game. If you know how to play Forest Shuffle, then you know how to play Dartmoor. The main difference is the addition of terrain cards that are played like the forest trees where other flora and fauna can be played. I would not be surprised if expansions for Dartmoor are planned in the future to offer more terrain and related flora and fauna. I really enjoyed the variation of the



game. I did NOT enjoy how complicated the scoring was. The standard scoring sheet suggests scoring section of the player’s tableau that is almost impossible to keep track. Cards score in so many different ways and in different parts of the player’s field that is not neatly organized. It is actually better to score by trigger — all butterflies, all hooved animals, all etc — than how the scorepad suggests. Have a scratchpad ready. I already have Forest Shuffle, so I do not know if I really need to add this one to the collection.

[Captain Flip](#)— I wanted to ensure I had a couple of lighter games on our list to play so we could add a little variety to our game play experience and give our

game minds some rest. We tend to play heavier games, and therefore get fewer plays for a convention. The game came with multiple different ship boards, each with their own scoring conditions to add some variety to the gameplay. We played the basic game with matching scoring conditions. In Captain Flip, each player alternates in drawing a tile from a bag to place on their ship,



starting from the lowest level of the ship and building up in the five columns/ship masts. When drawing a tile, the player assesses the first face up portion of the tile and where they would like to play it. Alternatively, the player can flip it over to the other side, but then must play that side. Each tile face has a type of ship crew on it which scores differently. Some add points based on what other crew tiles are placed or where. Some provide other benefits, and some can cause a player to loose points (coins) or the game. The game ends when one of the player completes four of the five columns on their board. The player with the most coins at the end wins. It was simple and light, but does require some strategic decisions to maximize scoring, but luck is a factor with each draw. It was a fine filler, but it did not provide a fulfilling game experience for us.

[Wyrmspan](#)— We saw a couple trying to learn Wyrmspan next to us, so we offered to teach the game. I bought the game as soon as it came out over a year ago



2 and enjoy it quite a bit. We also own Wingspan and all its expansions (too many in my opinion, but I love

all the cards and artwork). The edition in the Dice Tower library had all metal component upgrades and they were fantastic.

Botanicus— I had talked to my wife about the types of games I had on our list to play; she remembered that there was one about building a garden. When she saw a couple of ladies looking over the rule of Botanicus, she thought it was the garden game on our list and volunteered me to teach them the game. They were not too disappointed when I informed them that this was not the game I knew, so we all learned the game together. In Botanicus, each player had their own garden to grow flowers to fulfill customer orders. The flowers were not specific types of flower but “levels” of flowers with each increased level taking more time to grow and tend. Play-



ers moved their gardener about the garden to tend to the flower and could only act on the four nearest flower beds, so gardener movement was important to get the most out of an action. Additionally, customer orders could only be fulfilled by the flower beds in same row as the customers (the garden had five row of three or four flower beds each). The game is played over a set number of rounds, with each round beginning with a drafting of actions. Draft order is determined by the previous



round, the player selecting the most valuable action in the previous round going last, and the player choosing the least valuable action the previous round going first. Half of the drafting rounds have a fixed selection

of action, while the other (alternating) half is variable during set-up (somewhat shaking up the value order in that round). Action enable players to move the gardener, grow plants, upgrade plants (watering), gain money, collect garden animals, or gain victory points. There is a puzzle aspect to the game to get your gardener into the right spot to plant or upgrade the right plants to satisfy the various customers on each row efficiently. There are bonuses for completing progression tracks, garden columns, and plant upgrades that add victory points at the end of the game. After the last rounds, end game scoring is completed and the person with the most victory points win. The artwork is functional — same artist as Carcassonne. The game is fairly straightforward, though there are a couple of different strategies that could be employed to win the game. It was light and enjoyable, but not one that wowed me.

Calimala — The latest version of this game was released this year with artwork by Ian O’Toole, whose work I greatly admire for what I can best describe as clean and elegant vintage. In Calimala, players are Florence wool merchants seeking to be the most influential merchant in the middle ages by delivering the most wool to the different cities and ports and by contributing the most to the building of three important churches in Europe. There are eighteen scoring opportunities that are triggered throughout the game, and these scoring events are randomized during setup. There are times when delivery to a town is no longer worth the effort, but each city will be scored twice and each church will be scored



in some way five times. The action selection mechanic is the most fascinating part of the game. It takes place in the “Wool Market” where player place their action token (wool merchant) between two of the nine available actions, granting the player both actions. Actions allow players to collect building materials, build buildings or ships, decorate buildings, produce wool, and deliver wool. But here is where it gets interesting. That worker never returns. The next time someone places their worker on the same spot, not only do they get those two actions, so do the other players who had workers already there. Whenever a 4th worker is placed on the same spot, the bottom worker does not get the

action but instead moves their worker to the next scoring event to serve as a event counter (thematically, it is taking a seat on the City Council) and tiebreaker in scoring. This game is on our Christmas List.

Castle Combo—We finished the night with as light game of Castle Combo. I had played this only once on Board Game Area and struggled with its luck factor. In Castle Combo, players are building their own tableau of nine cards in a 3x3 grid purchased from either the village or castle market. Each card has their own scoring effect dependent on the types and locations of other cards in



the player's tableau. Players are limited to purchasing cards only from the active market as indicated by a messenger token that moves between the village and castle markets. We played with five players, which only consumes 45 cards of the 78 cards in the decks, so there are many cards that will not appear during the game. It is also challenging to plan ahead with five players. The market changes too much between turns. Even though there are so many different ways to score, it does not mean that any of the three options available will suit what is already in a player's tableau. Players can mitigate the limitations by paying to reset the market or move the messenger to the other market. This can only be done once and it does not guarantee that options will get better. Though I did have some wasted cards scoring no points in my tableau, I still managed to do well enough to win. But, it was luck. I purchased a couple card that I did not know how I could use very well, but then a card became available on my turn to maximize the scoring abilities on those cards. But it was simply luck. While other players may not have gotten as much use out of it, I doubt the card would have still be available if I had to wait four turns before I could get it. The artwork looks like a cross between info-graphic and Adventure Time or Fairly Odd Parents. While it looks kid-friendly with bright and whimsical colors, the caricatures can be a

bit extreme and the scoring complexity may be beyond younger kids ability to plan. It was not a game for my collection, and I would probably not play it again.

THURSDAY —

SETI: Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence— Last year we discovered Tomáš Holec's Galileo Galilei while everyone else was focusing on his first US release, SETI: Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence. Because Galileo Galilei was not released in the US until the next year, I felt both ahead and behind the gaming pulse at the same time. SETI is a massive game on the table and looks intimidating. There are a lot of things to do in the game, but the core actions are fairly simple. Players lead a sci-



entific institution to find life beyond Earth. This is done primarily my scanning for signals and launching probes (satellites) into space. The central board is the solar system that revolves around the sun; beyond the solar system are space sectors to be scanned. As the earth rotates, different sectors of space some into scanning view. Scanning collects data which feeds a player's computer (gaining additional benefits). Scanning sectors is a form of area control, which results in additional benefits to the player who scanned it the most once all the available



data has been collected by the players. Players can also launch satellites to either orbit or land on a planet, moon, or other space body. Doing so earns victory points and possible an alien life trace. An alien life

becomes unlocked once three different life traces are discovered. Five aliens are provided in the game, each with their own special benefits and rules changes to the board. During the game, only two are randomly selected during setup, waiting to be discovered. Many actions, such as launching a new satellite, increases a player's publicity rating, which can be traded in for mission cards or technology upgrades which make player actions for efficient or effective. Mission cards can provide bonuses for completing actions or end game scoring bonuses. While aliens do not provide any new tech upgrades, they do provide new mission cards that are far more powerful and new ways to explore space and gain bonuses. The game ends after five rounds. The first round seemed to end quickly because our capabilities and resources were somewhat limited. As the game wore on, our actions became more effective and we had more resources to accomplish additional actions. There are way more things to do than any player can possibly accomplish. It was a four+ hour game for us (four players), including teach. I am sure it will go faster with experienced players. I loved the game, but I do not know if I can get another heavy and long game to the table. Seti is on our Christmas list.

[Fairy Ring](#) — After a heavy game, we needed a light game to relax our brains. In Fairy Ring, players are building a mushroom village in their tableau by drafting mushroom cards from a selection of cards they pass around the table until all the cards are selected. Each card is a type of mushroom that has a scoring or movement effect. Each card also has a movement value that determines how far the player's fairy moves around the table.



Each fairy moves clockwise around the table moving from mushroom to mushroom, through every other player's village (hence the ring). Scoring is by collected "mana" that is shaken from the mushroom the fairies land on last. The owner of the mushroom gets the mana, and the fairy owner only gets the same mana if they also own the same type of mushroom in their village. For the first few moves, it is likely that a player's fairy is not scoring them points as they move through other player's village. But each player still scores points as other players move a player's own village. Mushrooms can

grow and become more profitable when an additional mushroom card of the same type is played in a village. Mana collection may start out slow, but starts to pick up as they game progresses. Mana is turned in for victory points. Most points at the end of the game wins. The game is cute, the art is cute, the fairy pieces were full color acrylic art. It was one we think our kids would enjoy, and we enjoyed playing it. I think it really shines with four players. Three would be fine. The two-player game has different rules and looked more like a duel game than a "fairy ring" game, so I was glad that we found two old friends to join us for the game.

[Architects of the West Kingdom](#) — Last year we enjoyed playing Paladins of the West Kingdom so much we bought the game. My wife expressed an interest in the Architect of the West Kingdoms, a game I had only played on Board Games Area before. The games central premise about constructing buildings for a medieval kingdom, primarily the cathedral for the Archbishop, a premise that appeals to both of us. Players have 20 workers to employ and may deploy one worker each turn. The effectiveness of each worker is based on the total number of the players worker at a location. For example, the first worker at the forest only acquires one



wood. But each additional worker already at the site adds to the total resources collected. Workers remain where they are placed. The only way to recall them is to spend a worker and coin to collect workers from a worksite, so this requires some management of workers to avoid losing track of them and not having any workers to place. A player can round up any player's workers at a site, holding them hostage on their own player's board, preventing another player from recovering them. A player can also throw captured workers into the guardhouse, gaining a silver for each worker as bounty. This is one way to gain money while disrupting another players workforce. Players can recover their workers from the guardhouse at a cost of a worker, or from another player's board with a worker and a bunch of coin. I was not sure my wife would like this aspect of the game, especially since I captured a bunch of her workers a couple of times to earn some coin, but it did not seem to disrupt her strategy at all. Some buildings require

specialist skills, and these can be acquired by hiring specialist (masons, carpenters, and tilers) who can also provide other benefits. One way to get valuable resources quickly is to go to the Black Market, but doing so causes a player to lose virtue. Losing virtue will lose victory points at the end of the game. Low virtue also helps avoid taxes but prevents a player from working on the Cathedral. The end game is triggered by the number of buildings, including progress on the cathedral completed. It is a simpler and shorter game than Paladins of the West Kingdom, but we enjoyed game. I still like Paladins better and I did not think that we would need both game, but my wife would be happy to add the game to our collection.

Kyoto no Neko — Kyoto no Neko is a visually pleasing game about kittens growing into cats in modern day Kyoto. Players have a character board for their kitten that tracks their abilities such as agility, friendship, fighting hunting, stamina, and growth. It also tracks the kittens victories in fights and hunts. The game board is a Kyoto neighborhood of houses, walls, trees, streets, and empty grass. On every space in the neighborhood grid is an encounter token that may be a tree to climb or a creature to hunt, fight, or befriend. Each game is a scenario that



lists five objectives for the cats to earn. As the kittens gain successful hunts, fights, or friends, they also grow in abilities and gain other benefits that allow the kitten to grow and become more capabilities. The game ends when the first player earns five medals (from accomplishing objectives or reaching milestones from hunting, fighting, and friends). Failing to make a friend, win a fight, or succeed in a hunt is more than just a failure — it causes the either the cat or the target to run away, making it much harder to re-engage for a second attempt. But there are lots of things to explore. In a two-player game, there seemed to be lots of other spaces to explore. I think the space would feel much more constrained in a four-player game. There is a higher likelihood then for players to encounter other players for a fight. This option might not appeal to younger players or player who prefer a peaceful cat life. It was an ok game, and a little more complex and busier than it needed to be. The cat pieces were cute though.

FRIDAY —

Fromage — Fromage is about becoming a prestigious cheese maker in 20th century France. Each player has three cheesemaker workers—one makes soft cheese, one makes hard cheese, and the last makes bleu cheese. The quality (age) of the cheese depends on how long the spend making the cheese. The length of time (aging) is manage by a rotating gameboard. The game board is divided into four sections. In each section, there are two actions a player can take. The center portion is a resource selection to collect fruit, buildings, cows, or orders. The main section is a place to make cheese. Any worker can collect a resource, but only the right type of cheese worker can be used to place the right type of cheese the main section. Each of the main sections for making cheese scores cheese in different ways. In one



quadrant, cheese is scored by connecting cheese in festival tents. In another quadrant, the cheese scores based on how much it is aged and how many tables a pair of your cheeses are plated. Another quadrant scores based on how many different shelves in a cheese store hold your cheeses. And the last quadrant is scored based on which regions in France mostly are delivered your cheeses. The way the aging is managed is by the rotation of the worker on the board. The length of time the worker remains on the board is based on the angle of the worker when it is placed on the board. Each turn, the board rotates, providing a new pair of choices (resources and cheese making) for new workers. Meanwhile, the rotation of the board changed the angle of all the previous placed workers in relation to the player. Any worker now pointing toward the player is recovered and can be used again. A worker that is place to age only once, is place facing right, so that when the board rotates, the worker in facing the player on the next turn and can be recovered right away. The worker who is aging a cheese the most is placed facing left, which requires the board to rotate three times before it can be recovered to use again. It is a clever mechanic to manage aging time of cheese and workers. The variability of the game is also achieved numerous ways. First is that the board is modular, so the order of the cheese production

quadrants differ each game. Additionally, the resource collection section is likewise modular, so its order and pairing with the cheese making board also varies. The types of cheese in each cheese making board is based on an insert that can be flipped and interchanged between the boards. Buildings can also vary between players, providing different benefits to the players if they invest in the building options. Overall, I really enjoyed the game. I backed its sister game, Formaggio, on Kickstarter earlier this year. Formaggio is a stand alone game built the same way as Fromage, except that players are Italian cheese makers. Because the games are constructed the same, the boards and inserts are interchangeable, and this is by design for even greater variability. I look forward to Fromage and Formaggio to arrive.

[Finspan](#) — I already own both Wingspan and Wyrmspan, and I was not sure I really needed to play another “-span” game. But I do like marine fish, and I heard that many people like it and that it was different enough to be appreciated on its own. All three do have similarities that if you knew how to play one game, you knew how to play the others. In all three, players are



placing animals (birds, dragons, or fish respectively in Wingspan, Wyrmspan, and Finspan) in one of three habitats suitable for the animals. Each animal is worth some victory points, and additional points are earned for any eggs or food stored on the animal or any other cards (smaller animals eaten) tucked beneath the animal. In all three, players activate a habitat to trigger habitat benefits, which are improved by having animals in the habitat, the more animals that are in the habitat, the more effective the habitat action becomes. How each habitat is activated differs between the games. In Wingspan, habitats are activated by an “action cube” from the first vacant space on the left, then proceeded further left to activate each bird in the habitat until there are no more activations. Players have a set number of action cubes each round, and once each player has played all their action cubes, the round ends. In Wyrmspan, habitats need lairs to be placed first before a dragon can be placed in the lair in the habitat. Players begin the game with a lair in each habitat ready to house a dragon. Habitats are activated by sending an explorer from left to right,

proceeded through each dragon, activating their bonus (if any) AND activating the bonus after each lair. Actions cost coins, and as long as a player has coins, the player can take an action. Each time a habitat is explored again, the costs increase by a coin. It takes more actions to place lairs and dragons in habitats, but placing lairs (and some dragons) generate resources as they are played. Additionally, players end their round action as different time because players will generate different wealth during their turns and thus have more money to fund actions. In Finspan, players begin the game with a couple of fish already in their habitats. Additionally, players also start with a couple of eggs and young (small fish/guppies) in their habitats. Habitats are activated by moving a diver from top to bottom of a dive site (over a habitat). Each habitat provides an effect and potentially three additional effects IF there is a fish in the specific region of the habitat. Finspan has more specific habitat criteria than the other games. In Finspan, habitat zones can be on the reef, reef edge, or open ocean, but can also be in the sunlight (top zone), twilight, or midnight (bottom zone), or surf (top row) or deep (bottom row), or any combination. Wyrmspan has a unique action that moves a player's marker around a Dragon Guild which earns additional resources, immediate benefits, or end-game scoring bonuses. Finspan also has a unique action that involves moving the young (guppies) around the board. The young is a food source for the fish. Some fish require a school of young to feed on. Schools are created by moving three young together on one space, which then converts the three young to a school token. Schools are worth more than young in final scoring. A unique aspect about Finspan that is different from the other games is the ability to remove a previously placed fish by playing a larger one on top of it (“there is always a bigger fish”) which is both thematic and solves a problem of finding optimal cards too late. Some fish require being placed on a previously placed fish as part of its cost. In all three games, there are scoring events at the end of each of the four rounds. All three games have round scoring criteria based on animals or eggs in habitats, or types and names of animals in play, or other features of the creatures in play. Wingspan includes scoring based on next type; Wyrmspan includes scoring based on dragon personalities; and Finspan includes scoring based on young and schools in play. Overall, I really enjoyed the game much better than I expected. It was on my short list to buy after the convention, but it has now moved to the Christmas list.

[Rock Hard: 1977](#) — This turned out to be the most thematic game that I may have ever played, probably a little bit too thematic. Players are part-time musicians looking to make it big as rock stars. Each player tracks the talent of their character on an amplifier with dials that go to 11, a hilarious pop culture reference to “This is Spinal Tap”. Characters keep track of their songs, reputation, and chops (all of which start at 2), along with their “cravings” which is one of the problematic

parts (though thematic) of the game. Characters also start with a random job to provide nominal income until they hit it big. The game is played over eight rounds (months) and players get to take three actions, one per day, night and after-hours. Some actions are available any time, while most actions are only available during certain periods. Performing gigs takes place only at night. Each venue has prerequisites in order to play the gig. Of course, the bigger the venue, the better the reward, but also higher the requirement. At first, local bars and party gigs are all that characters have the skill to perform. Larger venues require greater reputations, higher chops, more songs, stage crews that can only be hired during the day, and either tape and record deals. These small gigs are not enough to sustain a character's living costs, so jobs must be kept, but the jobs often pre-



vent a player from taking an action during their work hours. At some point, the player needs to skip work to take important actions, like play a gig. Skip work too often and the character gets fired. Players will quit work sometime to go full time as a musician so they can devote more actions to their musical career. The only way to get extra actions is to eat "candy" which may result in gaining an extra action or two (or none) but also increases a character's cravings which may result in becoming addicted to candy and losing a turn to spend time in recovery. Day actions involve the business dealings for contracts, rehearsing, hiring publicists, doing interviews, and hiring stage crews. If a character needs recovery, it is all they can do for the day action. The night actions are performance gigs, and after-hour actions include a bunch of hang-outs that enable the random of cards that provide various benefits, boosts, or income. Hanging out at the clubs typically causes players to wake up late the next day and be last in turn order for the following round. By the end of the game, most players should be able to play in the biggest venue to score as many points as possible. There are a lot of nice touches in the game. The amplifiers going to 11 is my favorite one. The turn order tokens for each player is a guitar pick. The demo tape markers are cassette tapes, and the record deal markers are small vinyl records. I am not a fan of paper money in games, except in this game where the money looks like real US dollars that have been scribbled on with various rock culture references (e.g. lipstick lips with a call me and number, doodles, "rock on" hand

symbol, etc). I really enjoyed my play of the game, but I am not a fan of the drug usage in the game, even though it is masked by the euphemism "candy". I'll happily play it again, but I could not add it to my collection. I highly recommend giving it a play.

[River of Gold](#) — Got another play in teaching someone who saw me post about my play on Facebook. Played even better with four players.

[Scholars of the South Tigris](#) — This was a fantastic game, but we made a mistake setting up for an "epic game" instead of a "casual game" for our first play, resulting in a later night than we intended. The goal of the game is to be the player who advances the most in knowledge and sciences. This will be primarily achieved by traveling to find and deliver foreign scrolls to the houses of wisdom, and hiring and employing translators to transcribe scrolls to Arabic. Translated scrolls provide end of game bonuses to the players. Delivering scrolls to the house of wisdom helps players advance in one of six research tracks. Player can invest in these research tracks directly, which can provide immediate and income bonuses as well as other benefits and discounts depending on the track. Translators under the influence of a player can retire once they have worked enough (usually by translating one to three scrolls), when they can be added to a player's action board and provide additional benefits for an action space. Action selection is an interesting process. Players have seven action cards to choose from and play in one of five action spaces on their action board. Action cards also include an income bonus during the income phase after all the actions are taken. The strength of the action is based on the assign-



ment of dice that are drawn randomly from the player's dice bag and roll at the beginning of the round. The color of the action also matters for some actions — research tracks can only advance with matching color actions, and scrolls can only be translated if the dice color matches the house of wisdom color. Players start with white dice, but have workers that can change dice colors and increase dice strength. Players can also pick up colored dice through research actions. It takes two dice to activate any card, and only four dice are drawn to start (though it can be increased with advancement in

a research track). Getting extra dice and extra dice draws in important to get the most out of each round. Once a player has taken all the actions they can, they rest, reset their dice and actions cards, draw income, and draw from the Scroll Card Draw Pile, which serves as the timer for the game. The drawn card could be a new scroll to be found during travels or it could be one of four caliph cards that trigger a scoring round. After the end of the forth scoring round, the end game is scored. Points are earned for progression on research track, scroll bonuses, retired translators, and the number of dice a player has — white dice are negatives! We really enjoy the game. We knew we would like it and we love the translation of scrolls concept. The difference between the epic and casual game is the number of scroll cards between caliph scoring cards. Because we wanted to do more of the main game action, we chose the epic set-up which added more scroll cards. But the minor add of a few cards added much more time to the game. Still, we loved it enough that it was the first thing we bought when we returned home.

SATURDAY —

Shallow Sea — Since I love marine life, we started the day with a puzzle-ly game about the Great Barrier Reef. In Shallow Sea, players draw fish and tile pairs to place in their sea tableau. The tiles are either corals or marine life that turn into scoring bonuses once other sea



conditions around them are met. In the case of corals, certain color fish must be present in one or more corners of the tile. Once that is met, the tile is turned over and once of the fish can move onto as a home. Gener-

ally, matching colors fish and coral score better, but a player may have tiles that score for the opposite. For marine life, their flip condition may be based on tile/fish conditions in three spaces either around them or in a row. Marine life are worth small points un-flipped, but are worth more if their conditions are met. Many fish will find a home in the corals, but fish still count as points if left on the board. Un-flipped coral is not worth any points. Objective cards also provide some additional scoring opportunities. The game ends as soon as there are only four empty spaces on each players board — this is about 17 turns per player. Because of the requirements to flip a tile, careful placement of fish and tile are important. It is quite possible to have a tile that can never be flipped. It is also possible to have a fish stranded in a spot — or worse, blocking a spot — where it does no good. Luckily, there is a mechanic that permits moving of fish anywhere on the board, so it is hard to be completely locked out of a useable position. The tiles and fish you may want might not be available during a drafting round, so it pays to be flexible while preserving strategies to complete the reef. Visually, it is a pleasing game. It is not a overly challenging game, but it tile placement or spatial relationship games are not your thing (like my wife), you will not enjoy this game (and neither did she). I was left wanting more from the game, while my wife wanted no more.

Tea Garden — This was the third Tomáš Holec game we played, and any game about tea has my wife's interest. In Tea Garden, players are owners of tea farms in China seeking to become great tea farmers worthy of the Chinese Emperor. The game board is an abstract map of the Yunnan tea region along the Yangtze River. Different regions can produce better quality tea leaves, but players start in the lower quality region. Players take actions to build new tea farms, take an extra tea harvest, ferment tea (increasing its value and quality), sell tea to caravans (which gains victory points, favor from the emperor, and other benefits), or buy an action card. Each



action is taken by playing action cards that has a strength value and maybe a bonus action. Multiple cards may be played to increase the strength of the action. Only the top cards bonus action may be taken if it is visible.

The strength of the action determines how effective an action may be, and some action have a minimal action strength required. The challenge is that players will only start with four cards, so additional cards need to be purchased early to extend a player's ability to keep playing on during a round. Each action card is also worth points at the end of the game. Players only have five rounds to play the game, so maximizing their turns is important. Bonus actions are also important to get the most out of each turn. As the game progresses, action cards with higher strength and more bonus actions become available, but also have higher purchase requirements. Earn emperor favor is important because it enables a player to acquire an emperor card, which is often a stronger card but also includes end game scoring bonuses. Players may also send a farmer to the tea university which also gains benefits, including emperor favor. After the end of each round, all tea farms produce a harvest, and all tea leaves age (which reduces the value of green tea, but increases the value of fermented tea). After five rounds, scores are tallied for advancement in the university, emperor track, advancement on river track, and points on action and emperor cards. Highest score wins. I enjoyed the game, but the map and art was a little too cartoony and abstract for me. There is a lot of different actions to do and keep track of in the game. Players only get two or three main actions in a round, so action economy is very important. It was not a leisurely tea farming game — it was a strict management of actions to leverage the most out of your tea business. Despite the tight action management, the game was not a fast play. It was good game, but one I do not think will make it to my collection.

[My Little Pony: Festival of Lanterns](#) — My granddaughters love My Little Pony, so we decided to give this game a try. I was disappointed immediately by the lack of any ponies in the game. It was about the lanterns, inspired by each of the main ponies from My Little Pony. It is a tile laying game where players place tiles of lantern patterns next to other lantern tiles to make up the night sky of lanterns. As each tile is placed, players will collect



a lantern card matching the closest lanterns type facing the player on the placed tile. The game is also a set collection game. Once a player have enough lan-

terns to match the scoring bonus tiles, they turn them end for the scoring. Scoring is not consistent, though. Sometimes a set of seven cards scores 7, sometimes 9, sometimes 5. Sometimes one set combination is worth more than another combination, and sometimes not. It felt random and hard to strategize when to cash in a set. The lack of consistency and luck factor for scoring left everyone cold on the game. I'm not sure even My Little Pony fans would enjoy it.

[Canopy: Evergreen](#) — This game is about building your own Pacific Northwest rainforests through drafting and pushing your luck. However, in order for it to shine, I think it needs to be played with four players. A two player set up is very different and reduces the variability too much. Each turn, a player with draft cards to place in their forest. Card include different flora and fauna that have different scoring conditions. There is also oppor-



tunity to grow and cap trees, which can earn bonuses on the forest floor. Some animals have special abilities that can be used once per round. Unfortunately, some drafted cards include wild-fire, heat waves, and disease. These are not only negative cards, they can also spread to other players. The cards are drafted in an unusual way. Each player will always have three piles of cards to consider. These piles are also available to one or more players. Starting from the left, a player looks at the entire stack of cards and decides if they want the stack or pass. If they pass, they add a card from the draw pile to it and proceed to the next stack. If they pass on all three stacks, they draw a single card from the draw pile and place it in their forest. If they accept a stack, they take the entire stack place every card, good or bad, in their forest; then add one card to the now empty draw stack. This continues until a player does not have three stacks to choose cards from (because the draw pile ran out). This triggers a scoring round. After scoring, all the cards, except animals, are returned to the main draw pile, get shuffled, and the new draft piles are set up to play another round. After three rounds, final scoring occurs. Players can "lure" animals to their forest with food, which is not easy to come by. Luring animals to the forest not only provides some scoring bonuses or extra abilities, they also create a food chain that can earn additional points for each link in the chain it creates. It was an interesting and enjoyable game. I had expected my forest floor to be more central to the game, but I only used half of my available tree spots and only

earned two of the eight bonus tokens on the forest floor. I found the drafting mechanic very unique and would be willing to play it again.

SUNDAY — This was the final day of the retreat, a day we go to church, and our travel day, so we kept our game play to very short games.

Pergola — This is a lovely garden game that has strong theming with all its components. Players take turns selecting action tiles (in the shape of a garden tool) to take actions that add items to their garden. Items can be flowers or other plants, bugs, lanterns, and leaves. Every different flower and bug scores differently. Some score by sets of different colors, some score by growth height, and other score by number on the same level. A nearby water feature provides opportunities to gain additional items for the garden. Also, movement of a frog in the pond also can add items to the garden. The tool row has a fix selection of actions available when the tool



(action tile) is selected, but each tool has two additional items on the handle of tool also. As tools are selected, the tools shift to fill in the gaps (moving to a different action slot) and a new tool comes out, so the choices are different every turn. Each player will take 15 actions to build their garden. At the end of the game, the garden is scored and the highest score wins. Each player has a players aide that explains how all the items score in the garden, which is not only helpful but absolutely necessary because there are so many different ways to score. It is hard to tell who is doing better because of the different ways to score. We enjoyed the game, and we like the way our gardens came together. We did not always feel efficient with our turns, but we felt like we were always getting something that scored. We will play it again, but it did not enamor us enough to be added to our collection.

Pixies — This was a filler game some friends brought to the event — it was not in the library. It is an abstract game with the Pixies name only due to the artwork (photographs(?) of woodland pixie models on each card). Players draft from a row of cards to add to their tableau. Each card has a color and number and other scoring symbols. Players fill in their tableau in a 3x3



grid, and must place number cards in order and only one of each number can be in a tableau. A number card can be placed beneath a same number card once to allow that number to score (it doesn't score unless it is "validated"

and the same number beneath it). If a card can not be used, it is placed in an empty space face down, creating a dead zone. After each round, tableaus are scored for numbered cards and largest connected colored cards. After three rounds, the highest score wins. It was too luck based for my taste, and the drafting was prone to hate drafting as much as efficiency drafting. The only plus side was that the game was quick.

10 Days in Europe — This game is about developing a 10-day travel itinerary through Europe. Players start with a random placement of ten tiles representing countries in Europe and travel modes (ship at seas and planes). Each turn, players draw a tile from one of the two face up piles or the face down pile. Then they replace one tile from their itinerary (if desired) and discard a tile to the face up piles. The game board only serves as a reference for which country is next to each other or seas. Travel itineraries must connect to neighboring



countries for travel by foot, or connected by a ship from the proper shared sea, or by a plane in the color that matches both country colors. Most countries only have one tile in the game, but some have two, and that is important information to know so that you are not waiting for a specific country to appear when it is already buried deep in the discard pile. Some flexibility is needed, but so is some luck. It was a pleasant short game, but not one for our collection.

Let's Make a Bus Route — I've played this on Board Game Area, so I knew this game was short. It is a flip and write game played in 12 turns. Each player has their own color marker to show their bus route. Each player starts from a different location and has their own personal objective route to complete. Each player has their own scoring board that tracks the passengers picked up and delivered for scoring. It also helps track which route markings have been used. There are six colored bus stops, which determine the direction and distance the bus will move. It is different for each player (the red bus stop may be a short straight for one player, but it may be a double turn for another). Once the final stop is marked on the board, players add up their scores. Points are scored for driving tourist by temples and castles, for delivering students to schools, for delivery commuters to subway stations, and for picking up elderly. Two common objectives can be scored also, in addition to the players own route goal. Highest score wins. It was light, quick, and passible game. The boards were heavily used so the markers had a rough time showing up on and later getting erased from the boards.



This is my favorite, and really only, gaming convention I attend. It is limited to only 250 people and it focuses only on playing games — no shows, no vendors, nothing to distract attendees from just playing games. I already booked my trip for next year.



Our return trip took two days, including the requisite stop at Bu-ces to get barbeque and jerky along the way. I stopped by Vahalla's Gate Games in Columbia, Missouri on the way home. It is just off the highway and it is an absolute hidden gem of a game store with a great selection of boardgames, rpgs, and wargames, well organized, well stocked, and staffed with very friendly personnel. We made a few impulse purchases, and will be stopping by there each time we pass by.

Needless to say, I'm exhausted, but I'm doing it again next year!

The Seedling

#51 They'll find a cure for anything

I'm writing this just hours before deadline from Manhattan, Kansas, where Molly and I are visiting one of her old friends. In a couple of days, we'll be off to Oklahoma City for the wedding of the son of another of her friends, as well as (if the stars align) a short visit with one of my cousins, whom I have not seen in many years. Back in Albuquerque, early autumn has arrived, along with a some rain after a fairly dry summer. Gamewise, I've been able to play two sessions of my friend Polo's *D&D* campaign in person, which is something I hadn't done in about two decades. I actually ordered a miniature to paint. My own game and my friend James's game, both *D&D 5E*, continue as usual.

All Good Things Must...

The Dullstrand Campaign | Sessions 55–56

Setting: Greyhawk—City of Dullstrand & surrounding environs

GM: James Schnedar

Game System: D&D 5E

Character	Player	Species & Class
Keolaren	Mark Nemeth	human druid
Gardai	Joe Ring	dwarf ranger
"Deuce" Durzub Mulakh	Mike Schnedar	orc barbarian
"Bova" Korst Bovasht	Polo Schnedar	lizardfolk monk

Prominent NPCs

Dudvin Hopnik	Keolaren's henchman, a human knight
Karvala	On-and-off party associate, an elven rogue
Jaoti	Lizardman, cursed to undeath
Fio Nie	Traveling priest

Recap

After months in Hepmonaland, the party had finally embarked for their home in Dullstrand. However, the ship sank in transit, and they escaped to a small village south of Dullstrand, near the keep where Keolaren remains imprisoned and which Bova intends to claim for his own. The village was enveloped by an energy-draining fog that emanated from the keep. After a brief encounter with some undead, the party decided to set off for the keep as soon as possible.

Session 55 [as reported by Dudvin Hopnik]

We scoured the village for useful potions, offering to pay beyond usual prices. Luckily, we secured a couple of potions of vitality, which those of us suffering from exhaustion—including myself—immediately consumed; the relief was immediate. We also offered to hire anyone in town who was willing to accompany us in assaulting the keep, and we found willing companions in ragtag groups of sailors and mercenaries, as well as a traveling priest named Fio Nie.



The black dragon soars over the keep. (Illustration created with Reve)

As we approached the keep, the fog got so thick that we lost our way and were attacked by a few wraiths and shadows. We were never in danger during the fight, but the encounter drained resources which we would have much preferred to conserve. Upon arrival at the keep, we found several dead bodies in the tower near the drawbridge, most showing vicious claw marks. We cleared the bodies—in part to prevent them from later being animated against us—and Karvala took a sniper's position on the keep's rooftop. The rest of us proceeded into the courtyard, where we immediately sighted a huge black dragon, apparently asleep. We tried to sneak closer, but it awoke, took to the air, and moved to attack.

Using his enchanted lantern, Gardai aimed a beam of disintegration at the beast. The magic stripped the illusionary flesh from the creature, revealing the form of an undead dragon beneath, but it did not appear otherwise harmed. There was a pulsing black gem set in the center of the undead dragon's chest, causing the other members of the party to recognize the monster as the



Dudvin shoots through the fog. (Illustration created with Reve)

transformed lizardman Jaoti, whom Bova had—reluctantly—consigned to undeath [session 38]. The undead dragon raised a few undead allies, and the battle ensued. The sailors and mercenaries made a poor showing, but Fio Nie proved surprisingly effective with his clerical magic. Karvala, who had left her sniper's nest and approached closer, delivered a brilliant bowshot that put the dragon down.

To our horror, the undead lizardman form of Jaoti rose from the dragon's corpse, still bearing the black gem at the center of his chest. To our immense alarm, we quickly found that the transformed Jaoti radiated an anti-magic field that deactivated ordinary magic items, though not Gardai's lantern or Bova's Conch of the Deep. Even worse, Jaoti seemed immune to non-magic items, so most of us, including myself, had no means of damaging him. I was hoping that Fio Nie might be able to cast a spell to negate the anti-magic field, but he had just fallen in combat and lay unconscious on the ground. We were in great peril indeed.



Jaoti emerges from the dragon's corpse. (Illustration created with Reve)

Session 56 [as reported by Dudvin Hopnik]

I rushed to Fio Nie and poured my last healing potion down his throat. I got a sense that it was working, though more slowly than usual. In the meantime, the others had tried attacking the soul gem itself, rather than the body of Jaoti, and had found that we could damage it, though it was quite difficult to hit [we could attack it at disadvantage only under conditions where we would have ordinarily have had advantage]. Fio Nie returned to consciousness and attempted to negate the anti-magic field, but he failed to do so. At one point, I was paralyzed by Jaoti's undead powers, while the Bova and Gardai lost consciousness, and Deuce remained on his feet only because of an innate ability to remain on his feet with injuries that otherwise would kill someone [he had some ability that put him at 1 hp rather than going unconscious]. In my paralysis, I lost track of exactly what happened, but Deuce was able to momentarily flee the combat and save the others, who eventually

were able to knock the soul gem out of Jaoti's body, which then crumbled to dust. Since I'd joined the party, it was the closest we'd come to all meeting our deaths.

After we'd destroyed Jaoti, I immediately searched the grounds for Keolaren, whom we'd expected to find held in stasis [since session 46]. We found him almost immediately, held in a stasis field. Fio Nie attempted to dispel the field, and he succeeded this time. Keolaren opened his eyes and took in the scene with a complete lack of understanding before saying, "Um, mind telling me what's going on?"

Epilogue [as reported by Keolaren]

It seemed like no time had passed since I drew the magic card in the hag's underground chambers [session 46]. I cannot fully express my thanks to my friends, especially Dudvin, whom I had known for only a few hours, but who dedicated months to freeing me from imprisonment.

It's been a year now since the battle with Jaoti. Upon reuniting with Olrea, I was pleased to find that she had taken my letter to heart [session 30] and attempted to change her ways. However, this has been easier said than done, as her vast merchant empire remains entangled with various unsavory enterprises, and she doesn't want to break too many commitments that she's already made. I made a trip back to Irongate, to see my sister, Saebeth, who's doing well in her recovery from immersion in the demonic cult [sessions 20–23], as well as my parents. To encourage myself to visit more, I purchased a pied-à-terre in Irongate. Back in Dullstrand, I've been helping Olrea operate her mines in a way that cause less damage to the natural environment. Meanwhile, the various pirate factions have been united under the brutal leadership of Wycombe Larsa's bastard son, Declan [session 28], and have been causing many problems for seaborne commerce. The shadow elves that once appeared poised for invasion [session 28] had moved briefly to trouble Moonshore [sessions 3–8, 12], before vanishing for the time being.

As for the others, Bova decided to retain keep for his own, settling into the life of a lord. Restoring the keep and maintaining his mansion in Dullstrand [session 28], from which a semi-transparent gang—one of several eldritch horrors to recently appear near Dullstrand—had to be forcibly evicted. Gardai has been helping Bova manage his properties, still dodging bounty hunters lured by the giants' and ogres' rewards on his head. Deuce ran into Copperhead again [sessions 23–25, 52], and the two of them alternate between running a training school for gladiators and hunting hydras. Karvala wandered off one day, but she sent us a paper bird stating that the twin of Deuce's magic mirror [session 27] lies within Olrea's vault. Perhaps not coincidentally, Olrea's associate, Rune Trel, reports that someone has stolen a few items from Olrea's vault, which was supposedly impregnable.

Observations & Commentary

My observation and commentary on these sessions appears below.

The End

This may not be apparent from the writeup, but this was the final session of the campaign (sort of—see below). I was not expecting the end of the campaign to come in session 56. It was kind of a shock, but it was fun to come up with the content for the epilogue, which the group did jointly. James mentioned that he felt a little bit bad that I didn't to play Keolaren again after his rescue, but that turned not to be so bad because, after some discussion, we decided to follow up with a new campaign in the same setting, with our old characters being patrons of the new ones. We also talked about having occasional opportunities to play the old characters.

This was the first time I've ever played a campaign with a definitive conclusion, as opposed to simply ending unceremoniously because the characters had gotten too unwieldy at higher levels. I liked it; it feels good to have something complete, as well as something that leads into the future.

And So It Begins Again

The Second Dullstrand Campaign | Session 0

Setting: Greyhawk—City of Dullstrand & surrounding environs

GM: James Schnedar

Game System: D&D 5E

Character	Player	Species & Class
Elaris	Sebastian Luiz	tiefling cleric
Zerna	Mark Nemeth	human wizard
Teslin Psy	Joe Ring	drow rogue
Pocketsnatch	Mike Schnedar	goblin fighter
Graata Drob	Polo Schnedar	orc bard

Our Patrons	Original Player	Species & Class
Keolaren	Mark Nemeth	human druid
Gardai	Joe Ring	dwarf ranger
"Deuce" Durzub Mulakh	Mike Schnedar	orc barbarian
"Bova" Korst Bovasht	Polo Schnedar	lizardfolk monk

Prominent NPCs

Dudvin Hopnik	Keolaren's henchman, a human knight
Karvala	On-and-off party associate, an elven rogue
Olrea	Keolaren's girlfriend, oligarch of Dullstrand
Umphray	Older knight, oligarch of Dullstrand
Declan	Pirate lord bent on revenge and conquest

Prologue: Zerna's Story

I suppose it was my fault, but I wasn't trying to do anything wrong. I really had it good, too. Keolaren, my old neighbor in Irongate who had always been like a reclusive big brother, was letting me live rent-free in his new lodgings, provided I would clear out whenever he came to town. I'd fallen in love with magic, making an abrupt career switch from architecture to wizardry. I didn't want to be any sort of adventuring wizard, though; I just wanted a comfortable life in Irongate, crafting items and being a sage. My parents were silversmiths, so I knew my way around valuable items. Everything was going well. I had an aptitude for magic, and my trickle of clients was slowly growing larger.

The trouble started when I heard about the theft of the Ashcloud Bowl, an heirloom of a now-defunct noble house from the Lordship of the Isles. When I heard it was stolen from its current owner, a local merchant named Agburt the Orange, I figured that if I made a replica, no one would know it wasn't the real thing. It took a couple of weeks, but the replica came out well, and it looked quite fine sitting on Keolaren's dining table. My friends were impressed. But you know who wasn't impressed? Agburt the Orange. Somebody blabbed to him that I had his bowl. I'd always thought he was a milquetoast merchant, but apparently he fancied himself a ruthless tough guy who had regular dealings with the criminal underworld. Anyway, he took umbrage at the idea that I had his bowl, even though I really didn't. So when I looked out Keolaren's kitchen window and saw two of Agburt's thugs approaching, I grabbed my spellbooks and my coin purse and then ran out the back door.

I didn't know anybody outside of Irongate, other than Keolaren himself, so I spent all my money on passage on a ship that was going to Dullstrand. After many seasick days in my cabin, I threw myself on Keolaren's mercy once I got to Dullstrand. His displeasure wasn't quite as bad as I'd feared. He and his old adventuring buddies were putting together a new squad to run some of their more dangerous errands. It wasn't my cup of tea, but better options were absent. So now I'm condemned, at least temporarily, to the life of a traveling adventurer, roaming the filthy, bug-infested



Is this the real Ashcloud Bowl, or is it a replica? (Illustration created with Reve)

wilderness with a band of people who actually seem to like this sort of thing.

Session 0

This was supposed to be a easy mission. Bova, who had construction going on at both his keep and his mansion, wanted us to deliver supplies to the lumber camp he had employed. I'm not even sure why we all had to go, but the five of us were on the wagon, pulled by a tired ox named Vincent. We were supposed to make the deliver to the foreman, Tibor Wester, and then go home. I started to worry when we approached the camp. It was too quiet: no sound of saws and axes, no babble of uncouth lumberjacks. When we got to the camp, it looked a little beat up, and no one was around.

Teslin and Pocketsnatch went forward to investigate. Right in front of them, the ground erupted, and a monster that looked like a giant praying mantis leapt out and attacked them. I sent a bolt of electricity at the thing, then followed it up with a bolt of fire. The fire finished it off, even though I felt like I didn't hit it that hard. We started to search the camp, beginning with some tents. There was another of the monsters—which we later found out were called ankhegs—over there. The guys hacked at it with their weapons, and I used the same spell combination as before. This time, Elaris dealt the death blow by hooking his weapon in its throat and tearing out its trachea. There was insect goo everywhere. I was glad I hadn't gotten closer.

The foreman's office was in a little cabin, which we approached cautiously. I noted that the foundation seemed disturbed, so we were forewarned. Indeed, there was another ankheg inside. I stayed outside and slung spells through the window until it was dead. The first room we saw didn't have anything interesting in it, but there



An ankheg in the lumber camp. (Illustration created with Reve)

was a locked door to another. One of the big guys busted through it, and Tibor Wester was inside. I've never seen someone so fearful. He wanted to get out of there right away, and we could hardly get a coherent story out of him. He said everybody else in the camp was dead, but we didn't see enough bodies. I suppose the ankhegs might have carried them off, but I was suspicious. After we got him out of the office, I searched around, but all I found was routine paperwork and logbooks.

I didn't mind getting away from the camp myself, so we all headed back. After a couple of hours, we came upon a boar sitting in the middle of the road. We all got the impression that it was happy to see us, which seemed weird. After a while, it started trotting back toward the lumber camp. Elaris followed for a while, then turned back when he thought he was getting to far away from the party. Like I said, weird. Anyway, we eventually reported back to Bova and had a few days off before our next assignment.

Observations & Commentary

My observation and commentary on these sessions appears below.

The Beginning

I was excited to start over in the same setting with new characters. Not that it's all that elaborate, but this is the most complex background I've ever come up with for a new character. I kind of liked the idea of playing a character that isn't keen on the adventuring life but may eventually grow to like it (or not). I'm also going to try to write the session reports in a different narrative voice, at least at first. After 30+ years of education and work as an engineer, I tend to default to a concise technical writing style, so we'll see how long I can keep up a different style (if it even is all that different).



The boar waits in the road. (Illustration created with Reve)

On the Edges

As an experiment, James wanted to replace the D&D skill system with something called edges, which is an idea I think he got from some other game. Basically, edges are background-based bonuses you can apply to skill rolls when it's appropriate to the situation. This is in place of normal D&D skill bonuses. It was kind of fun to come up with them. I gave my character edges related to item crafting and evaluation, architecture, fashion & style, swimming and holding breath (from backstory experience as a pearl diver), and getting to sleep easily (attributed to acclimation to her parents' silversmithing noise). In practice, I thought the system worked pretty well in session 0, even though nobody was used to it yet. We'll see how it goes.

Some Hard Choices

The Eastlands Campaign | Session 4 & Another Session 0

Setting: Eastlands (email me if you want a setting guide)

GM: Mark Nemeth

Game System: D&D 5E

Player	Character	Class
Sebastian Luiz	Vale	ranger
	Yanic	barbarian
James Schnedar	Destrian Marvane	wizard
	Karn Thorn	warlock
Joe Ring	Bristol	fighter
	Shadden Tuck	cleric
	Dakota Shelvin	rogue
Polo Schnedar	Grubor Hawkstorm	sorcerer
	Mooria Zurka	ranger
	Wrag Drukstol	rogue

Prominent NPCs

Ivora	Chaplain of Norvald
Haroot	Steward of Norvald
Niaxe	A traveling midwife
Rogolith	A local painter, recently murdered
Mutani	Adult daughter of Rogolith
Niaxe	A traveling midwife
Dozira	A woman, exiled for manufacturing poisons
Bloonar	A man exiled for armed robbery
Alfinno ("Bruiser")	Local petty criminal
Elia	Veiled woman disfigured by an acid attack
Udargu	Wrongly convicted man, now back from exile

Recap

The party has returned from an expedition to inform Udargu, a man in exile for manslaughter, that his conviction had been overturned on the basis on newly discovered evidence. Along the way, they spent the night at the Sunflower Tower, a former wizard's tower recently converted to an inn, where they witnessed an abortive wyvern attack and rescued the stableboy from falling into an abandoned well. Continuing to search for Udargu, they came upon a orderly compound led by Zarixi, a friendly but reclusive wizard. They eventually found Udargu and, after getting past his initial suspicions, convinced him to return with them to Norvald.

Session 4

Characters Participating: Shadden, Moorria, Karn, Grubor, Bristol, Destrian

Shadden arrived at his room at the chapel to find that someone had apparently searched it, though nothing seemed to be missing. He also had a note from Multani, daughter of the deceased artist Rogolith, informing him that he could get the painting of himself [session 2], from her anytime prior to her departure, about twenty days hence. There was also a note from Ivora, the head chaplain, instructing him to see her immediately. Hastening to Ivora's chambers, Shadden found that she had summoned him to ensure that he was ready for his previously accepted assignment—requiring departure the following morning—to escort a midwife to attend the birth of a pregnant woman in exile. She gently chided him for cutting things so close, then offered him money to hire his party



Niixa accompanies the party. (Illustration created with Reve)

and suggested that, if possible, he include someone who was knowledgeable about poisons, since the pregnant woman had been exiled for sale of illegal poisons. Ivora appeared surprised by the searching of Shadden's room and said she knew nothing about it.

In the brief time prior to the group's departure, Grubor penned a letter to his mother, who resided in Stolt (his hometown), detailing his recent search for Udargu. Karn had time for a brief conversation with Imadria, a luxury-goods merchant who was his former employer, after unexpectedly finding her in town.

The party was scheduled to depart in the early morning for a two-day journey to the residence of the pregnant woman, Dozira, and her partner, Bloonar, who had been exiled for armed robbery. The pair hadn't known each other prior to their exile, but they decided to stick together because Dozira lacked the skills to survive in a dangerous wilderness and Bloonar lacked competence in the domestic arts and in any form of agriculture. Bloonar's note requesting the midwife provided clear directions to their abode, which was east and slightly north of Norvald. On the morning of the departure, the party found the midwife, Niixa, well-prepared and appropriately mindful of both the dangers of wilderness travel and the import of her assignment.

The first day and night of travel passed uneventfully. The next morning, however, the party was ambushed by a group of kobolds and their trained attack goats while crossing a stream. Karn, alone on the far side of the river, used his magic to create the sound of an illusionary owlbear, which frightened away most of the goats. The kobolds' initial assault proved ineffective, and they quickly attempted to flee after seeing a couple of their comrades fall. The party was able to dispatch all of them before they could escape, and Mooria, who had used her expertise with animals to calm one of the goats, found herself with a new billy goat follower. The party continued onward without further incident until arriving at the vicinity of Bloonar and Dozira's residence.



The residence of Dozira and Bloonar. (Illustration created with Reve)



Dozira lies in bed. (Illustration created with Reve)

As they approached their destination, a scruffy man sprang from concealment in the bushes and gruffly demanded to know their business. This turned out to be Bloonar himself, who was quickly mollified when he learned it was the midwife and her escort. He expressed concern about Dozira's wellbeing, stating that she had been bruising very easily and that he had confined her to bed for the last few weeks. Approaching the house, the party noted an extensive garden that had once been well-ordered but had recently gone to seed. There was no livestock. Mooria also observed a patch of low bushes with white flowers, which she identified as summerflower, the petals of which could be used to create a poison that worked by preventing blood coagulation. Destrian used his magic to detect poison, finding that Bloonar bore poisoned arrows.

The party, led by Niixa, entered the house and found Dozira in bed, in the final stage of pregnancy and covered with bruises. Niixa asked to be alone with her, and the remainder of the party made awkward conversation with Bloonar outside. Destrian voiced his strong opposition to use of poisons, and Bloonar angrily responded by stating that their use was necessary to ensure survival in the dangerous world exiles were forced to inhabit and that the poison-prohibiting laws of the settled lands do not apply in the wilderness (which, from a strict legal interpretation, was true).

Niixa exited the house and later contrived to speak alone to the party. She had concluded that Dozira was suffering from prolonged chronic exposure to a poison called summerflower extract, which causes hemophilia, and that she was very unlikely to survive childbirth, though the baby would probably live. The party took stock of their resources and determined that none of their equipment or magic was able to provide effective relief. She left it to the party to decide whether to tell Dozira and Bloonar about Dozira's condition; the party decided to tell them immediately. Dozira reacted with resignation, as if she had half expected the diagnosis. Bloonar, however, reacted with angry denial. Karn tried to calm him by stating that his forthcoming baby might offer some solace in Dozira's absence. The couple wanted to be alone together through the night, and the party did not interrupt them until late the following morning, when they still had not emerged from their room.

Cautiously entering, they found that Bloonar had calmed down and accepted reality. The couple asked Shadden to marry them, to which he readily agreed. Bloonar pointedly instructed Shadden to properly record the marriage upon his return to Norvald, carefully going over the spelling of their names. Almost immediately thereafter, Shadden performed a short, poignant marriage ceremony.

Later that day, Niixa took the party aside and said, "We have a problem. Do you know what it is?" When they didn't, she followed up by asking, "What is the baby going to eat?" There was a stunned

silence. Various options were considered and rejected, as there was no time to procure a milk-producing animal, and even if there had been, no one trusted Bloonar to properly care for it. Bloonar's exile carried a strict sentence of death if he returned to settled lands, so the party decided that adoption was the best option, as the baby could probably survive the two-day journey back to Norvald without being fed.

Surreptitiously, Niaxa and a few of the party members spoke to Dozira about this issue and, while conflicted, she agreed that Bloonar, being a man of violence and not industry, was incapable of feeding the baby, and she thought it would be better not to tell him until after the child was born, as he would likely be enraged, and she didn't want the baby born into an environment of immediate conflict. The party agreed to this course of action.

The next morning, Dozira's labor began. As the childbirth proceeded, she began hemorrhaging extensively, as expected, but she delivered a healthy baby girl at about noon. Dozira lived long enough to name the baby Nela and feed her the colostrum, and then she died. The party let Bloonar hold the baby for a few minutes, then instructed him to give her back to Niaxa for cleaning and evaluation. When Bloonar complied, the party, led at first by Grubor, explained the situation, offering to ensure Nela's awareness of her biological parentage and bring her back when she was old enough. Bloonar furiously protested, offering various implausible suggestions of how he might feed the baby, including a mixture of water and beer (of which he had an extensive supply), along with chewing food himself and feeding her like a baby bird. Karn [*whose wife and children had been killed in his pre-campaign backstory*] stepped forward and delivered an impassioned speech about how he would give anything to know his own children were alive, even if he could never see them again, and he urged Bloonar to acquiesce to the adoption. Bloonar appeared on the verge of agreement [*Karn rolled 20 on his DC 21 Persuasion check*], then hardened his face and said, "You ain't taking my girl."

At this point, Shadden took charge, firmly stating that the decision was made and that Bloonar could not hope to defeat the entire party in combat, which they were fully prepared to engage in. Bloonar made a few starts at drawing a weapon, then seemed to realize that, while he was more than a match for any of the party members individually, he couldn't beat them all. The party, along with Niaxa and Nela, moved to depart immediately, and Bloonar stood still and watched them, vowing that they'd regret this, then began weeping as they got farther away.

The journey back to Norvald was somber but uneventful. Nela was placed with a young couple that was a distant acquaintance of Grubor and Moorla. Shadden and his pals practiced some new skills [*mostly moving up to third level*], then went to see Mutani and retrieve his portrait. Arriving at her deceased father's house, they found it, if anything, more disordered than before. Mutani handed over the painting, with the canvas rolled up, rather than stretched and framed as it had previously been. When Shadden inquired about this, she said that she was trying to sell all the art supplies, which didn't sound wholly believable. In general, her answers appeared somewhat evasive, and she clearly wanted Shadden to depart as soon as possible. She seemed to be in a hurry and said that she intended to leave town on the following day.

Upon arrival back at the Constellation (the inn in Norvald), the bartender took Grubor aside and told him that an unusual visitor had asked for him and indicated a room where the visitor might be found. Proceeding thence, Grubor was greeted by a person wearing a dress, with head fully veiled except for a strip across the eyes. In an odd, rasping voice, the visitor introduced herself as Elia, an acquaintance of Grubor's mother from Stolt. Noting that Grubor and his party seemed to be good at finding people in exile, she offered to hire them to locate a man named Wudron. According to



Grubor's mysterious visitor. (Illustration created with Reve)

Elia, in her youth, she'd been pursued by two suitors, of whom Wudron had been one. When she chose the other and became affianced to him, Wudron, in a fit of jealousy, had thrown acid on her face, permanently disfiguring her, as well as ruining her voice. For this act, Wudron was sentenced to exile and released at the northern edge of the settled lands. Grubor had a vague memory of this incident from his childhood. Elia said that she was tired of harboring the anger and wanted Grubor to find Wudron, deliver a letter of forgiveness, and then write to her to confirm its delivery and let her know Wudron's location and state in life. She offered a small advance payment now, to be followed by a much larger sum upon his successful return. She said that she had reason to believe that Wudron was living near Mt. Sernec (which is far west of Norvald, near the seacoast). Grubor accepted this commission and shared the details with his friends.

Session 0(c)

Characters Participating: Vale, Yanic, Dakota, Wrag

[The group has a new player, so this session was scheduled to give him a chance to get acclimated to the setting and software, as well as to give his characters some experience.]

While returning to Norvald after an archery practice session, the party was passed by a horseman—heavily injured and sporting a large facial tattoo—riding recklessly in the opposite direction. Moments after appearing, he was already far down the road. The party continued back to Norvald, finding the Octagon (Norvald's central plaza) abuzz with activity. At the center of the commotion, the village steward, Haroot, was talking with the chaplain, Ivora. The party quickly learned that someone had stolen the reliquary from the chapel, sustaining extensive injuries as he made his escape. The culprit was identified as a local petty criminal named Alfinno, who calls himself Bruiser. A reward was offered for his capture, provide he is brought in alive. Given that Alfinno was known to have a large tattoo of a serpent on his face, it was evident to the party that he was the horseman who had passed them.

The party spoke to Haroot about the finer points of conditions for the reward, receiving both clarification and caution that Alfinno might have a gang on his side, as he had been trying to recruit disaffected youth lately. It was easy to locate Alfinno's trail, and they followed it for about a mile until it turned east into the forest and led to a dark cave mouth. Five horses were tied inside. Wrag lit his lantern, and the party entered. There was a large chamber with a narrow passage leading from the back. The party proceeded onward, almost immediately activating a tripwire that set off a blade trap. With increased caution, they continued forward until they came to a flooded portion of the passage. The water was about two feet deep and quite turbid. There were several bear traps hidden in



A desperate horseman. (Illustration created with Reve)

the water, but the party's precautions were sufficient to avoid injury. Passing the flooded section of the passage, they proceeded into a larger chamber that had a sandy floor and several apparent exits, each covered by a curtain. Vale carefully examined the sand on the floor, noting that one of the exits seemed to have been the subject of a recent effort to efface tracks in the sand. Wrag and Dakotadiscovered that each exit had a sand-covered false floor, presumably leading to a pit or chute. The party proceeded carefully down the passage where the tracks had been brushed, stepping over the false floor. The passage turned south, terminating in an outdoor ledge about forty feet above a river. On the opposite side, there was a narrow floodplain on which a windowless shack had been constructed. There was a cable stretched across the river, with several handles to facilitate its use as a zipline.

Wrag crept forward on the ledge and looked northeast toward the shack. He wasn't sure, but it looked like someone was on guard on its north side, mostly concealed by the wall of the shack. There was no movement for several minutes. The others moved quietly onto the ledge, then Wrag got onto the zipline and pushed off. The wheels of the zipline handle squealed unexpectedly loudly, and the guard by the shack raised the alarm. The other party members hurried onto the zipline, and an archery duel ensued, as two more people came out of the shack. One of the enemy bowmen fell, but so did Wrag and Vale. Yanic rushed forward to engage the enemies hand-to-hand, followed by the others. Another enemies fell, and the remaining one, a young woman, threw down her sword and surrendered.

Vale's condition seemed to have stabilized, though he remained unconscious. Wrag, once seemingly at death's door, made a sudden



Wrag crosses the river. (Illustration created with Reve)

recovery and was up on his feet. The woman they had captured, Dezella, asked permission to tend to her companions, which was granted after the party had confiscated their weapons. Without need for much duress, Dezella revealed that Alfinno was inside the cabin, still severely injured. Wrag opened the door momentarily to glimpse Alfinno making a sudden move, then closed it. A thrown dagger thunked into the door. The party entered quickly, and Alfinno submitted.

In response to a question about whether Dezella had participated in the theft of the reliquary, she hesitantly said, "I wasn't there," and she subsequently mentioned that Alfinno had promised her a carefree life of treasure and adventure, which she now perceived him as unable to deliver. The party decided to leave Dezella and her companions to their freedom, which she received with surprise and thanks. The party recovered the reliquary and took most of Alfinno's possessions, which included some coins, a nice dagger, a pair of gilded throwing knives, and the logbook of a notorious criminal known as Basilisk, which whom Dakota had had a previous run-in. After getting directions from Dezella about where to ford the river downstream, the party took Alfinno and headed back to Norvald, where they turned over Alfinno and the reliquary and collected their reward, as well as the thanks of Haroot and Ivora.

Observations & Commentary

My observation and commentary on these sessions appears below.

The Unfortunate Infant

I'm apprehensive about the tragic storyline in session 4 involving Dozira and her baby. In addition to it being heavier than my group's usual content, I wasn't sure how a childbirth-centered session would be received by a bunch of middle-aged guys. On the other hand, one of the players, in his pre-campaign questionnaire, had expressed a desire for moral dilemmas, and this was an attempt to come though on that. It's always a little hard to tell, but it seemed as if the session was received fairly well, which makes me more inclined to try future experiments.

A Tangled Web

I'm finding it difficult to manage all the parallel narratives and weave them together. I'm not sure it's working particularly poorly in the campaign, but I feel like my management of it is awkward. Maybe it doesn't matter that much, as long as there's an interesting adventure for each session, but I'd like to feel more comfortable with my approach.



Haroot thanks the party while maintaining his usual solemn demeanor. (Illustration created with Reve)

Comments

On *E&A* #2

John Redden

I understand and share your objection to the ICE incursion on your farm, especially given the unmarked nature of the group. It really seems law enforcement officials ought to be clearly identified (unless they're specifically authorized to work undercover, of course, but that doesn't seem like the case here).

I'm sorry that your regular game came to an end, too.

Brian Rogers

Good luck on the 5K; the way you described it was quite amusing.

It's cool that you're running the games for the kids in the library. It sounds fun. I do not have the confidence to try playing with a big group of juveniles. I wish I did.

Patrick Riley

Point taken about people who most need to learn the lessons of *American Notes for General Circulation* being unlikely to read it. Still, I can dream.

I enjoyed the PC profiles from your game.

Gabriel Roark

I think you're right about adjusting challenge ratings slightly. The last few encounters have been pretty easy. Next time, the party plans to venture back into the old-school big dungeon they've already explored a little, so it'll be more up to them to decide how much risk tolerance they have. I'm curious about what they'll do.

Myles Corcoran

Regarding your comment to Heath Row, Portugal seems to have become a common destination for Americans moving to Europe, perhaps because of perceived low cost of living and openness to immigrants. My wife's brother moved there recently. I'm curious about whether this phenomenon is well known outside the United States.

Regarding my description of my RPG taste as "retrograde," it's kind of a joke and kind of not. I do enjoy very traditional *D&D* with fights in corridors, secret doors, and delving ever deeper in a big dungeon. On the other hand, I can't seem to resist introducing unconventional narrative elements and expanding thematic boundaries (as may be evident with my writeup in this issue). I want it all, I guess.

Dylan Capel

Civil engineer speaking: Wooden buildings aren't too bad in environments with earthquakes. The wood flexes a little bit and can absorb the shock better than masonry, which tends to crack rather than bend. The wooden house I grew up in was built in 1974 and came through the 2019 Ridgecrest, California, earthquakes (of magnitudes 6.4, 5.4, and 7.1) without significant damage. I don't live there any more, of course, but the current owners have let me inside when I've visited my hometown.

If you get a message supposedly from God, *of course* it makes a huge difference whether the message is actually from God and, if so, what characteristics God actually has. If the message *is* from God and God is knowledgeable, honest, and good, then it makes sense to follow any instructions you might get. If the message isn't from God or God isn't reliable, then following it might not work out so well.

Paul Holman

I think in *AD&D*, infravision is an alternate mode of vision. In later editions, the various forms of seeing in the dark are more akin to ordinary vision.

Using the old British currency system for flavor seems like a great idea. It's not totally alien, but it's meaningfully different. Also, most English-speaking people have heard of it and associate it with old times, even if they don't know how it works.

Patrick Zoch

I think your hand-drawn maps look great! Very stylish. It's a little hard to distinguish the floor material hatching from the solid wall hatching, as you have noted. But they're still quite usable, and a little adjust could make them even better. Very nice work, indeed.

Heath Row

I'd like to see you if you come to Albuquerque again.

Clark Timmins

Thanks for showing us as much as you could of BII½. It had never occurred to me to do something like this, but it makes perfect sense. You've give me a new sense of freedom of form.

Joshua Kronengold

I'm continuing to have inexplicable problems with audio. Doing exactly the same thing results in anything from good audio to near unintelligibility. I'm about due for a new computer, so perhaps that will help. The only thing that reliably works now is using plugin headphones with my phone.

I'm not sure what to think about PC motivations. Some players tell me clearly what their characters want to do. Others never really do (and I may be one of that type myself). I guess if the game has a mechanism to make players declare their characters' goals, it might make things easier for the GM. On the other hand, I can see that same mechanism producing narrowly focused results. I don't know.

Lisa Padol

I'm not sure if airlines not compensating passengers for weather delays is a new policy. It's never come up for me before.

As a GM, James is pretty flexible, so he'll find a way to work with whatever happens. In fact, one thing I learned from him long ago is that if what you had planned becomes infeasible, just make something up instead of compelling the players to do what you had in mind.

The two-character Heartland City game sounds cool.

Here's the rationale for the things you asked about in my Eastlands game. In session 0, Gemma wasn't hiring the PCs to do something she couldn't; rather she was trying to give her brother (and the other PCs) a gentle—so she thought—introduction to the adventuring life, while accomplishing a useful task that would have been well within her own capability but emotionally distasteful. Regarding the picture of Wylinga, I had a lot of trouble getting Gemini to make something close to what I had in mind. I wasn't thrilled with it, but it was the best of several attempts. Since she's patrolling the point of her property most prone to raids from monsters, it's not crazy that she's prepared for combat, but I would have preferred something that looked a little different. Also, I tried to make up for it with a more representative portrait of her in a later issue. Finally, Udargu was exiled from Norvald, not Stolt; the magistrate from Stolt is the only magistrate for all Stolt's territory, which includes the smaller village of Norvald. It's been a while since Udargu was exiled, and he wasn't all that well liked. Also, no one knew exactly where he was. And as you likely know by now, the PCs did up looking for more out of sympathy than desire for

reward.

When you state that the exact drive doesn't matter that much as long as the PC engages with the scenario, that's basically what I think too. The motivation doesn't matter as long as its internally consistent and gives the GM a means of coming up with scenarios that the PCs like.

Thanks for the clarification regarding *Good Society* plotting; it appears I had misconceptions about the game.

In my experience, the different motivations and temperaments of the PCs (and players) makes the most difference to a scenario's resolution, rather than internal progress. For example, do the PCs turn over the villain to the authorities, kill him, let him go? Whereas during the scenario, they're probably fighting his minions and disarming his traps no matter their motivations.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek

Smoky sunsets are kind of cool. The smoke itself is a fun novelty for about one day, then it gets tiresome very quickly. I hope you have clearer air by now.

Thanks for the Machado stuff. I had known essentially none of it before. Very interesting.

I did think that the woman who asked me about Tavern of Souls was hoping it was a bar, rather than a game store. I told the owners about that incident, and they told me that a few people have come inside and asked if they have any jobs for servers.

Jim Vassilakos

I used to reject the concept of level training, but all my games are using it now. It's a nice means of giving the PCs a reason to seek monetary treasure.

On *E&A* #3

Roger Bell-West

Are there people who use script coordinators for their games? That seems...excessive.

Thanks for suggesting Typst, which I hadn't heard of. I'm using Scribus myself, but there are some things that are awkward with it.

John Redden

In response to your question about refunds from *A&E*, I did receive a \$15 refund, but I had about \$150 in credit. I decided not to worry about it; Lee seemed to have enough trouble going on at the time already, and I didn't really mind her getting a little extra after all her years of hard work.

Gabriel Roark

In my *Eastlands* game, all the humanoid monsters don't speak or negotiate, and they're more of a continuum than distinct species. I did this so that the PC could have some adversaries they could attack without compunction, whereas interaction with humans, even villainous ones, carries more nuance. It was basically an attempt to have variation in types of adversaries, while still making it everything clear for the players. Now, of course, I'm attempting to hang some plot points on it (though this isn't apparent in the session reports yet).

I'm continuing to enjoy retirement. For a while I was describing it as *every day is Saturday*, but lately I've been having a bit of a sense that its like *being in college without having to go to class or do homework*.

I enjoyed the *T&EE* stuff, as usual.

Michael Cule

Your city development process was interesting.

I think it's good to make some things hard for the PCs. It's good

if the players don't expect that will always succeed, even if they almost always do.

Dylan Capel

I've never played *Traveller*, but it always struck me as having been heavily influenced by *Foundation*, as you noted.

Avram Grumer

That Transatlantic accent is so strange. Watching old movies might make a person think that people used to talk like that, which, as you noted, could be quite misleading. It's strange that the idea ever occurred to anyone.

Myles Corcoran

I think you're exactly right about the players' tonal expectations needing to manage the GM's. Your pirate examples were apt.

I feel similarly to you about the *D&D 5E* and *Daggerheart* art. It's not intriguing, which I think is kind of the definition of what good art should be. It's hard to believe that *anyone* would actively like—as opposed to simply not hate—a lot of the contemporary game art.

Your explanation that it's easy to come with security that you can't break but difficult to find something that nobody can break was well-stated and astute. I've had this experience myself, after having my college dorm room burglarized after leaving a window open above a deep stairwell shaft. I never would have risked a fall into it, but evidently there was someone to whom the risk was tolerable.

Patrick Riley

One of the good things about *D&D* XP advancement is that, since the XP to advance is logarithmic, characters can miss a lot of action (or get a late start) and still only be a level or so behind.

I'm kind of a simulationist, so the *Daggerheart* initiative system really bugged me. Most of the other players are on the gamier side, though one does have a strong narrativist streak—but even he didn't like the initiative system.

My *Eastlands* game has only humans a playable PC species, so our preferences seem similar in that respect.

People certainly, *certainly*, have a tendency to co-opt God/religion to suit and justify their own preferences. Frankly, it's infuriating. That happens with non-religious concepts too, of course, but doing it with religion seems both more objectionable and more problematic. Religion ought to challenge and change my own intuition, not be an extension of it

h d d d

Brian Rogers

Regarding *Daggerheart*, *Critical Role* has incentives beyond the participants having a good time, whereas most of us don't. Frankly, I'd get a little uncomfortable and self-conscious if a game session was set up to spotlight my character, and it sounds a little dull if I'm supposed to be a part of the supporting cast for someone else's spotlight session. Obviously it can't be exactly equal for everyone all the time, and that's fine. But it seems like something to be minimized—or maybe limited—rather than explicitly sought.

Somebody else recommended *Dungeon Crawler Carl* to me just a couple of days ago. Maybe I'll check it out.

Why did I read Sarah Moss's *Ripeness* despite not being its target audience? Two reasons: First, I try to read a variety of books, including some that are written for people unlike myself. I want to break down my bubble sometimes. Second, a few years ago, I made a vow to read one book published in each year back to 1800, which includes reading a book from each new year that comes around. It was getting to be about time to read a 2025 book, and *Ripeness* and *Fireweed* looked like the two most interesting ones on a list of new

releases that I found. In retrospect, I kind of wish I'd waited for Thomas Pynchon's upcoming *Shadow Ticket*, which I'm looking forward to, but I didn't know about it when I read the other two 2025 books.

Patrick Zoch

In contrast to your own experience, I find Meyers-Briggs and similar personality classification systems useful. There's a sense in which they are obviously pseudo-science, but that doesn't mean they lack utility. For me, it was very helpful to realize that other people may have vastly different mindsets and may be motivated by and concerned about concepts that I barely consider. They're good for awareness of diversity, but it's certainly important to know that they're simplified models of an infinite-parameter space, rather than definitive categories that objectively exist.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek

I continue to be amazed by your prolific production of Cuban stuff.

Jim Eckman

I like your art.

Lisa Padol

Brand, in Roger Zelazny's *Amber* books, does indeed seem like a Byronic hero. It would have been cool to get a little better sense of his thought process, though.

Regarding why humanoid monsters in my *Eastlands* game don't talk or negotiate, yes, you're thinking of the correct setting; also, see my comments to Gabriel Roark, above.

Your *Phoenix Dawn Command* example was interesting and even kind of shocking. A lot of people like math; it's bizarre for a scenario writer to assume that no one will do it correctly.

I think if the characters turtle up too much, it's not that hard for the GM to either destabilize their secure base or come up with some compelling reason why they have to leave. It's not as if the players and GM are actually adversarial to one other, at least in any game I've ever played. Rather, the GM is playing NPCs who are sometimes adversaries of the PC; so the NPCs may ruthlessly oppose the PCs, but the GM isn't opposing the players. As for acting like a character in a story, it always annoys me when characters in a story make bad decisions, so I certainly don't want this in my games. As a GM, I think it's my responsibility to properly incentivize the PCs.

Joshua Kronengold

Regarding clever PC actions, I think your example is good. Ideally, at least in my view, PCs would sometimes overcome adversaries with clever stratagems and sometimes slug it out through more conventional means. (And occasionally lose, too.) I genuinely enjoy all these options, from bypassing the encounter through toe-to-toe combats in tight corridors.

My characters usually *are* just me with a thin mask. I'm perfectly happy with that.

Jim Vassilakos

Thank you for the detailed explanation of the writers' circle. That sounds like something I would say I want to do and then never get around to. (This is a criticism of myself, not of your idea, which is well-conceived.)

Timothy Collinson

Thanks for asking what *xandering* means; I was wondering that myself.

You could not trust anything you thought between two and five a.m.; in those dark hours the brain was deprived of certain fuels or functions necessary for right mentation.

—Kim Stanley Robinson



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Age of Menace

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From Our Last Episode...



I came down with COVID 19 in late August, and was so suddenly afflicted that even this raccoon I spotted from our back deck looked at me with concern. I was off 4 days before I felt well enough to get back to work. While unwell, I tried setting up the free A1 academic license my university offers to all faculty of *Office 365* on my MacBook Air, which somehow disabled my *old Office 2019* in the process. I finally caved and bought *Office 2024* outright; so much for "free." All of which is my roundabout excuse for being skimpier with content for this month's E&A.

Gaming-wise I managed to get in a few more online sessions with *Peter Hildreth's* online Zoom game since last time (& still intends E&A). And on the Saturday before the deadline, I also manage to attend the semi-annual *Hamilton Tabletop Games Sale* and came home with far too many gaming goodies (see photo).



The Sunday before deadline I spent a fantastic 6+ hours catching up with old (gaming) friends I hadn't seen in far too long. It had been five years since I last saw Trevor, who was visiting from Saskatoon, and 1.5 years with former A&Er Chris, even though he's only ~1 hour away. Post brunch at *Jax Sweet Shoppe* with my daughter Lauren as our waitress (n.b. she started a part-time job there in August) we headed down to my basement game-cave where I showed off my painted figures. The three of us settled into hours of conversation about dogs, the *Jorune* RPG, role-gaming, hobbies, and life in general.



Chris Abbott, myself, & Trevor Marshall

Chris reminded me that this September marks 45 years since we first met in Grade 9 at Innisdale HS in 1980! Chris had noticed my carrying a copy the classic Holme's blue book D&D between classes in the hallway. He had asked me, "Is that for a fantasy board game?" and I had apparently answered, "No, it's for a game *without* a board," which apparently blew his mind. ☺

Habana Horror: *The Mazorra (Part 2)*

Generic Mazorra Visitor Encounters:

1. A visiting priest hurries away from the train depot, carrying an artist's easel.
2. Elderly visitor sobs as an orderly speaks to them; those with keen hearing can hear that he is extorting her for *Dinero para comida* ("food money") for her in-patient daughter.
3. Two visitors comment that the marvellous bacon in the Visitor's Canteen is because the pigs are fed food meant for patients.
4. A notice in Spanish: *Representación de Romeo y Julieta el próximo sábado al mediodía.*
5. English-speaking visitor at the Post Office is trying to purchase post-cards, but the clerk pretends not to speak English
6. Over the Mazorra's PA system can be heard "*¿Regresará la Familia de Emilo Gonzalas al Pabellón de la Esperanza?*"
7. A visitor emerges from one of the pavilion's, muttering to themselves "...ella ni siquiera me conoce." ("...she doesn't even know me.")
8. A guard searching a visitor's bag confiscates a small bottle of rum and a shouting match begins
9. There is a sudden announcement that Visiting Hours are over three hours early & visitors are angrily escorted to the *Boyeros Road* gate.
10. Locomotive engineer steps on to platform; they have come from *Bejucal*, and are going right back due to problems on the Havana rail line north

More Mazorra NPC Pts (cont. from AOM 240)



Juana de la Cruz "The China Doll"; ~35yo F, Amnesiac Patient with *Glass Delusion*, Mazorra

Juana de la Cruz (name is Spanish version of 'Jane Doe') is a mystery woman found wandering *El Cementerio de Colón* three years ago wearing an oddly padded outfit of quilts and rags. She has retrograde amnesia & the delusion she

is made entirely of glass and will shatter if touched roughly. Usually docile, but when startled she can

lash out with uncanny speed while producing sharp shards seemingly from nowhere. Rumors whisper she is the missing wife of a diplomat, or a funerary angel stitched back to life.

STR 50 **CON** 60 **SIZ** 60 **DEX** 70 **INT** 45
APP 90 **POW** 50 **EDU** 33 **SAN** 10 **HP** 12
DB/Build: - / 0 **Move:** 8 **MP:** 12 **Luck:** 10

Combat:

- Brawl 30% (15/6), damage 1D3+1D4
- Ceramic Shard (Blade) 25% (12/5), damage 1D4
- Dodge 35% (17/7)

Skills: Listen 55%, Spot Hidden 75%, Stealth 40%, Etiquette 70%, Shorthand 55%, Typing 60%

Languages: English 40%, French 70% Spanish 5%

Pulp Traits: *Insanely Hard to Hit (Insane Pulp Augmented Talent)*; when attacked physically, attackers suffer disadvantage dice due to her uncanny recoil and twitchy avoidance.

Back story:

- **Bio:** Entirely unknow (up to the Keeper/GM).
- **Description:** Blonde, blue-eyed 30-something woman, who would be beautiful if her face was not so masked. Speaks English with an unfamiliar French accent (Quebecois). The padded, quilted garments which looks a little like a vintage lady fencer would wear also conceal rods of steel and woven metal mesh to make her shape seem bulky. Her usual movements are unusually slow and deliberate, but then in a flash if anyone tries to touch her, she recoils violently from contact, screaming in French then English "*Ne me touché pas! Je vais me briser!*" "*Don't touch me! I'll break!*"
- **Traits:** Wary. Loner.
- **Motivation:** Don't break or let others break you.

RPG Gaming hooks:

- Missing person whom Investigators has been tasked to find.
- Small gestures can trigger violent (over)reactions; she may even injure someone during one of her "shattering fits"; reaction could be deliberately provoked by the Investigators

Dona Dominga Pérez: *La Matrona de las Ratas (Matron of the Rats)*. 80 yo demented rat-lady.

Dona Dominga is an elderly woman housed in the *Demencia Pavilion*. She has no short-term memory and lives entirely in the past, convinced she is back in her hometown of Pílon with her parents. To her, her filthy cell is their family home. She mutters in endless loops—half-faded tales of vanished neighbors, misremembered tragedies, and sudden



flashes of uncanny lucidity that reveal secrets of the Mazorra (a 6 on 1d6 of being dead on).

Her shelves are crowded with a bizarre collection: lost keys, mismatched silverware, dentures, writing utensils, postcards, pills, random ammo rounds, hairpins, tooth brushes, even a glass eye! She feeds and whispers to a pet rat that performs simple tricks, though the “pet” is only one of a hidden legion she commands. To Dominga, these vermin are her siblings or children, and they bring her “gifts” scavenged from across the asylum, including staff notes and guard orders. This explains her startlingly accurate warnings, though she often burns the evidence after reading. Guards insist her rats fill more space than her cell could possibly contain.

To visitors she can be warm and eager to show off her rat one moment, then suddenly turn, accusing them of stealing some item she herself hid. Crossing the “rooms” of her imagined home can provoke her fury unless trespassers apologize at once, though within a minute, the offense is forgotten.

Every five to ten minutes she needs to be reminded by any new visitors who they are else she will have forgotten entirely and will have to be told again; there is no day to day carry over of recent events. However her emotional memory is more durable, and if she likes someone, she may not know who axactly they are but she will still trust them.

If angered, especially if her “children” are harmed in any way, Dominga squeaks and chitters commands that summon a ravenous swarm, who will attack on a second signal from her.

STR 35	CON 40	SIZ 40	DEX 50	INT 65
APP 20	POW 70	EDU 35	SAN -	HP 8
DB/Build: - 1/-1 Move: 6 MP: 12 Luck: 40				

Combat (*unlikely physical but possible*):

- *Scratch/Kick*: 25%, 1D3-1 damage
- *Rat Swarm (special attack)*: 50%, 1D6 damage/round + disease risk

Skills: Listen 55%, Spot Hidden 45%, Stealth 40%, Fast Talk 30%, Occult 35%,

Languages: Spanish (native) 35% English 5%

Pulp (insane) Talent: Animal Handling (rats) 80%

See page 338 7e CoC Keeper’s Guide for stats for a Rat Pack of 10 rats.

Dominga has 200 rats at her beck and call, takes 1d4 rounds to summon, and can summon an additional 1d4 swarms in any given round.

Opposing skill/Difficulty level:

- *Regular difficulty (80%)*: getting a rat to sit, fetch an object in sight, summon a rat pack (10 rats), or summon to swarm & attack.
- *Hard difficulty (40%)*: getting a rat perform a task on command when target is not in sight
- *Extreme difficulty (16%)*: When there is a chance of significant harm or death to a rat such as chewing through an electric wire, or attacking

If Dominga fails a *pushed* roll, she will start to behave like the rat or rat pack she was trying to control, which includes attacking with her teeth and claws, or running away with an item.

Back Story

- **Bio**: former house-wife, cigar roller, who has outlived her entire family and was placed at the Mazorra as she was wandering and getting lost.
- **Description**: frail, stooped 80-year-old person of colour with a toothless smile. Spends much of her time in her corner cell
- **Traits**: Repetitive, Forgetful. Kindly.

RPG Gaming hooks:

- Dominga’s gifts can be terrifying, but make her a potentially valuable (if unstable) ally if Investigators approach her carefully and earn her trust; using a white lie they are a relative will gain her trust.
- Her rats can act to fetch 'shiny objects' that resemble similar objects shown to them.
- Conversely, a small object gone missing from an Investigator may have been pilfered by one of her rats; this cannot be too large or heavy even if her rats work in unison, but could include anything up to the size and weight of a derringer pistol
- With her help to command her rats they can also be distraction to orderlies and nurses, or be used to set off traps, trigger alarms, or chew through electrical wires.



Tomás 'Tambor' Wong: (*The Drummer*).



Tomás is a slight 46 yo clean-shaven and bald smiling Cuban man of mixed Black & Chinese heritage with epilepsy (last seizure 15 years ago, who has been living at the Mazorra for 30+ years. His seizures are suppressed by the meds his family supplies monthly when they visit. His larger oddity is that he communicates only by tapping Morse code on

tables, walls and pipes. Hence the name Tambor which is 'Drummer' in Spanish.

Tomás knowledge of the asylum's layout is unmatched. and he knows every hidden passage, crawl space, disused cell, and forgotten service tunnel. He knows where the guards keep their keys, when doors are left unlocked, and which doors creak the loudest. Slowly tapping, he can even navigate by memory a path across the Mazorra in total darkness, even in total darkness, counting paces and turns and listening by echo-location much like a bat.

'Tambor' has seen things in his Mazorra: illicit staff abuse, forbidden experiments, hidden rooms sealed for decades. Other patients and inmates fear him-not because he's violent, but because they believe "he remembers *everything*," and sometimes his tapping suggests preternatural awareness, tapping out a funeral dirge where there is danger, or tapping a happy 'shave and a haircut' when someone friendly is nearby and approaching.

He can appear unexpectedly-sometimes standing just behind a PC without them noticing until the tapping begins. The "Tap tap...tap" sound of his knuckles drumming on a pipe can seemingly echo from nowhere, suggesting he's either very close, or very far away.

STR 35	CON 45	SIZ 40	DEX 55	INT 75
APP 50	POW 70	EDU 55	SAN 70	HP 9
DB/Build: -1d4/-1 Move: 7 MP: 14 Luck: 65				

Combat

- Brawl 25% (1d3-1d4, min 1 damage)
- Improvised Club 25% (1d6-1d4, min 1 damage)
- Thrown Small Object 30% (1d3, range 10 yds)

Skills

Stealth 65%, Listen 70%, Spot Hidden 60%, Navigate 75% Psychology 55%, History 35%, Occult 30%

Language: Spanish 60%, Morse/Code-Tapping 70% Cantonese) 40% English 25%.

Pulp Talent: *Sense of Direction*; Tomás never becomes lost, can retrace routes, superb mental maps & mapping.

Pulp Talent: *Rhythm Savant*. Through tapping, drumming, or even finger-beats, Tambor can entrain human bodies and minds to his rhythm. Anyone who hears him must make a **POW** roll:

- **Success:** They resist but feel unsettled.
- **Failure:** They involuntarily sync heartbeat, breathing, or even (subtle) muscle movements align. This can slow them (penalty die to DEX/CON actions) or agitate them (penalty die to INT-based checks).
- **Special:** If disrupting another drummer (e.g., a Voudou ritual), Tambor makes a **POW vs. POW** contest against the lead drumming celebrant. If he wins, the ceremony falters or backfires.

Tambors medication-controlled epilepsy can be a vulnerability and perhaps used t as a clock ticking down to add to tension. GM/Keeper's could model the missed meds as having each day without Luminal/bromides → **POW** roll. Failure = seizure (damage 1D2 + possible injury from fall). After each seizure, roll 1D6:

- 1-2 = brief absence seizure (*minor, unsettling*).
- 3-4 = tonic-clonic seizure (*major, frightening*).
- 5-6 = postictal psychosis (*GM-controlled brief violent/confused behaviour*) then needing 2d6 hours to sleep off the effects.

Tambor's Back story:

- **Bio:** From Habana, Tomas dropped out of school at 12 due to seizures; moved to Mazorra. Attended Mazorra school until 16, and still visits the facility library under special permission. Family still in the city and visit monthly to deliver his antiseizure medications, a quantity of Luminal and bromides.
- **Description:** Slender black-Asian man dressed all in grey clothing. Sharp eyed and hearing.
- **Traits:** Survival, Curiosity.
- **Motivation:** Learn news of his family in Havana since they missed last monthly visit due to General Strike. Replacement source of his meds.

RPG Hooks:

- Though 'Tambor' can help Investigators find their way or get through secret ways if they are kind to him and others, acting as a living compass; but if crossed or insulted he could also lead them exactly where he wants them, such as locking them inside a dead-end sealed corridor.

Claudio Rivera y Zayas: *The Fake Mute.*



'Claudio' is a 48 yo patient of the chronic but docile *Esperanza* (Hope) *Pavilion* due to a brain injury that left him slow moving, slow thinking, and mute, and needing some place to have his care needs met. He is always smiling, but because of being silent and rarely blinking, gives the

unsettling impression of someone half-dead or embalmed. Patients whisper that if you look at him too long, he looks back inside your head.

In truth, Claudio is no patient at all, but two embedded identical twin members of the *Porra*, tasked with guarding a hidden vault constructed during the 1927 Mazorra "restoration." The two (names are Claudio & Silvio) take turns quarterly pretending to be patients, and are secretly swapped out to give a break. There, secret bullion and treasures stolen by President Machado and his cronies are deposited quarterly via train deliveries of supplies tucked away beneath the old and abandoned tunnels of the old Mazorra plantation underneath the old and abandoned Laundry Pavilion, and during this time the swap of brothers take place. The brother just leaving the Mazorra quickly trade stories about events and fact the other replacing brother should know. The two men are *almost* identical, the chief difference is that there is a mole on the left cheek on one brother, and another on the L chin of the other. Even fingerprints will not work since they have been erased on both due to acid.

When someone grows too curious about the basement, he intervenes with quiet and deadly precision (which is what happened to one of Capt. Gandia's guards who was found dead with this throat slashed). Only Machado's cousin, the Director of the Mazorra, knows 'Claudio's true role and is smart enough not to look too closely and there are no finger-prints on file.

STR 80	CON 80	SIZ 80	DEX 65	INT 65
APP 40	POW 65	EDU 60	SAN 65	HP 16
DB/Build: +1d4/+1		Move: 8	MP: 13	Luck: 85

Combat

- Brawl 75% (Fist 1d3+1d4)
- Knife 70% (1d4+2+db)
- Club/Cosh 65% (1d6+db, KO on Hard success if target fails CON roll)
- Pistol 65% (1d10, range 15 yds)

Languages: Spanish 60%, Spanish Sign Language 40%, English 30%

Skills

Stealth 65% Intimidate 70% (*smile never wavers*), Listen 55%, Spot Hidden 60%, Disguise 45% (mute persona), Psychology 40% (reads unease), Sleight of Hand 45%, Firearms (*Handgun*) 60%

Pulp Archetype (NPC): Enforcer/Assassin

Pulp Talents:

- *Strong Willed* (+1D10 Sanity & Luck at start, +20% bonus to Intimidate rolls)
- *Tough Guy* (spend 10 Luck to shrug off a Major Wound)

Claudio's Back Story:

- **Bio:** [redacted]
- **Description:** Huge lurching slow moving man, powerful fixed grin on huge face otherwise so expressionless it appears embalmed. Never speaks, but sometime will slowing use (Spanish) using sign language
- **Traits:** Utter Loyalty. Patient. Cunning.
- **Motivation:** He/They will stop at nothing to protect the hidden bullion beneath the Laundry Pavilion, since President Machado paid for needed surgery for their mother.

Mateo Derosiers: 46 yo M Haitian Bokor/Brujah



Derosiers is a 46 yo Haitian Voudou (aka Voodoo) priest aka *Bruja* or rather a *Bokor*. This is not Cuban *Voudou*, which is called *Santería*, but *Hattian Voudou* which is from a different, and much darker African religious tradition.

He is confined to Mazorra not because he was insane, but because practice and belief of

Voudou religion is considered a mental illness in this era of Cuba. He also is insane, or rather *unsane*, from his brushes with Loas, the Mythos, and adjacent supernatural entities.

Seized in Cuba's eastern provinces both for being the head of a secret society preying on the locals. No enough evidence to convict of murder, for the last few weeks he was starved, beaten, and humiliated by the *Porra* at the Atarés Fortress before being shipped off to the Mazorra. Diagnosed with tuberculosis during his period of being held because of his literal Atarés dungeon confinement, he was transferred to the TB pavilion to waste away coughing out the last of his life.

Mateo Derosiers may look like a dying prisoner, but he is something far more dangerous: a man with

nothing to lose, armed with forbidden knowledge, and ready to unleash it in the name of revenge. He's not a caged tiger; he is a caged virus.

Burning with the need for vengeance before he dies, he has carefully exploited the curiosity of Dr. Zorrilla, who he learned is obsessed with applying *Voudan* beliefs and hidden knowledge to genuinely help patients at the Mazorra. Mateo feeds him secrets, some genuine, others twisted half-truths, all while biding his time. Hidden among his few possessions is a centuries-old vial, containing **Twsha** elixir, and he plans to use it infect the doctor and in turn infect other enemies.

The elixir is a fragment of shoggoth essence preserved by a *Profundo* (Deep One in Spanish) shaman, and has been fed a drop of the blood ever few days. The vial is rigged with a spring mechanism; open it carelessly, and it will spray its roiling dark liquid contents in a 1-meter radius. At first this may seem only foul and irritating but soon its true effects emerge, changing those exposed cell by cell into something less than human, more than human, and horrifyingly alien.

STR 30	CON 15	SIZ 40	DEX 50	INT 75
APP 15	POW 80	EDU 45	SAN --	HP 4
DB/Build: - / 0 Move: 7 MP: 16 Luck: 25				

Languages: French 75% Spanish 40% English 30%

Skills: Art (Drums) 40%, Art (Dance) 35, Intimidate 75%, Occult 75%, Cthulhu Mythos 20%, Persuade 45%, Stealth 50%, Medicine 30%, Pharmacy (ethnobotany) 70%, Occult 50%, Cthulhu Mythos 25%.

Spells: *Contact Loa, Contact Spirits of the Dead. Enchant Ju Ju. Enchant Gris Gris, Create Zombie. Curse of the Putrid Husk, Green Decay. Soul Extraction. Summon/Bind Baron Zombi (actually Nyarlothotep).*

Pulp Talent: *Iron Will:* Resistant to mental domination reflects his stubborn drive and faith in his Loa.

Back Story

- **Bio:** Born in Port au-Prince Haiti to parents steeped in Vodou, his mother a respected *mambo* (Vodou queen), his father a disciplined *hungan*, —he inherited both tradition and power from the cradle. But where his parents sought balance and service to the Loa, he hungered for deeper, more forbidden knowledge. When his parents and community discovered his transgressions, they banished him, casting him out as one marked by corruption. He stole the *Twsha* elixir

when he fled, thinking it only as a means of making a more potent **Voudan Zombie**.

- In exile he wandered across the Caribbean basin, seeking teachers, rivals to fight, and voodoo secrets. For a spell he was in New Orleans' back alleys and swamps, where he learned English and honed his craft among other Vodou practitioners. Finally, about a year ago, he came ashore in Cuba. There, in the province of Pinar del Rio, he gathered the desperate and the fearful into a cult. His followers served him with offerings of flesh and blood until the authorities struck them down. When the smoke cleared after the police raid during a summoning ceremony that was interrupted, he alone survived.
- **Description:** Emaciated black male man, ragged moustache, clothing is extremely loose and ragged. Racked by coughing fits with bright red blood (from his TB). He has penetrating black eyes in an otherwise expressionless face. About his neck he wears a tiny stuffed brown bat as his Gris Gris, (pronounce *Gree-Gree*) which is a ward against evil spirits.
- **Traits:** Cold-hearted.
- **Motivation:** Revenge on all those who hurt him. Escape to wreak further revenge.

The Twsha Elixir Vial



- **Appearance:** Thumb sized antiqued ivory rough cylinder (in fact a hollowed out metacarpal bone) capped by an odd brass cap with multiple L-handed screws sealing with a slender glass vial inside.
- **Delivery:** Spring-loaded misting spray coats all those nearby if combination lock of screws set incorrectly. All within 2 meter (succeed a **Dodge** roll (1/2 **DEX**) or be exposed.
- **Immediate Effect:** Burning sensation on skin and eyes, 0/1 SAN loss, nausea.

Tshwa Elixer is a *Transparenting Horror*:

The contents of the Twsha vial can slowly transform living tissue one cell at a time, with a transparent xeno-cellular mimic that works like normal cells and tissue but is almost invisible to the human eye.



Early clinical signs appear on visibly on the victim's skin as translucent freckles, making what appears to be tiny windows into the body when in fact the spread of alien tissue is both internal and external. These apparent gaps on the skin's surface, widen and merge, revealing muscles, vessels, and deeper organs as if the skin were melting off from the outside inwards. This leads to the appearance of 'dissolving' or 'transparenting' of the victim.

Through the increasingly widening patches of transparent 'skin' can be seen deeper internal structures: muscles flexing, bones moving, coils of intestine shifting, blood vessels pumping blood, even organs such as a beating heart or lungs repeatedly inflating and deflating.



In the middle stages, the afflicted resemble versions of the old "Visible Man" or "Visible Woman" anatomy models brought unnervingly to life, an outer patchy

translucent shell within which organs can be seen shifting and working. Those affected might be mistaken for the walking dead: bodies that move, breathe, eat, and speak as if whole, despite patches of flesh seemingly missing and replaced by glassy, alien tissue.

As the process progresses, these translucent gaps widen and merge still further, until the victim appears like a skeleton draped in gore; impossibly animated, moving and unraveling in plain sight.

Eventually, the form blurs into a wavering silhouette with only a skeleton left surrounded by a human outline that seems to dissolve into the air. The brain is always the last to change once the blood-brain barrier is breached, and the CNS transforms entirely into something itself alien.

Call of Cthulhu RPG explanation:

The Twsha elixir is a liquid seeded with Shoggoth cells, terrestrial life's alien ancestors, remaking the victim first outside then inwards, first body then mind. Shoggoth protoplasm was somehow obtained by *Deep Ones* (*Profundo* in Spanish) shamans; can be propagated like sourdough starters for centuries if cared for and 'fed' on occasion human or Deep One blood. This elixir is preserved and passed on intergenerationally within a cult.

A **Twsha** is a biological artifact designed to control shoggoths. In its mature form, it resembles a fist-sized lump of gelatinous tissue that functions as a kind of remote-control organ.

The trace amount of shoggoth protoplasm found in the vial is far too dilute and insufficient in volume to serve this purpose, unless it is transferred to a larger flask, fed nutrients (human blood being ideal), and allowed to grow for about a week. During this period, it develops internal organelles, dense, gummy-like nodules that reach the size and configuration necessary for biological information exchange with a shoggoth to tune the two together.

By rotating, squeezing or pressing these nodules together inside the more viscus lump of rugged jelly-protoplasm, the wielder can transmit simple commands to the creature: stop, move, change shape, consume, divide, and so forth. Careless control however may mean consumption of the wielder by the shoggoth.

Alternatively, if you don't want Shamans, the source of the elixir is cryogenic survival of Shoggoth protoplasm from an Antarctic archeological university team visiting the Mountains of Madness; long frozen it has thawed out and escaped inside a person or contaminated a water supply. And if you don't want any Mythos in your Horror, just make this the contents of a meteorite that falls to earth.

NB. having run up against the 16-page max for E&A again, I'll include the full effects of the Twsha Elixir nextish, including the stages how this transformation takes place, what happens with the Twsha completely takes over, strategies, stats, etc.; this is not just a zombie variant since the victims are still human and conscious for part of this process; think of a slower based version of John W. Cambell Jr's novella "Who Goes There?" the basis for John Carpenter's 1981 cult horror film "The Thing".

MAZORRA NPC STAFF:

The Mazorra in the 1930s employs just under 300 staff, including physicians, nurses, orderlies, porters, and psychiatric institute guards. Additional support staff handle meal preparation, janitorial duties, maintenance and repairs, the agricultural colony, laundry, the post office, and even a small fire department. Many these roles are supplemented by less-impaired and unpaid inpatients. Administrative leadership and their supporting staff round out the workforce.

While it is impossible to list everyone, the two pages provided in table form include names, roles, ages, and other details for many staff members you may encounter. Whenever a GM or Keeper needs an NPC, or a name or a role select one from the list. I'll expand on just a few of these.

Dr. Ramon Zorrilla MD (Neurology & Psychiatry)



Dr. Zorrilla is one of the senior staff physicians working with long term psychiatric patients at the Mazorra the last few years. His speciality are those in-patients with severe mental health disorders involving psychosis; bipolar illness, and *dementia praecox*

(schizophrenia). He has a great interest in these chronic patients and has been pioneering experimental drugs and radical surgical procedures at least 10 years ahead of common, European or American practice (e.g., early forms of leucotomy/lobotomy, electroshock and insulin shock therapy, etc.) with somewhat unpredictable results.

While Zorrilla's motivations are good, his ethics are highly questionable. While not a made scientist by

any means, he will conduct trials without the knowledge or consent of patients or their families. He is not against providing "treatments" for inconvenient Machado dissidents or embarrassing relatives of wealthy Cuban elites.

Zorrilla has recently gained an interest in applying ethnobotanical treatment as used by priests of Haitian Vodou or Cuban Santeria (and is ignorant enough to confuse the two as being the same). An utter rationalist, he sees Afro-Cuban traditions only as tools to mine for pharmacology and psychology.

STR 55 **CON** 60 **SIZ** 55 **DEX** 60 **INT** 75
APP 50 **POW** 65 **EDU** 85 **SAN** 65 **HP** 12
DB/Build: 0/0 **Move:** 8 **MP:** 16 **Luck:** 50

Languages: French 75% Spanish 40% English 30

Skills:

Medicine (*Psychiatry/Neurology*) 80%, Science (*Chemistry / Pharmacology*) 70%, Science (*Biology*) 65%, Psychology 70%, Persuade 60%, Intimidate 45%, Cthulhu Mythos 15%

Languages: Spanish 85% French 45% English 35
German 20%

Combat:

- Scalpel 30%, damage 1D4
- Syringe (drug delivery) 40%, effect depends on substance (*see table below; either roll randomly or Keeper/GM's choice (see end of NPC writeup)

Pulp Talents: *Coldly Rational* (bonus die on Sanity rolls when confronting and misattributing supernatural or other horrors purely as "novel scientific phenomena".

Dr. Zorrilla's Back Story

- **Bio:** Born in Madrid Spain of wealthy parents, who moved to Cuba with his family while he was young; medical degree from the University of Habana, but also did training in Paris, New York, and Vienna before turning to work at the Mazorra in 1929.
- **Appearance:** Military bearing even in civilian clothes, mostly tailored suits, over which he wears pure white and crisply ironed lab coats, polished shoes, and a neatly trimmed moustache. Piercing dark eyes that seem to miss nothing. He never goes without his tailored suits because of an upper mass he has had since birth, his absorbed twin (*fetus en fetu*) deemed both benign and yet tricky to remove.
- **Traits:** Calculating. Arrogant
- **Motivation:** Advance scientific knowledge for the sake of knowledge more than the suffering it relieves. Earn a Nobel prize for curing schizophrenia.

Mazorra Staff

Name & Role	Description / Quirk
 ADMIN ROLES	
Dr. Miguel Rodríguez Machado - Mazorra Director	55-yo younger cousin to President Machado; former veterinarian before appointed to the role; greedy, lazy corrupt. Often absent for long periods, but present now.
Capt. Alberto Gandía – Admin supervisor	Former army officer; ruthless, greedy, rents inmates out. Head of Mazorra Security Not so secret member of the Porra.
 Don Ricardo Menéndez y Valdés - Hospital Controller	Overseer of Finance & accounting Dept; payroll for all employees, skimming funds by having imaginary workers on payroll.
Dr. Eduardo Ravena – Medical lead	70 yo M; semi-retired MD, poor hearing & STM; respected, but advisory role only (and often ignored); essentially a rubber stamp for Director Machado's orders. Hired Dr. V.
Mazorra Managers	
 Ing. Leandro Vives – Procurement Mgr	55 yo M; Supplies, railway platform maintenance. Corrupt; steals from shipments (morphine, alcohol, food) & stores them in an outbuilding until can secretly remove
Dª María Teresa Domínguez - Food & nutrition Mgr	Orders all food supplies for the Mazorra, involved in vegetable garden effort.
 Ing. Juan Carlos Padrón - Maintenance Supr.	48 yo M; responsible for new builds, repairs, incinerator, & waste removal.
 Srta/ Lic. Sofía Martínez y Cordero - Lab Mgr	44 F; petite & scary smart. Involved in Infection Control, water testing, & sanitation.
 Lic. Ismael Fernández y Abreu - Pharmacy Mgr	Involved in ordering and storage of all pharmaceuticals & medical supplies; crooked.
 Sr. Ofelia Marrero – Laundry supervisor	Involved in both cleaning/purchase hospital clothing & sheets. Functioning alcoholic. Stays in his office on the 2nd floor of laundry pavilion & sleeps there.
 Sr. Domingo Figueroa – Ranch mgr	Runs Mazorra agricultural colony (sugarcane & tobacco plantation), & stables. Excellent horseman. Runs secret rum still.
 Lic. Israel Castellanos – dactyloscopic lab	~50 M wizard in fingerprint lab for ID of all Mazorra pts. Avid medical photographer.
 MEDICAL STAFF	
Dr. Arturo Vilela – Lead MD	~30 yo man, brilliant, competent; carries gun for protection after past attempts on life by staff. However, has un-dx prodromal schizophrenia and some plots delusional.
Dr. Santiago Prats - MD	28-yo M, Dr. V.'s assistant. Loyal, discreet. Acute/crisis cases. Member of the A.B.C.
Dra. Gilda Ramagosa -MD	32-yo married F. Normally comes in from Havana for the week to see F Dept. pts.
Dr. Manuel Calderón - MD	~60-yo physician widower; competent, avoids conflict.
Dr. Ramon Zorrilla- MD	44 yo M; involved in controversial experiments with drugs/surgery; ++intense arrogant, unethical; interested medical gases & in Santeria herbs/elixirs as Rx
Dr. Francisco Llerena – MD	36 yo; Machado appointee, incompetent, allies with corrupt staff; hates Dr. V.
Dr. Esteban Madrazza y Zayos - MD	48 yo M General Surgeon; deals with acute cases, visits from Havana M W F.
Dr. Armand Moas- MD	~40 yo M Anesthetist; works with surgeon; mistrusting so personally brings N ₂ O, ether, chloroform, & O ₂ via tanks in from Havana 3/7, along with his Boyles Gas Machine.
Dra. Elda Real - Clinical psychologist	41 yo F; pediatric assessments using standardized tests. Children's Pavilion only.
 Dr. Oscar Quintana – Dentist	Travels twice weekly from Havana to provide dental repairs on patients. In A.B.C.
 NURSING STAFF	
Beatriz Montalvo – Chief RN	47 y F, widowed; competent. Enferma (Spanish for RN) Montalva is bitter, Worried about Dr. V who claims plots. Intermittent longstanding affair with Dr. Calderón
Rafael Yániz, - second Chief RN	64 yo M. Flagrantly corrupt, and for decades has stolen medical and other hospital supplies with impunity; plotting with Dr. L to poison Dr. Vilela. Member of the Porra.
Guillermo Coronado - male RN	~40 yo M. Works with Dr. Calderon + Dr. Viella seeing chronic / violent cases.
Anna Belén Rodríguez – RN	~25 yo F; goes by Enferma or simply Anna-Belén; drug addict (syringes on person)
Yolanda Heres- RN	~30 yo F; works with Dr. Zorrilla, whom she is having an affair with. ++loyal & discrete
Terisita Cruz - RN	~40 yo F; assists Dr. Madrazza when surgery is called for.
Herminia Gómez – RN	28 yo F; red haired, notorious gossip. Twin sister Rita-Maria is an RN
Rita Maria Gómez – RN	28 yo F, red haired, very quiet. Completely opposite personality as her twin Herminia
Srta. Marta Pérez - Nursing student.	18yo F: husky attractive nursing student; called either Senorita Marta or just Marta
 Office Roles	
Senorita Esperanza Hildalgo-Gato -Secretary to the Director	25 F beautiful; black curly hair; blue eyes, expensively dressed, & perfumed. Fields personal calls to Director Machado & is his secret mistress. Terrible typist.
Sna. Teresa Pacheco - Switchboard operator	~45 F; Listens in on all incoming and outgoing phone calls; notorious gossip source. Does all the overhead PA announcements for the Mazorra

Sna. Josefina Karmen	~40 F; medical receptionist to all other doctors. Fast typist. ++Superstitious.
Sna. Marina Suárez - Health records clerk	~30 F; tall, dressed plainly, glasses, but rather good looking. Widowed, (spouse died inside the Mazorra of TB 4 years ago). Detail-oriented, discreet. Member of the A.B.C.
Srta. Marta Gimenez - registration clerk	~20 F; a little dyslexic and patient forms often have odd spellings. Superstitious.
Sna. Hortensia Ignaza - transcriptionist	~35 F; types up reports dictated on wire recorders; stores files & recycles eventually
ⓈOther Hospital Based Employees	
Carmita Bernal - Occupational therapist	30 something. Works in F Dept. Very capable.
Lourdes Marquez - Social worker	~50 M. Balding, pompous. Wears lab coat over suit but not a doctor. Porrista.
Victor Delgado - M Dept orderly	Involved with hydrotherapy Tx
Tomás Fiallo - F Dept orderly	Short, friendly, protective of female inmates
Bartolomé Velasco - M Dept orderly	Cruel. Secret opioid addict. Porra Member.
Cipriano Valis M Dept orderly	Involved with Hydrotherapy Tx
Armando Lastra - M Dept orderly	Incompetent, very slow, very superstitious.
Luis Del Monte - M Dept orderly	Works in Violent Cases wards. A.B.C member
Blanca Texidor - F Dept orderly	Steals candy and sweets from patients. Gossip. Porrista.
Rogelio Pardo - F Dept orderly	M Dept orderly 40 wears an eye-patch Demands bribes from visitors. Superstitious.
Fausto Sotolongo - hospital porter	M ; moves patients; runs errands & smuggle contraband (e.g. cigarettes) for a price
Elisa Moor - hospital porter	F: delivers clean linens & hospital specimens to the labs; shameless gossip
Non-Clinical Hospital Employees	
Joaquín Benítez - Morgue attendant	38 M; Competent, very friendly but quirky sense of humour. Member of A.B.C.
Evelio Gil - Medical Lab technician	Works in Enteric Pavillion & Lab in main hospital building (M. Dept). Fussy, Intense.
Sna. Carmen Pérez - Cook/Food Services	Works in Visitor's Pavilion and F. Dept. Generous portions when unwatched.
Sr. Amadeo Moran - Janitorial staff/cleaner	55 yo M. Unable to smell. Member of A.B.C.
Sr. Rafael Zayas - Maintenance mechanic	Brilliant at repairs in electrical equipment but lacks supplies; dislikes corrupt staff.
Sr. Waldo Marin - plumber	40M; big, hearty, friendly, in overalls. Doubles as fireman when there is an alarm.
♥Mazorra GUARDS	
Manuel Barbe	~30 M; ex Havana police, competent. Perfectly fitting tailored uniform. Porra member
Vicente Beltrán	~25 M; very handsome, will not work in medical wards. Superstitious
Jorge Dolz	~40 M; ex-felon; sadistic; quick w/ brass knuckles; superstitious; in Leopard M Cult
Leopoldo Enriquez	~30 M; ex-military; Head of the Guards; reports to Col. Gandia; corrupt, Porra member
Oswaldo Miranda	~25 M; huge, quick with baton. Very superstitious. Member of Porra
Jesús Nadal	~30 M; ex-military. In charge of the Mazzora's kennel & dogs.
Mario Puig	~25 M; bearded and balding; doubles as fireman if alarm called.
Álvaro Recio	~20 M; mustachioed, quiet. Member of A.B.C.
Pepe Sabates	~25 M; deaf in one ear after a patient slugged him; backs down from a fight.
Jorge Washington	~30 M; touchy about his name around 'gringos'
OTHER	
Mons. Bruno Aurelio - Catholic Priest	Gaunt severe looking but kindly Monsignor (71 years old). Visits weekly from Havana. Speaks Spanish, French & English.
Hermana Carmen Vergós - teacher	Catholic nun, teacher in the children's school. Stern but fair. Devoutly religious.
Sr. Javier Benítez - Cemetery mgr	Joaquín's twin; competent, cynical. Member of A.B.C.
Sr. Félix Cárdenas - Post Office Manager	Stays in the back room. secretly intercepts letters for blackmail. Porra member
Srta Ena Tolon - Post office clerk	Officious, haughty; pretends not to speak any English. Superstitious.
Sna. Rosalía Ortega - Gift store worker	Mean 50+ unmarried; steals inmate crafts & sales profits. Very superstitious.

- **Notes:** In Cuban Spanish, common honorifics include: **Dr.** (Doctor), **Dra.** (Doctora), **Sr.** (señor), **Sra.** (señora), **Srta.** (señorita), **D.** (Don), **Da.** (Doña), **Mons.** (Monsignor), **Ing.** (Engineer), and **Lic.** (college degree). There is no Spanish abbreviation for nurse (*Enfermera*) but English **RN** was often used. Nor for a religious sister (*Hermana*).
- In Spanish naming customs, a person traditionally has two surnames: the first from the father and the 2nd from the mother, sometimes joined by "y" (e.g., Geraldo Machado y Morales). Women do not change their surnames upon marriage. Persons may use just their first and last name (e.g. Geraldo Machado); full name is typically reserved for legal or formal use. Both surnames may be used first is very common.

RPG Gaming hooks for Dr. Zorrilla:

- Zorrilla has stumbled across evidence of the *Mythos* (strange behavior in patients belonging to cults, anatomical anomalies, etc., but instead of sounding the alarm, he's carefully hiding his findings until he can publish)
- Santeria practitioners, knowing he doesn't believe in their religion, resent his attempts of using their sacred knowledge; can provoke retaliation from practitioners who know more than he does and find out, else even from angry Loa spirits themselves.
- A Brujah/Bokor patient may be able to manipulate Zorrilla into using one of their ethnobotanical or ethno-zoological animal toxin-based concoction for dreadful effect
- Zorrilla cultivates rare herbs on a rooftop garden on Mazorra's grounds, and their dangerous effects are carefully recorded in his notebook; if either are stolen, they need to be found.

Random Medical Syringe Contents (d6)

1. **Morphine** (*Sedative*); **CON** roll or target grows drowsy.
 - Fail = penalty die on DEX/physical actions for 1D6 hours.
 - Extreme fail = unconscious 1D3 hours.
2. **Scopolamine** (*Deliriant*) POW roll to resist.
 - Fail = highly suggestible 1D10 minutes (bonus die to Persuade/Intimidate).
 - Fumble = delirium/hallucinations, possible Temporary Insanity.
3. **Curare** (*Paralytic*); **CON** roll to resist.
 - Fail = paralysis 1D6 minutes (conscious but immobile). Suffocation risk if prolonged.
 - Success = penalty die to physical rolls 2D6 minutes.
4. **Experimental "Nervine Tonic" Stimulant**
 - Temporary burst of manic energy.
 - Target gains **+1D4 DEX** and acts first in initiative for 1D6 rounds, but afterward collapses with exhaustion (half Move, penalty die to CON rolls for 1D6 hours).
5. **Hallucinogenic Elixir** (*Santería or Voudo herbal concoction*) **POW** roll to resist.
 - Fail = vivid visual and other hallucinations for 1D6 x 10 minutes, giving penalty die on attacks & skill checks.
6. **Normal Saline** - No pharmacological effect. However, Dr. Zorrilla makes a **Persuade roll** opposed by the target's **Psychology** or **POW**.
 - o If Dr. Z succeeds, the victim *believes* they are under the influence & Keeper/GM may impose *penalty dice* to appropriate actions (shaky hands, sluggish movement, hallucination-like sensations) depending on the "suggested" effect.
 - o If Dr. Z fails, the target quickly realizes they feel nothing.

Captain Alberto Gandía



Capt. Gandia is the Superintendent of the Mazorra asylum, second only to Director Machodo. He acts in the Director's name when the Director is away (which is often for long periods).

He is responsible for overseeing all non-medical aspects of the facility: managing non-

medical staff, developing policies, maintaining records, and coordinating external services. He also doubles as the Chief of Mazorra Security in charge of all the guards and their standing orders. And he's also involved in a variety of highly illegal activities:

- **Rents inmates:** Offers select prisoners for outside "jobs" or to outside parties for financial gain, often exploiting vulnerable or politically inconvenient patients. These jobs range from unpaid plantation work to outright prostitution.
- **Murders inmates:** using a patient known as *The Persian* aka *Executioner*, the leader of the Leopard Man cult as his enforcer.
- **Black-market operator:** Involved in smuggling out work from patients (e.g. cigars) to the theft of valuable items from Mazorra in-patients and supplies earmarked for the Mazorra itself
- **Surveillance fanatic:** Maintains a network of informants among both staff and inmates, using it to anticipate threats or exploit weaknesses.

STR 65	CON 70	SIZ 75	DEX 45	INT 65
APP 45	POW 60	EDU 70	SAN 60	HP 15
DB/Build: +1d4/ +1 Move: 7 MP: 16 Luck: 60				

Pulp Talents:

- *Intimidating* (+1D10 Luck, +20% Intimidate)
- *Tough Guy* (10 Luck to ignore Major Wound)

Combat

- Brawl 60% (1d3+1d4)
- Knife 50% (1d4+2+db)
- Revolver 55% (1d10, range 15 yds)
- Military Rifle (Mauser) 50% (2d6+db, range 110 yds) (*keeps one locked away in his office safe*)

Skills

Intimidate 70%, Command 65%, Persuade 50%, Stealth 25% Listen 55%, Spot Hidden 55%, Firearms (Handgun) 55%, Firearms (Rifle) 50%

Tactics/Military Science 55% (organized, disciplined approach), Accounting 40% (black-market schemes)

Languages: Spanish (Native) 90%, English 45%

Captain Gandia's Back Story:

- **Bio:** Former Cuban army officer known for his opportunistic ambition. After leaving the military under unclear circumstances he leveraged his contacts to secure this position
- **Description:** Once a fit, disciplined officer, Gandia has now gone to seed. He is overweight, his uniform straining against his bulk, with a perpetually sweaty face. Despite this, he keeps a faint trace of military posture.
- **Traits:** Ruthless. Paranoid
- **Motivations:** Greed & Avarice

Gandia's Connections to the Leopard Man Cult:

- shadowy alliance with the leader of the Mazorra's Leopard Man cult, Jeremias "The Persian" Yohama; provides intractable inmates in exchange for help to keep unruly patients and staff in line



- personally participated in one Leopard Man *borfirma* ritual to seal a pact of loyalty

Secrets:

- he fears the *Persian* and the Leopard Man cult; shows anxiety or paranoia when his name is mentioned, this by dropping things, breaking out into a sweat, wiping his brow, etc.
- has a secret two-way radio & been anxiously following news reports and talking to other Porra members; if things blow up. If the latter, he plans to bolt with his large supply of cash in a safe only he and his private secretary know the combination.
- Knows his president Geraldo Machado has a kind of secret 'Fort Knox' built inside the Mazorra somewhere under the old and abandoned *Laundry Pavilion*, he doesn't know

exactly how to enter the underground ways, only that they are boobytrapped and guarded by an utterly loyal Porra member pretending to be a patient

COMMENTS: E&A #3

ROGER BW: Howdy! You're playing style you write about lastish aligns closely with mine, where I gravitate more to historical settings. And with my interest in pulp heroes and pulp magazines, this naturally overlaps the same era from the 1920s to early 1950s. <> As for your comments about *Brindlewood Bay*, like yourself I would have preferred something where the mystery game would have helped generate mysteries that had to be solved, rather than the GM and players coming up with the plot and solution themselves. <> What is *Cthulhu Eterna*?

I enjoyed your comments on using copy-free software. I share your frustration with *LibreOffice*, which was not only clunky to edit prior *Word* documents, but what it did to my *Dementia with Lewy Bodies* PowerPoint deck looked like a mad cultist's tribute to some eldritch horror. In the end, I gave up and bought *Office 2024 for Mac* after my university's A1 license overwrote my old Office 2019, wiping out my activation key.

GABRIEL ROARK: Since you asked, I've included below a photo of all the vintage *Harn* (and *Shadow World*) stuff I bought that day.



Re
Ice Skating; in the summer and in California?? Boggle! I used to play ice hockey as a kid and was pretty good as a skater, but when I bought a pair of skates when my daughter was young I found I had lost all my skills, and it was an effort to recall how to stop suddenly, rather than just gliding in a tight circle.

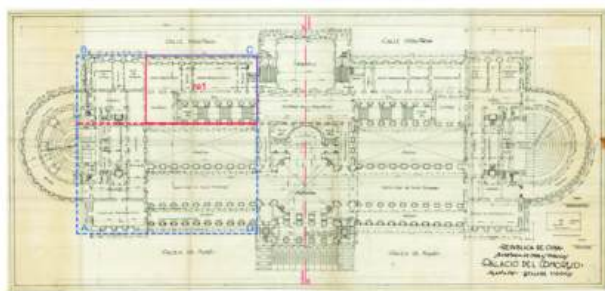
RYCTM: I'm glad you and others have been enjoying my history and RPG write-ups on 1930s Havana (or *Habana*, as the locals say (and perhaps I should, too). I've been to Cuba about half a dozen times over the past 30 years, but this was my first visit to the capital. I'd happily return, though my wife would not, so I would have to either travel alone or find travel companion.

Since U.S. citizens can only travel to Cuba under one of the 12 authorized categories (and tourism isn't one of them), and Americans are not allowed to stay in government owned hotels (which is all of them!) I suspect few E&Aers have visited. You can visit, for example for humanitarian reasons, but there is a lot of red-tape required by the U.S. government. Here's a [web-page](#) for more about this: That puts me in a somewhat unique position from first-hand experience visiting this fascinating if now sadly decaying city. And this in turn inspired me to dig a little deeper and with more insights into the past having walked streets and visited locations little changed over the last 70 years or longer.

AVRUM GRUMER: Woot! The look and feel of your zine lastish was fantastic: the old-school ASCII art, font choices, and even the page colour all echo A&E's contributor sub-zines that Lee Gold first mimeographed and later photocopied onto.

I also enjoyed your write-ups of 'An Infinity of Ships', 'Black Star', and 'Mothership.'

LISA PADOL: *RYCTM on floor plan of Havana's El Capitolio missing some of the numbers in the legend;* this was the image from Wikimedia Commons is oddly just about all I have found online regarding detailed floor plans of this Cuban historical building.



There was an Architectural journal article from Spain I found online that had the above image but they were mostly interested in the construction of the capital building rather than the completed building and its contents after the fact. They themselves were frustrated at not being able to view the blue-prints they requested from the American construction firm involved. And while there was a contemporary lovely leather-bound book celebrating Cuba's capital building opening and detailing the contents, the online version & translation (see below) I found also

did not include any floorplans, much to my frustration. I don't even have the upper floor plan, nor the dome or cupula nor the basements.

Re my 3 hours walk back to my hotel; Cuba & Havana is perhaps the safest country and city in Latin America to visit. Sure, there is petty theft, and street scams, but things like extortion, kidnapping, and murder is way down below US levels. And since there is no drug trafficking to speak of (since the Cuban government is very harsh with sentencing), there isn't organized crime. Here's a [link](#) for what it's like for persons travelling that are half our age:

Re calculating MOV for that NPC; I didn't, I found an online repository of 7e CoC NPCs, and used only the stats, discarded the text, and ported them over as-is!

Re missing a 'not' in my description of the Capitolio construction site: you are probably correct; I'm terrible at editing my own stuff unless I print it out and try skimming through it a few days later, and since I'm like others here and rush to complete often only the day or hours before the deadline, far too many errors slip through. But thanks for your positive comments about the scenario, and the other scenario ideas I included for lastish.

Hmm...*Worldcon* is in Montreal in 2027? That could be doable, and Montreal is one of my favourite cities to visit. <> So when is "Something Completely Different" coming out?

CLARK TIMMINS: *Re 4 Things:* As a fan of the weird and pulp fiction, these & the accompanying vintage illustrations were wonderful to read. Reading your 5e stats, I suddenly realize how far I am behind since I don't really know how such powers work.

There is literally a life-time of reading in the vast strove of vintage fiction in [archive.org](#), along with many non-fictional resources I've used many for these Havana Horror gaming write-ups. I even found a [vintage 1931 Habana social directory](#) that included names and positions of Cuban government officials, lists of professionals, and even the names of members of the foreign diplomatic corp. I've used to come up with suitable names (remixing first and last names). I hadn't realized one can search for specific words like 'Things' in sub-archives; this is extremely helpful to know.

JIM VASSILAKOS: I did a double-take at 'Brian Misiaszek Blah Blah Blah' in the 'What is This?' intro to E&A. perhaps a future name for a future zine of mine? Or something to rhyme with "...Cha Cha Cha?" <> *Re The Fall of Machado in Cuba:* thanks for your kind words. I experienced equal moral distress going reading about the all too real horrors of the Mazorra, and I toned way down my write-up lastish and thish.

Regarding your comment, “*This is something I never understood about CoC, how seeing something that shouldn’t exist causes characters to go bonkers.*” My take on this is this is not a case of sudden “insanity”, but an automatic catastrophic panic response triggered by ancient, hardwired survival circuits. The brain of a CoC PC isn’t reacting to the impossibility of what’s seen, but to instinctive patterns our ancestors evolved to detect and fear. A failed SAN roll comes from those deep circuits firing: the mind instinctively recoiling from something it cannot comprehend, and the conscious self scrambles to explain the ever-escalating fear and yet can never catch up, further driving panic and breakdown.

For a real-life example of this, snakes: even infants who have never seen a snake show automatic fear reactions to photographs of snakes and not to bears. We have neural pathways primed to register snakes and snake-like objects faster than most other threats; triangular heads, zig-zag warning patterns, odd sinuous movements. This biological pre-conditioning can later be affected by experience and exposure, but the initial negative reaction is hard-wired and was probably an evolutionary advantage.

Likewise, the ‘uncanny valley’ effect where many people are creeped out by viewing computer animated generated actors, life-sized dolls, and persons with too much plastic surgery & body modification. This has been argued to reflect an evolved human wariness of things that appear *almost* human but *wrong*; FREX persons who are carrying disease, corpses, or rival hominins. And, as some horror authors have suggested, an ancestral hardwired revulsion of undead as per folklore of vampires and other supernatural almost-humans.

As the common trope where reading forbidden lore can drive one insane in *Call of Cthulhu* and other horror books, I can think of several overlapping possibilities:

- Highly disturbing content alone might trigger a psychotic break in a younger Reader already predisposed & vulnerable. For example, an individual with latent pre-diagnosed schizophrenic (usually late teens to early 30s, with men on the younger side), where reading and reacting violently to something very upsetting could be the last straw to push them into their first episode of outright psychosis.
- Weird texts written in unfamiliar languages cannot be accurately “translated” but instead *interpreted* in the mind of the Reader, and in doing so they carry along subliminal patterns that heighten stress and which can destabilize an already vulnerable mind.
- Physical factors could be at work: fumes from poisonous inks, inhaled spores from hallucinogenic molds accidentally growing on the books, or neurotoxins deliberately soaked into the parchment (ala Umberto Eco’s *The*

Name of the Rose) to cause madness in a careless Reader who licks their fingers when turning pages.

- Or it’s a hybrid effect, where the Reader’s brain, already compromised from toxic residue emanating from the ancient tome as above, in the act reading, translating, and interpreting the content of alien information has it act as if uploading essentially incompatible software into our neural tissue and salience networks, resulting in mental breakdown and ‘insanity’.

PEDRO PANCOCA Da SILVA & MAIRA ZUCOLOTTI: Re *Os 33 porquinhos* (2017). This sounds (and from the video looks) like a fascinating format for a kid’s book if it could be made durable enough. I wonder if they used a material like Tyvek®, which is waterproof and tear proof, and used for things like the night indestructible *Tuk Book™* notebook, it could also prove to be child-proof enough for this purpose?



MICHAEL CULE: RYC: *Starman Jones* was an old favourite of mine as well. It’s interesting how Robert Heinlein’s juvenile SF books have held up better and is less cringe-worthy than many of his later adult fiction. <> Re *Clerihews*; I read quickly on Wikipedia, and noted this quote by the inventor of the type of AABB rhyming structure biographical poem, “...Bentley said that a true clerihew must have the name “at the end of the first line”, as the whole point was the skill in rhyming awkward names.”

GEORGE PHILLIES: Snerk at giving (3) skritchies to Cerberus. Thanks for including that link. I liked your write-up of the PC dealing with the drunken sot so handily.

MYLES CORCORAN: A sunburn in Ireland? I would have thought a *moonburn* would have been equally likely (grin). Awesome you supporting your kids and others in this Pride event held in Cork. <> ‘Project L’ looks quite elegant and nifty. <> I continue to enjoy reading your ever charming *Mausritter* write-ups (*Maus-writeups*?).

Re Twisting the Rope: After reading your explanation, I went and tracked down *Tales of Red Hanrahan* and read Yeats’s short story that has the same name as your zine. The poet Hanrahan’s defeat struck me as a reminder that the support of a community, and even the practical ingenuity of a single person, can overcome beguiling words that lack substance. It’s a

lesson I think would be welcome to see more often these days.

MITCH HYDE: I loved your illustrations, and the piece you created for the door closing/opening fight between that uni-horned gargoyle and the PCs is a beautiful example of the personality of old-school stylized role-gaming art. The story was fun to read too.

BRIAN ROGERS: Cool family vacation and photo of yourself visiting ~~B2's Caves of Chaos~~ *Lost River Gorge!* And thanks for your kind comments about my *Havana Horror* scenario(s). Shout out for being inspired by 1930s weird fiction author Clark Ashton Smith's witch-ridden antique fictional French province of *Averogine* setting.

PATRICK RILEY: *Re your Monster Bee Encounter:* Crumpling up the paper minis of each dead monster Bee must have felt quite satisfying to your players

RYCTM: You've put your finger on one of the challenges I wrestled with: how much to keep the straight history of 1930s Cuba as history, and how much to blend in the pulp elements without it feeling like a lecture or a hard break in tone. I tried to have the hand-picked history of the era up front in a separate essay and then in the actual 'Havana Horror' scenario ideas I leaned toward weaving them together so the reader would "slide" into the fictional divergences.

In this case it was adding in supernatural elements and contrived names & backgrounds of NPCs. But you correctly point out how this also risks muddying where the real record stops and the *Havana Horror* setting begin. How do you suggest I signal those shifts? A side bar, a typographic font/colour change, or other marker? Or just framing each section with "In history..."?

PATRICK ZOCH: We play virtually live too using Zoom, and even after 3 years or so there is always someone whose internet or computer is acting up.

I'm glad you like what I've been inspired to create for this sprawling collection of write-ups I'm loosely filing under 'Havana Horror'. As for *Pulp Cthulhu*, this is a wonderful variant for those who like the horror aspect, but also like having more player agency and improved chances to survive an encounter with Lovecraftian entities due to spending Luck, having more HP, and their own *Pulp Talents*.

RARE your Leavenworth Wargames Club *Epic Games Day* write-up and photos you took. I also noticed online that there is an annual *Leavenworth Militaria Show & Sale* each February that you may find worth attending with your son and find some tabletop bargains. We had something like it last Saturday, and here's a photo I took.



JOHN REDDEN: *Mouse Guard* looks like it was great fun! <> Kudos for ongoing electric guitar success with your grand-daughter. I'm pleased you liked my (gulp) 28 pages I wrote for AOM#239 covering part of Cuban/political history from almost 100 years ago. I often write about things and settings I wished I could do as a player in such games, and come at it with that sensibility in mind.

Regarding BTTF 2: I will have to hand in my geek credibility card and admit I've only seen the first film in the trilogy.

MARK A. WILSON: Thanks for the nice and short 'Alice is Missing' text RPG review.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: *RYCT George Phillies:* It's been since I last read *Amber RPG*, but your comment that despite missing the initial Auction later players/PCs can be slid into campaigns with stats jives with my own memories just as you write.

HEATH ROW: It certainly seems that fate (or cheese) is conspiring to have you play *Pathfinder* sometime soon in the Madison WI region.

MARK NEMETH: RAE. I hope your time frees up soon.

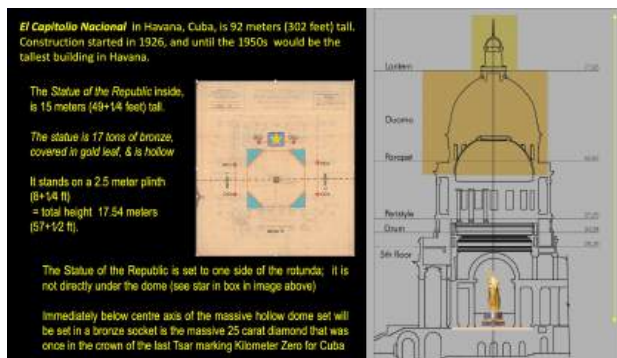
JIM ECKMAN: Sorry things have been so crazy busy. Thanks for the ego-boost with your comment about my *Havana Horror* RPG material.

Everyone Else: RAEBNC

ME: My apologies for going over the 16-page limit for E&A; I'll be within limits this time.

Some more thoughts on my *El Fantasmos of El Capitolio* Scenario in A&E #2

The dome's unusual magnetic toroidal flow of AC electricity that the entity feeds on is one circuit. however, the *Scintillator* (*Centelladores*) uses DC current to produce even lighting through its 5 Carbon arc lamps.



Arc-Lamp Advantages:

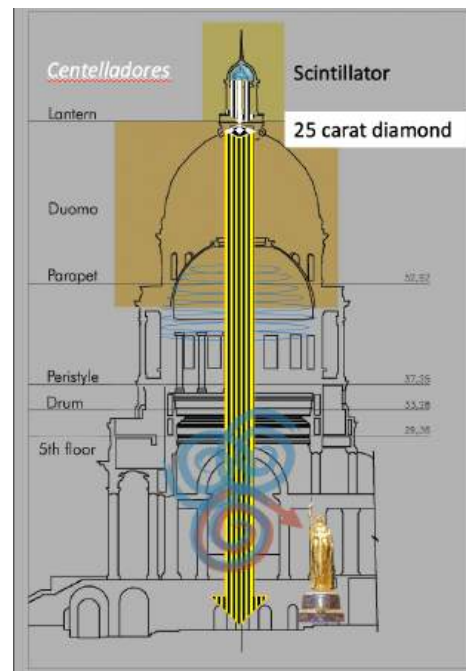
- Super bright white-purple light, capable of lighting a large length of street or a large factory interior
- cheaper to light streets than gas or oil lamps
- Used from 1920s until WW2 as high intensity search lights

Arc-Lamp Disadvantages:

- Carbon rods had to be frequently replaced
- Produces (dangerous) UV-A, UV-B, & UV-C rays
- Creates buzzing sound & flickering as light burns
- Created +++radio frequency interference
- fire hazard, many theaters burned because of the excessive heat/sparks emitted; unenclosed lamp could electrocute or severely burn technicians.
- also emit carbon *Bucky-balls*(!)

Questions/Thoughts/Ideas

- If the intense beam of 5 arc lights is aimed (using fun-house mirrors) at the 25-carat 'Kilometer Zero' diamond (*cuboidal* crystalline structure), perhaps it can disrupt the energy since entity's energy structure is hexagonal?
- Entity hates sunlight, and the light from an Arc-Lamp is closest to sunlight, if combo insufficient to damage it; perhaps the +++RFI can stun it to prevent it from leaving?
- Can carbon arc-lamps bucky-balls entangle the entity? Make visible and constrained??
- diamond could be used in the arc lamp diamonds will burn if subjected to flame, just like coal does (*though rather \$\$\$ way to defeat the enemy*).
- Gold-foil bronze statue near rotunda/Scintillator vertical beam could act as a **third** circuit to attract/contain a charged mass.
- PCs (or Talbot) might overload the Scintillator, sending its beam through the diamond *El Brillante* to disrupt the *Entity's* resonance with its preferred hexagonal carbon nanostructure where surface plasmons are excited to Fano resonance.
- *Entity* becomes 'stuck' briefly while it readjusts internally; during this pause, a conductive link (makeshift or hidden in dome ironwork) channels the *Entity's* energy into the bronze statue, trapping it like a giant Leyden jar/capacitor.



- Marble pedestal (non-conductive) holds the charge, preventing the Entity from grounding or dispersing energy.



Old postcard and what Gemini AI did with it

Because the statue is slightly offset, the PCs might have to *physically* reposition something (like a metal rod, a conductor, or even the Scintillator's angle) to align the energy discharge through the diamond and into the statue all while the Entity tries to stop them.

Just imagine this; a giant 60-foot-tall statue that is the Creole interpretation of the Goddess Athena flickering with arcs of St. Elmo's fire, the gold leaf turning into a crackling cage of ghostly lightning as the *Entity's* form shreds as it is drawn to and trapped inside.

Sept 21st 2025. BCM

An Unlooked For Zine #3

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email: drcpunk@labcats.org or drcpunk@gmail.com

Running tight on time, so I'm going to see if I can insert images from a Storybrewers Discord Bingo Month. The idea was to click on a link to bingo cards with a different set of tropes each week. One could click more than once to change the sequence, but each week had the same set of 24 tropes.

Character Tropes				
B	I	N	G	O
Trashfire	Not here to make friends	Sadly widowed before 35	Secretly broke	Uncomfortably good looking
World's saddest hedonist	Lady who doth fence too well	Unhappily married to a John	No thoughts/ head empty	Dead parents
Obstinate headstrong girl	Wants more than this provincial life	Free!	Grumpy outside/ Sensitive Inside	Fish out of water
Lone wolf	Used to be a Good Guy	Repressed cornerstone w/ extra year	Rare eye colour	So hot in their military uniform
Cinnamon roll	Born for the STAGE	Scarily competent	Bad boy	Easily distracted

Only one bingo for this one. Apparently, I don't care about my characters' eye colors. And I tend to play cross-gender, so I didn't get a headstrong girl or a lady who doth fence too well. Nor were any of my characters married to a John. Apparently, I avoided lone wolves (unsurprising) and empty headed characters (somewhat more surprising) for the games that came to my mind when filling this out. I've totally played a cinnamon roll, but I guess I didn't think of the characters that fit this square.

Relationship tropes				
B	I	N	G	O
You're my new project	Found family	Oops, all siblings	We really really shouldn't	Ride or die friendship
One brain cell between them	Fake courtship	Identical twins	Long-term house guest	Lovers to enemies
Shh, it's a secret	Exasperated parent	Free!	Hype-worthy wing-person	Exes and things ended badly
They were roommates	Long-lost siblings	Rivals to lovers	Happy poly ending	3+ queers in a large closet
Long-parted lovers	Lavender marriage	Lex Luthor level-nemesis	Calculated political match	Married to lovers

Relationship tropes are my jam. I almost filled the card!

Regency tropes				
B	I	N	G	O
At least £5000 a year	Keeping a diary	Inheritance drama	Amateur theatricals	Torn between suitors
Emotionally-weighted dance	Unwanted proposal	Croquet match	Masquerade ball	Whispering at church
Awkward carriage ride	Courtship of convenience	Free!	Hedge maze	Language of flowers
Reverse gender norms	Diving or falling into a lake	Recovering from illness	Accidentally sent letter	Needing smelling salts / vapors
Confession letter	"I shall never marry"	Perfect sibling	Significant Hand Touch	Embarrassing family

I clearly need to up my Regency-fu! I probably could have put in Amateur Theatricals. Maybe. That showed up in 2 games with modern settings, and one involved high school performance, the other college, so it's oddly liminal. Not enough carriage rides or church scenes, clearly. And I can't believe I haven't done hedge mazes! One of the players in my Fearful Symmetries game noted the lack for that game as well.

At the Table				
B	I	N	G	O
IRL and online games with same person	Gasped IRL	Fan art/fic of your game	Filled out the feedback survey	Being distracting in chat (affectionate)
Multi-session passage of time	24/7 epistolary goes wild	Christmas special	In-game poetry	Beach episode
30 minute scene	Cat/dog cam	Free!	Reusing character names	"Is there anything else we'd like to see in this scene?"
Free monologue	Duet game	Modern song lyrics	More than one star	Greek myth allusion
Relationship chart	Alternate universe with repeat characters	3hr novel chapter	Played two characters in one conversation	Dice in diceless game

At the Table Tropes netted me 3 bingos. Not quite as full as Relationship Tropes. I probably could count 30 Minute Scene, especially as I've played in a Duet Society game, and Josh and I have playtested two of Pelgrane's One2One games. I may or may not have had a 3 hour novel chapter in a Penned to Good Society game; I simply don't know. Folks would have let me count Cat/dog cam because I've played with people whose animal companions put in an appearance, but I didn't feel that counted for me. The alternate universe square came from playing Starfleet Society, where we did 2 episodes, one of which was set in the Mirror Universe, and from Modern Gothic Society, where we also did 2 episodes and one used the alternate universe plot.

IGTHOTS

This will be a quick race through a few months' worth.

Issue #1 igttheme: Introducing players to a new rules system, especially to new combat rules

Josh and I have thought about this and created a cheat sheet for ourselves to guide us when we run Dangerous Refuge, our Penned to Good Society game. This tells us what to teach and in what order, so that we don't overwhelm people with new information.

When we run larps, generally with Stephen Tihor, we have both a GM Timeline telling us what the overall breakdown of the (usually) 4-hour slot should (roughly) be and a Rules Briefing outline. Which one of us gives the rules briefing varies.

I've walked folks through Gumshoe at convention and home games (Swords of the Serpentine and

Trail of Cthulhu) and Powered by the Apocalypse games (Monsterhearts and Urban Shadows), as well as various Penned to Good Society games.

Storybrewers has a series of videos about playing and teaching the game, including one on how to manage time for a convention one-shot of (I think) 4 hours. Some other companies do similar videos.

One trick I've seen many times in convention one-shots is to open with a combat, walking players through the combat mechanics, and then having a period of rest (for the characters) before the main plotline of the slot kicks into high gear.

There are some systems I have problems learning, despite decent GMs. Cortex in its various incarnations is one of them. Somehow, every time I need to make a roll, I need to be walked through the process of assembling a dice pool.

James Mendez Hodes has come up with a solution, although the game he's co-authored, Streets of Jade, doesn't use the Cortex system. It uses the Paragon system, which also involves gathering a dice pool. Mendez has created a sheet with spaces to put the dice and instructions for which dice go where. This makes things so much easier! It probably wouldn't be that difficult to do something similar for Cortex games.

I also have an astonishing (to me) amount of trouble internalizing the Accelerant system. Accelerant is used for many boffer larps, and it's really not that difficult at base. Moreover, the larp I played, They-Ro and the Rulers of Perpetua (not the most serious of larps, as one might suspect) had a much simplified version of the Accelerant rules.

Yet, as soon as combat started, every single one of the very few, very simple rules about what phrases to shout out when, how to figure out when my character was injured and just how injured they were completely fled my mind. I could not keep a single one in my head and still do boffer fighting, and I automatically prioritized at least semi-competent boffer fighting.

I've got a couple of notes about how one shouldn't do it. The first is about a game I didn't play in. Apparently, this involved a scenario that multiple GMs ran at a convention for many different groups, something I saw at my very first Gen Con / Origins. (There were 96 of us, and we were split into groups of 6. Each group went with

a separate GM who ran the adventure for them.) Folks knew going in, I'm pretty sure, that this was a company's scenario, and that it was being run many times for many groups. The person telling the story was part of a group assigned to a GM who clearly hadn't read the scenario carefully enough. The GM didn't realize that the tone was supposed to be somewhat comedic, and I think mishandled what was flashback and what was present time. The crowning moment, though, was when the players realized that GM thought that violins were cello-sized.

Running a demo scenario for a company is a tricky business. Some companies give their GMs good support material, and others don't. Some companies understand what a demo scenario should accomplish, and others don't. For example, at DexLite this year, I played a 2-hour demo of Cursebourne, which felt like a variation on World/Chronicles of Darkness. That was fine; it was what I was there for.

What was less fine:

The GM had to photocopy and cut up pages from the book to give us details of what our characters' special abilities were.

The GM ignored or was unclear on one major part of the rules, curse dice. It wasn't that you can't play the game that way; you absolutely can. It's that this is clearly a big part of what makes Curseborne Curseborne, and we were there to learn Curseborne.

The scenario description and opening, in summary: The PCs were all Curseborne and all friends with a normal human being. They were supposed to meet him, but he didn't show up, and he wasn't the kind of person who was late. Therefore, clearly, they needed to find him.

The problem: He was basically doomed from the beginning. The PCs would be too late, no matter what.

Why this is a problem: This was blurred, no doubt by the company, as most convention one-shots are, which is to say it strongly implied that the PCs could potentially rescue their friend. Additionally, this is a demo, which means that you want groups coming away satisfied. And sometimes, a bleak ending can do that. But in this case, it left me decidedly unsatisfied. We couldn't really affect the course of events. Is this what the game as a whole is like? I'd like to believe it isn't, but I can't be sure. (In fairness, I backed the game on Kickstarter and do have an

electronic copy of the manuscript, I think, so I could probably read it.)

Issue #2 – July 21st: Do you stat and equip your intelligent and powerful villains who are going to defeat the inferior “heroes”? Why or why not? Does doing or not doing this influence how you run the session/campaign?

It depends. Note that “who are going to defeat the inferior “heroes”” is making a very large assumption.

I run mostly commercially published scenarios, so the villains/adversaries generally come pre-statted and equipped. I've discovered I can get lost in their stat blocks. *The Masks of Nyarlathotep Companion* had some good advice there, at least for *Call of Cthulhu* spellcasting villains: Cross out every spell they can't usefully use in combat.

It turns out that most *Call of Cthulhu* spells aren't useful during combat. Sure, a villain can summon a monster, but this needs to have happened before the combat starts. At that point, I don't usually need to know the summoner's spell list so much as the stat block for the summoned being. The *MoN Companion* and people online have listed what they think are the useful-in-combat spells, and for the most part I agree. Mindblast is the one that leaves me boggled, as its effects (by the book) are fairly random and don't really keep the victim from attacking. *Tatters of the King* is my gold standard, though, as it tells the GM what tactics the spellcasters will use in combat. Alas, it's the exception rather than the rule. Moreover, it has very few spellcasters, so that's a relatively small part of the campaign, which is definitely not a dealbreaker.

I'm not the best combat GM. Generally, I suspect, I underuse the adversaries' resources, even when I'm trying to hit as hard as I can. I also don't have the best sense of when I'm hitting too hard.

When I've created my own villains/adversaries, it really depends what the system is. For Dracula Dossier for *Night's Black Agents*, I have pages of stat blocks. Dracula's stats, iirc, take up about 8 pages, and this is a problem. I definitely get lost in the stat blocks.

For much of the Dracula Dossier campaign, I did not run the opposition as effectively as I could, and I didn't understand what I was doing wrong, why the supposedly tough vampires went down

in about a round. I got some advice from fellow GMs which helped. When I ran "4 Days of the Bat", the relatively weak adversaries (comparatively speaking) were suddenly actually challenging.

When I playtested Evil Hat's *Fate of Cthulhu*, I created opposition, including alternate timeline versions of the PCs. When I ran Kerberos Club Fate, I created nearly all the NPCs. Note that both of these games had social, as well as physical, combat.

Whether and how I stat up opposition/potential opposition does influence how I run a session. This isn't always for the better; sometimes, I try, not necessarily consciously, to nudge things away from a direct confrontation with an adversary whose stats I'm not completely sure how best to use or who I think is too powerful for the group. Sometimes I underplay because I think, generally incorrectly, that playing the adversary as competently as I should would be too much.

That said, preparing in advance does, in theory, and often in practice, make me more familiar with what the opposition can do and how I should run it in play. And if I'm using a commercially published scenario, preparing in advance often gives me a heads up about any issues I'm likely to run into. This could be an NPC who should be interesting, but who the scenario authors don't think should ever be willing to say anything to the PCs. In this particular case, in the interest of fair play and clever players, the authors compound the problem by coming up with an utterly nonsensical way to get the NPC to talk, one which, when questioned about it, they admitted they had no idea how to make happen. It could be recognizing that, in the climactic scene, Hastur wins any POW vs POW unless the outer god roles 00 and the PC roles 01. (7th edition *Call of Cthulhu* mitigates this problem, but the campaign I'm thinking about was written for an earlier edition.)

For Dracula Dossier, the fact that I was running a campaign composed of mini-campaigns meant that some NPCs' stats changed over time, most definitely including Dracula's. Some of his abilities cost him less to use. Some of the things that kept him at bay became less effective or ineffective.

This wasn't necessarily a matter of the PCs fighting him. Indeed, he's often been an ally, if a very, very dangerous one. But I did keep an eye on both my vague plan for the campaign and what happened in play.

Dracula started out being blocked by crosses and other symbols of Christianity. Then, he met Liesl Rosenzweig, a young psychoanalyst who was a cousin of a certain Sigmund Freud.

Liesl's player was determined to have Liesl psychoanalyze Dracula, which made perfect sense. I'd decided, either in advance or on the spot, that my Dracula was always learning, always fascinated by new things, like, oh, the budding field of psychoanalysis that he'd just learned about from Fraulein Rosenzweig.

Liesl got to psychoanalyze him, and she came to some conclusions that I'm not certain were entirely warranted based on how I played Dracula -- but which were sufficiently interesting and logical that I decided she was right. She said that she was Dracula's last chance at not losing his humanity, and as far as she was concerned, he blew it. (She phrased it more elaborately, but that's what it boiled down to.) Dracula, then, was going to get more callous and feel more superior to humanity over time.

But he also was going to learn everything he could about psychoanalysis! And he did.

He met Liesl in 1894. By 1940, he was starting to overcome his hangups about Christianity, and could only be affected by Christian icons at least as old as he was. By 2015, he was over it. Crosses, churches, church bells, all of that? These petty mortal things no longer affected him.

He also arranged to study with Freud, to Liesl's chagrin. This happened between mini-campaigns, offstage, and I suspect it may have played some small part in Liesl's eventual move to Palestine, as well as her creation of an organization to deal with vampires and other supernatural menaces.

While it hasn't yet come up directly in play, I also decided that Dracula never did get Liesl out of his mind. He's probably written various letters, sent or otherwise, and journal entries arguing with her about humanity, particularly in the wake of a world war or two.

Back in the 1990s, when 1st edition *Over the Edge* had been in print for some time, someone did a series of character sheets for the same character, each accompanied by the character speaking for a few paragraphs. The character changed over time, and the sheets reflected this. I learned from this, I think, not just for Dracula and other NBA vampires, but also for Fate of Cthulhu and for Kerberos Club Fate. That last had a recurring villain whose stats changed with

every appearance. He started off as a fraudulent medium and eventually became powerful enough to take out three of the four PCs -- and almost the fourth as well! Ultimately, he sought redemption, although he sought it from someone who, while genuinely willing to help, was, from the PCs' point of view, definitely a villain.

How I played this changing NPC was definitely influenced by my prep work, which, in turn, was influenced by what the players and their characters did, as is meet and proper. As for the villain he eventually worked with, the PCs overcame that one, and Josh's PC said to him that if he wanted one more life, she would give that to him by having him reincarnate as her child. He accepted, and I used that to create a new version of the character for the sequel campaign, Kerberos Club II: The Machinery of Life. It was set long enough after the first campaign that he was fully an adult.

He was also clearly protective of the PC who was his half sibling, and at one point, I asked that character's player why they thought this was the case. He came up with a brilliant bit of backstory explaining that: When the NPC was an infant, he wailed in frustration because he was trying to give commands, but no one listened, likely because what they heard was only the usual noises infants too young to speak make. However, his half-sibling not only figured out what he wanted (the usual things infants want, as this was not a case of telepathy), but also addressed him extremely respectfully, using "milord" a fair bit. This meant that the NPC-PC relationship was akin to the one between Kropf and Agatha in the comic *Girl Genius*. (See <https://www.girlgeniusonline.com/comic.php?date=20040317> and <https://www.girlgeniusonline.com/comic.php?date=20040319>)

Long lasting NPCs generally change over time, generally because of their interactions with PCs. Combat is one obvious interaction, but there are so many others. Following where the players take things and sometimes, getting the players to help define facets of some of the NPCs, is generally a good strategy.

This matter of the villains defeating the PCs, though, is fraught. Sometimes, there's an obvious "it just happens" way to do that. If the PCs are surrounded by too many competent and powerful NPCs (and sometimes, that can be 1 NPC), sometimes, the players agree that surrender is the correct option.

Sometimes, the system makes it challenging to defeat competently played PCs. Kevin Kulp described a recent combat in his *Swords of the Serpentine* game. The PCs were faced with a well-planned ambush, and between the use of skills allowing Flashbacks, calling in favors from powerful allies in those factions, and going all out in combat, the situation changed from an ambush to the PCs overwhelming the opposition and sending a survivor back to the people who sent them, as and/or with a message. And Kevin was delighted. This is what he and Emily designed the game to be able to do.

Gumshoe combats can be tricky, though, especially in Gumshoe games that are not *Swords of the Serpentine*. The GM has a lot of points they can use, and I've often noted that it feels like I'm fiatting the result of the combat, no matter which side wins. *SotS* deals with this by specifying what a GM should add to combat rolls. No dice pool for that, just a consistent modifier. The game does give the GM NPCs with assorted abilities fueled by a pool of points, but supplements this with advice on using these abilities, on what abilities in combination might suddenly overwhelm a party even when one doesn't want that, and on giving NPCs fewer abilities so that one doesn't get lost in a myriad of options.

Trail of Cthulhu doesn't go quite that far, but the second edition has added enough advice and changed enough that it doesn't feel like I've predetermined who triumphs in combat. I do still need to review any Gumshoe scenario, as there are often opponents theoretically intended as minor speed bumps, but with stats that make them too powerful for that.

Issue #3 – August 21st: What is your playing style or what do you look for in an RPG session?

As a GM, I either spent a lot of time prepping or I realize I don't need to spend that much time prepping. I lay plans based on who the PCs and their players are. In long running games where I'm not just using commercially published scenarios with as few changes as possible, I'm almost certainly going to come up with the family tree that shows how all the PCs and NPCs are actually related to each other.

While what I do as a player (and as GM) depends on the situation, I definitely have types. I usually play male characters. I go for innocents a lot. I go for simple brick types, especially Sunday morning at a gaming convention, because if I'm

too tired to think, that's okay -- I know what to do. I hit it. I can play a Good Society Hedonist, as this slides into either of those easily. I'm also good at stalwart loyal types, and somewhat distractible types. My reaction to a game Avram Grummer was theoretically going run, many years ago, but alas, never did, where the PCs would be young princes and princesses "invited" to stay at the court of the high king (i.e., hostages for their parents' good behavior) was "Dibs on the Bookish Prince!" I've played Cheerful Evil a couple of times, and it's fun. I realized some years after the fact that one particularly cheerful vampire I played was not altogether dissimilar from Bangladesh Dupree from Girl Genius (although it's since been made clear that she's a lot smarter than my character). Also, I've played more than one character who was apparently very frustrating to argue with.

I look for opportunities to chew scenery. When figuring out which of a particular circle of friends would play whom in Umbrella Academy, one friend and I would clearly have gotten into a metaphorical knife fight over who got to play Klaus!

I want to be comfortable with a group and to have fun. I want everyone else to be comfortable and have fun. I want good communication about what is and isn't working.

Sure, this can be taken too far; most things can. But, for example, if I'm running a game that seems to have been working for you, and suddenly, you can't make any of the sessions, and it turns out the reason you can't is that you now have a weekly therapy appointment or you started night school, I'd really like to know this. Or if you cannot give an online game your full attention until after 7:30 pm, again, I'd like to know. (Why yes, both of these are examples from games I've run, and in both cases, the players in question did not volunteer the information until, after more than one session of it being the case, it occurred to me to ask.)

Things I look for in games (on the understanding that this is very context specific, and many of these items apply more to home games than to convention one shots) include:

- Use a light hand on the crunch. Make every bit of crunch you do use matter.
- Group character/world creation. Seriously, it makes everything better.
- Group character/world creation as part of the game, not this thing you gotta do in order to play. It's part of play.

- Whatever the game's about, make every part of the game support that.
- If there are character sheets, the design should work with what's important. (E.g., Monsters and Other Childish Things wants relationships to be the heart and soul, but the sheet fails to reflect that.)
- If there's an online character keeper thing, make that easy on the eyes (which for me is a tall order, hence my love/hate relationship with character keepers).
- I like rich settings but I also need to be clear on what the game is about and what everyone who plays/gms/facilitates does.
- Presuming we have player characters, they are the part of the game that is most important. Yes, there's the rest of the world. Yes, there are challenges they may not be able to overcome at first/ever. Yes, they may be doomed. But. I do not want a game that exists to show players scenery that they get to watch as if watching a movie. That's what movies are for. I do not want a game that expects player characters to be moved as if on a chess board, captured here, unable to stop an action there, having the mcguffin stolen from them because plot demands. No. (This is not the same as having resolve tokens fly or having a group agreement like "Yes, we know Dracula will survive a Four Generations game of Night's Black Agents until the final generation part." I'll give you premise.)
- Support for emotional play, because I like emotional play.
- I like running commercial scenarios and campaigns. I also like games where you just... don't have a preset plot. These are generally two very different paths, and you won't usually, if ever, find them in the same game.
- I want a table where, whether I'm player, facilitator, gm, or some other role, everyone's making it work. We're building on each other's stuff, pulling each other in, tossing the ball back and forth.
- I enjoy running jokes and things that have unexpected payoff. But these things aren't and can't usually be planned for. They come out of play.
- I like surprises coming out of play, specifically surprises that feel right, that *fit*.

- I also like being able to predict how players will react -- but not all the time!

Issue #4 – September 21st: What are your favorite RPGs to play, run, or just read?

Often, my favorite is either whatever I am playing, running, or reading right now -- or everything I want to be playing, running, or reading after I am finished with the ones I am.

- For the longest time, I would have said 1st edition Over the Edge, and it's still a fine system.
- I can now do more with Fate than I did with Over the Edge -- in some respects.
- I still enjoy Call of Cthulhu.
- Gumshoe is fine system, though I have various issues with various flavors of it. Swords of the Serpentine is my favorite Gumshoe flavor!
- I enjoy playing Clockwork: Dominion, but so rarely have the chance.
- I enjoyed the one game of current edition Over the Edge I've played. I need to read the new book and the scenario collection.
- I enjoyed reading the playtest draft of the Swords of the Serpentine campaign Pillars of Sand, and enjoyed running most of it, and hope to run the rest.
- I've enjoyed various Powered by the Apocalypse games and think Aviatrice has a point when she says that it's a pity that didn't come out before Gumshoe (it was about a year later).
- I don't entirely understand Forged in the Dark games, but I had a blast reading the CHEW rpg and the CHEWniverse expansion, and between those and Candela Obscura, I think I'm beginning to get the gist of it.
- I was surprised to find myself enjoying reading and playing Bluebeard's Bride and its variants.
- I love Midnight Circus for Old World of Darkness.
- I am very much enjoying reading and playing the journaling game My Late Father's Correspondence.
- I've enjoyed playing various Penned to Good Society games, as well as working on Dangerous Refuge with Josh and running it at conventions.
- I enjoy Belonging Outside Belonging / No Dice, No Master games, particularly Grand Guignol.

- Phoenix Dawn Command (NOT Phoenix Command!) was fun to play, so long as we were aware of its limits.

Obviously, I could go on, but I'm pushing deadline as it is.

Accidental Recall #3

For Ever & Anon #4

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I was able to get my more useful wikis working again, which should be helpful when we take *Ghost Fu*, our quasi-historical China game (where nearly all the PCs are dead before the game starts) out of mothballs to run at next year's Intercon. We previously ran it with 4 or 5 GMs, but unless we recruit more, we'll have 3, so that hopefully won't be a problem (I may mechanize some stuff that previously has been handled with loosely GMed one to one session which might help).

Another year, another new Genshin Impact release. I'm still using a "some on, some off" play schedule to avoid addiction, but the new release includes one mechanic that challenges that; you get free constellations for characters you own, but only out of playing for at least 5 days in at least 8 weeks...over a 80-90 day period. Since 90 days includes 12 weeks, this should hardly be a challenge even with some off weeks, but if I want to have some nice breaks and still get free stuff, I'm going to have to schedule them carefully.

Having not gotten enough board gaming in, I've returned to a Saturday board gaming meetup. The meetup was, when I first joined them, most often meeting in a pool all in Astoria, but the billiards place lost their lease due to the economy, sadly. They'd then spent time another mile away, which I made a number of times but which was a bit awkward to get to, and then spent a period of years in very awkward locations indeed that I didn't feel the need to travel to.

But more recently, they've switched to a location in Flushing, QUEens, which is both an easy subway ride from my place and one of the Chinese food meccas of NYC, so there are several reasons to make it. As such, I've managed to make the 3 of the last 3 Saturdays (this record will not last).

Some games I've played:

Project L. This one was described in these pages so I won't repeat them.

Lorenzo the Magnificent: I encountered this just as I was finishing up Ada Palmer's *Inventing the Renaissance*, so it had some extra juice as I got to play important Renaissance figures like Savonarola and Cesare Borgia. But the game is also quite good (enough that I went online and found a copy of the latest edition, with all the expansions, in a nice small box, for \$60 including shipping. The gameplay is an interesting style of worker placement—you have four workers—your family members, but they are unreliable; a die is rolled for each color of family member (of 3) and their value is set to that die's value, so they might be an utterly brilliant worker at a 6 value, or they might be very unreliable at 2 or 1. The remaining worker is fixed at a value of 0 (which is useless; the minimum value needed to take an action is 1), but fear not: in addition to your family members, one of the resources you manage is assistants, which can add to a family members' value when taking an action,

allowing a worker with a value of 0 to take any action with enough help—even the highest difficulty card taking actions, which require a value of 7 not, I'll note, rollable on a D6). As befits worker placement games, there are a number of different types of actions your workers can take, but unlike most, there are no ways to add new worker placement actions to the game at all! Instead, in addition to a number of ad-hoc actions that can provide a number of resources at respectable costs and the obligatory "change the turn order" action which generates a small amount of a useful resource while also granting you an earlier turn order in the next round (but only the person to go there first will go first in the next round; if someone goes there a second time they will go second, etc), the main action-taking spots are the card gain actions and the "engine" actions.

Card gaining actions are in four different types, and there are four cards available for each type per round, but the first person to take particular style of card will significantly block both themselves and (to a lesser degree) other players from taking further cards in that stack. But as to the four types,

Green (territory) is free but after you have taken two territories, each additional one requires greater and greater military strength to conquer, and each territory you have becomes part of your green engine. However, in addition to the minimum worker strength needed to take a territory (like the other card-taking actions, depending on random placement this is 1, 3, 5 (but you get a free resource back) and 7 (but you get two free resources)), each territory will also list a die strength needed to use it in our green engine, and players after the first taking the "run my green engine" action will have their worker strength reduced by 3 for that action additionally and need to plan for that. Green cards also often produce some immediate resources in addition to what they do when you run your engine. Green cards are also worth points at the end of the game, but this uses a modified triangle; if you build all 6 green spaces you'll get 20 points, but the first two green cards aren't worth any points at all and the third is only worth 1 point.

Purple (ventures) cards are very simple; you pay the cost and get a bunch of free resources; you also get ~5 points at the end of the game for each one.

Yellow cards (buildings) comprise your second engine. Unlike green cards, they were worth nothing at the end of the game, but their production action might be more valuable and easier to use (that said, it is often some kind of transformation so you have to plan for your yellow production actions; in the one game I've played I didn't build yellow).

Blue cards (characters) are very different. They are scored at the end of the game using pure triangular numbers, and their cost is always expressed in coins. But also, they provide some immediate effects...and a continuing effect that lasts until the

end of the game. These might be powerful effects that will improve your game (for instance, one I got simply improved all dice I used to get Venture cards by 2 steps), but they might even be negative effects that help pay for an underpriced immediate effect.

The other two main pieces of the game are church favors (piety, but honestly that's a terrible name for the mechanic) and the character cards. Each character card specifies a set of unique conditions to play it, but playing it is a free action you can do any time during your turn; you can even play multiple character cards during the same turn, and each character will provide a special benefit on every game round once they enter play.

The church, on the other hand, is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, the church will score up to 4 times, scoring up to 30 points (quite a lot; player scores in the end game were around 100) and moving your church marker back to 0. But on the other hand, every time such a scoring opportunity arises, you get a choice. Cash in your church favor and score some points...or refuse to do so (which you must if your church favor isn't high enough). If you refuse, well, you keep your church favor and can try to push the marker further up to the points where you get solid points when you finally cash it in, but also, you get excommunicated! At the beginning of the game, 3 excommunication tiles are drawn (one for round 2, round 4, and one for round 6, the final round), marking what happens to you if you get excommunicated—a penalty that will last until the end of the game! Of course, it might be that you look at the

Comments on E&A #2, part 2

Patrick Zoch: I know GMs have a habit of having enemies use consumable treasure against the PCs, but overall I think it's a mistake. By design, the treasure of an enemy isn't there to present the PCs with a perverse set of incentives—"defeat the bad guy or they will use up all "your" treasure!" seems attractive, and in fact I've seen it used several times—but it fails in several manners:

First, it incentivizes the players to behave unnaturally in a way that isn't great for the game. The very fact that enemies have "treasure" is a slightly unnatural part of our hobby—it shows up in our sources, of course, but treasure in D&D-like games is far more common in D&D than it is in our sources and for good reason in both cases; a story gets over-burdened and diffuse if too much magic gunk is introduced, so fiction tends to limit it to one per character per storyline and usually less (and destroy treasure as often as it adds it so it doesn't simply accrete); on the contrary, each player's story is enhanced by each piece of loot they acquire and only to a much lesser degree by the loot their compatriots gain, so treasure-focused roleplaying games will often have as many items of loot drop per PC as would, in a more typical story, happen over the entire adventure.

But by the same token, the treasure is in the story for one main reason; as a reward and tool for the players.

Get into the habits of having enemies deny that loot, then, and you break the contract by which the loot is placed in the game itself. Suddenly, players have to worry not simply about defeating their enemies, but also making sure the loot that is "rightfully theirs" is preserved. They will do things like:

The party over-prepares against the enemy, to defeat them as quickly as possible. In the most extreme examples, they might attack before the enemy realizes they are an enemy (or for that matter might attack uninvolved NPCs they think *might* be enemies; they (might) have good loot after all!)

The party plans not simply to defeat the enemy, but also to ensure their loot is untouched. In so doing, they might have specific party members who make it their mission not to defeat the enemy, but to first secure the loot, scouring the fighting ground (even while the fight continues) to find and secure unattached loot before enemies can pick it up as they flee or

penalty and figure that you don't care about it, in which case you might choose to accept the excommunication and simply plan around it; it all depends on what game you want to play! The late excommunication tiles (coming in at the end of the game) don't affect play at all, but affect scoring, so you don't generally want to skip that (but maybe you want to play an entirely faith-less game and can avoid having your score be affected by the one drawn); the others all penalize you in some way but depending on what they are you might consider them a great impediment or a tiny one.A

It's not heavy strategy, but it's not light either, and it certainly has enough Renaissance flavor to satisfy me. One of the expansions is even themed after the Pazzi conspiracy (that time a pope convened a conspiracy to attempt to assassinate Lorenzo the Magnificent while he was at prayers—and it failed!) And then Lorenzo fled for...the crime of not getting assassinated! (also his brother was dead and the mob had captured a great number of the conspirators).

As Lisa has no doubt written, we've playtested a solid Swords of the Serpentine campaign composing of 5 different adventures. Well, the first four, anyway; we used two different groups of PCs to playtest them (since some players wanted to get more play for their street gang characters), and Lisa's still figuring out what to do for the finale; we might use all the PCs and both groups (3 of which have a character in each game), who knows?

invisible allies of the enemies can remove it to use in the next battleground, or even, should they have the skills, remove so far unused loot from the enemy persons during the fight.

Which (having totally been the clever party member who made exactly these choices) can totally be a fun way to play, but over-encouraging it by having the loot vanish because the enemy USED IT swings the pendulum too far in one direction, that of trying to overthink GM structures and over-brutal worlds where the players and GM (not simply the PCs and NPCs) are in a struggle over the very rewards of the game.

As a contrast, I suggest:

The Enemy will use consumables. But they will almost always (unless the consumable was never intended to be one available to the PCs) have backup copies that the PCs will get. If the enemy uses a Summon Undead scroll, they probably had more than one prepared and the PCs didn't lose anything (other than having to fight the summoned undead) by letting them use it. Similarly, enemies don't know the maximum number of charges an item has nor care; if an item recharges automatically it might be down a few charges after the enemy used it against the PC (note that I have no issue with the idea of enemies using loot against the PCs in general; that's a tried and true practice and particularly with unique loot, gives them character).

If the PCs mess up and destroy magic items they could have won, well, that's on them.

Similarly, if the PCs mess up, and, say, let the enemy flee (when they could have stopped them; the enemy being intended to be able to flee at least once doesn't count) and giving them time to prepare and use up more magic items to heal/charge up, well, that's different; actions/inaction has consequences.

If the PCs are clever and can ambush enemies before they can prepare, or (see above tactics) steal loot enemies were intending to use in combat, the enemy won't be able to use it! The PCs might end up getting extra loot, but they might also not (or just get extra gold); perhaps the tools were half-used or customized to the enemy and so can't directly be used by the PCs (particularly if they start trying this trick regularly), because you don't want them thinking they get a massive advantage from metagaming this way.

This way, enemies still feel organic, but players don't feel

that they're punished for not metagaming (or, see previous paragraph, rewarded overly for metagaming).

Re pulp in Nazi countries: Without any direct knowledge of the topic, I'd have to assume they targeted their existing scapegoats, rather than Americans. Fascists gotta fascist, after all.

Jim Eckman: Re SF systes: a lot depends on your tastes, but Scum & Villainy (Forged in the Dark) is pretty good if you like the framework; we've started a new game and so far it's worked seamlessly. I'd played Diaspora, an early Fate SF RPG, but I think you can do better now, particularly since it's pre-Fate Core (including the official Fate Space toolkit). There are a lot of games, so it really depends on what you want to focus on.

I really liked several of the Barker EPT novels, but...yeah, given the everything I'm happy to never touch the work again. Steal any ideas you can't let go of; leave the rest where it lies.

Heath Row: Sadly, I've already fallen behind on my E&A comments (will try to reverse this "tomorrow"), but I'd love to catch up on my A&E comments and publish the choice ones here. Some day.

Re more A&E veterans appearing in these pages: Lets hope! Plus even more new people as well.

Mark A Wilson: I didn't know you played violin (what preferred music? Did you do session play or what?) and dance; awesome! Lisa and I were dancing blues for a number of years, though with covid we fell out of the habit for now (and had somewhat slowed down in the years before that, but were still making events and the occasional friday night dance).

2024 monks are much stronger (and more interesting) options than 2014 D&D monks, so hopefully you'll have better luck there than you'd had in the past. The action/focus (previously Ki) point economy of the 2014 monk was just bad, but the newer version of the class seems much more, er, focused, with the economy much better thought out, and you really get the feel of the class when you see a monk just zooming around the field and meleeing foes at will (and with relative impunity, even when the rest of the party is a round or two behind. Even the much maligned Way of the Elements monk is really viable in 2024.

Re Murder Mystery: From your description, an interesting style of improvised murder mystery indeed. Sounds a bit more Ace Attorney than Jessica Fletcher, but there's nothing wrong with that.

Clark Timmins: I'm certainly no paragon of design, but I'll note that at least for one reader (I am that reader), a separated cover to your zine rather than a title on the first page was really confusing. It looked like it was an illustration from the previous zine, and then without warning I was in an essay that seemed in an entirely different voice; it took clicking on the TOC to realize what was really going on.

The maps are very pretty and nicely old school—sadly I have to agree with you on the copyright infringement issue; on your own website it's your own lookout, but as part of the APA? Too high a collective risk.

Lisa Padol: You're going to have to track down some latecomers for Something Completely Different. By which, of course, I mean me, and maybe you.

Re Xenofilkia and it publishing many filkers: Including me!

Cities are pretty great for roleplaying games. They have a lot of people in them (I mean, except for abandoned cities, which *used* to have a lot of people in them, that's almost the entire definition of a city)! Which can make for really great play, but if your concept involves having very few characters then cities

might be less ideal.

RYCT Patrick Re scenarios that aren't run by their original designer: as you say, I think the main issue here is assumptions. We assume that a game system isn't going to be run by its designers, so we flag when it is (sometimes. Double Exposure cons do this by having a whole "play with the designer" track sometimes because it's uncommon enough that you want to flag it, but common enough that you can have a track of them).

But by the same token, in both larps and tabletops we assume people are mostly going to run scenarios that they wrote or published scenarios (less often) that they didn't write [and that people can tell the difference by whether they've heard of the scenario, which as per example won't necessarily be true. I'd lean towards the positive—tagging anything where the GM also designed the scenario with "Play with the scenario designer", except that this doesn't, of course, change the demographics that people running at cons are more likely to run adventures they designed unless they're running under a company/"living ggame" banner, which has different rules (we have changed the setup with the rise in games where there is no preset adventure and instead its improvised on the fly, but that's a different thing). Overall, I'd err as an organizer in giving as much information as possible, and as a player on being kind about information that was left out.

Re PvP in Swords of the Serpentine: I still somewhat regret that we didn't go with full-on PVP, given that each scenario includes elements where PCs could legitimately compete and elements that, once discovered, are likely to put them on the same side, which would make for a nice structure if carefully managed. But enough of us didn't want to, and in any case, it's clear that a PVP structure would have made every adventure take longer, which was time we could ill afford to lose.

But I'm reminded of Usagi Yojimbo, where very often, Usagi and his friends will be on opposite sides of an issue—Gen and he are competing on a bounty, or Kitsune is trying to steal something and Usagi is trying to protect it. And then the main plot will show up; a demon or hungry ghost; a plot by Lord Hebi, a betrayal by a previously ignorable underling,—and Usagi and his friends will find themselves fighting on the same side despite their earlier plans.

You can, in theory, ring interesting changes on "the PCs are always broke at the start of a scenario." For instance, if a PC got a particular windfall, they might have spent it, not on beer and hookers (or whatever), but on, say, building up an entire charity organization that does good work throughout the city....which is now, having just lost a major donor, in desperate need of money, so saddle up. They key, after all, is the need for oney as the singular drive for adventure, not your position outside of that simple and important fact.

Re Heartland City: Yeah; the issue with the Slice of Life game wasn't that it was no-combat, but that it didn't have an obvious focus other than "lets play these people." Add in techniques that gave a little more investment in their lives and a sense of what the players were doing and it would have worked nicely, but we were feeling our way.

Re Good Society connections: I can go into detail but I won't right now. That said, the simply answer is that when you're playing a connection in a scene, you are, in a sense, a GM. As such, your goal is (within the connection's limitations) to make plot happen (unless enough plot is already happening, in which case Back Off). How this happens is going to depend a lot on the connection, but one of the things to think about when you pick up a conneciton is "how does the connection make plot happen?" (another is "what is the purpose of this connection in the game"). So when I was playing a character's monther and a mastermind, her job was to tempt PCs into working against the interests of other PCs (mostly my own). On the other hand, when a player

had a created a loyal sycophant as a connection, it was much more of a challenge to come up with a way that character made plot happen, but I eventually managed to (in the course of a one-shot playtest): When a Danger Phase started, that character immediately got into trouble and called (of course) the PC for help [when I think about it, I've used that trope before, but I had considerably more time to plan it since it was for a longer term game]. Of course, this doesn't mean you can't play the connection in other ways; I remember one long funny scene in which I played a character's batman getting them dressed and nothing plot related happened at all. But in a game where part of the focus is to take the load off the GM (to the point that there isn't a GM; there's a facilitator who may or may not have the responsibilities of a GM and in an experienced group you might not even have a facilitator at all!), players playing connections take a lot of that work on, just like in No Dice, No Masters/ Dream Askew (which I've never played, but Grand Guignol uses the same system and Yazeba's uses close enough), the Agendas serve as quasi GM-roles (and in Yazeba's, the same is true to a degree of the more NPCy visitor roles that you can pick up in addition to a main character).

Brian Misiaszek: Looking forwards to a Peter Hildredth contribution; thanks for the heads up!

Thanks for the fascinating and shocking Cuban history! Which, of course, set a nice stage for your adventure...including XYZ as an (I assume) pastiche of the real life ABC organization. Using, not a real world org, but an inspired org with a similar but more sinister role is a nice trick I shall have to steal.

Re the Avengers: Lovely that you and Caroline are also watching it! We've switched regular vieweing a few times since, but we should turn it back to 1st season Peel at some point in due course.

Congrats to Lauren on her graduation; she looks so happy!

Jim Vassilakos: I have to sympathize with Plankewell/ Conrad here. "Every time I talk to nobles, it leads to trouble/ plot. How do I know this invitation will not also lead to yet more trouble and/or plot?"

I think the favor Kaz needed wasn't in any way described in this update? At least, I didn't recall anything.

Re alignment being visible to the characters: I mean, in games with alignment detection it can't but be otherwise. But also, if you look at early sources, (particularly Moorcock), it was very clear that alignment was very open and obvious—but also, that it wasn't a matter of internal morality, but your literal "alignment" (or lack of same) with heavenly forces.

Comments on E&A #3, part 1

Roger BW: Welcome to the APA!

The Team Leader being popular may have been a Gencon thing; I've found the same thing in the US that you did in the UK; that players are very reluctant to be a Leader (then they could play a trouble-maker). I've ended up in the role, or something like that, a not unreasonable number of times just because I didn't back away as fast as everyone else did.

In practice, as someone who has and continued to enjoy games with player-defined abilities, I don't see Fast talk (GM) being relevant as much as detractors claim. As long as you have a good sense of what your character is good at and what they're bad at, and neither are empty sets, the GM and other players will generally let you define your character's outlines; it's a high trust format for a reason. And, of course, for more modern iterations of this like Fate, Fast talk (GM) has been largely replaced by a token economy, whereas you explicitly get bennies for defining ways in which your aspects interfere with you that you can use to be good at things later.

Honestly, I've long been over GURPS. It just models far

One of the advantages of more recent versions of D&D is that they don't have mechanics that interact with alignment (mostly). Which means it can be a non-issue or a background feature the characters aren't aware of, if you want, without having to change the system.

Re games where good deeds are rewarded and evil/ expedient deeds are punished: West End Games's Star Wars! You got Force Points for doing good and heroic things, and lost them (or got Dark Side Points) for doing bad stuff!

Ways for PCs to spend out their loot: I mean, magic items are traditional but are really expensive and can break games. So why not real estate and status?

Apropos nothing except that you're generally interested in multiple GM, one PC games: I was reminded a few days ago of the RPG Heroine, which I think might be interesting to you. In Heroine, only one player plays the protagonist—a person (most often a young woman who has gone to another world, but there's nothing wrong with variations). Another player plays the antagonist, which also handles most of the GM roles. The remaining players play various companions the protagonist meets on the way to try to fulfill her goal. And, here's the interesting thing: The players playing helper characters act as quasi-GMs in two ways. First, whenever a challenge or situation comes up, they can act to help and be part of the solution, in which case they will spend some tokens, or they can act to complicate the solution and be part of the problem (intentionally or accidentally; perhaps they just get captured, rather than being tempted by chocolate!), in which case they are awarded with tokens they can use to help out later.

But also, if they accumulate enough tokens, they can choose to write their character temporarily (or permanently) out of the narrative entirely, and instead TAKE OVER THE ANTAGONIST role. This might, or might not be a literal change in antagonist—on one end, the helper character to be revealed to be the bigger bad and the player takes over the antagonist with that in mind, but the other, the character might (seem to) die or disappear, and the player takes over the GM role and the existing antagonist. In either case, the previous antagonist player makes up a new helper character who is introduced in a future (likely the next) encounter.

The overall result is that you have a story with a single protagonist, and the remaining players act collectively to direct, complicate, and play helpful NPCs along that single protagonist's journey. The helper characters might have their own plot threads, but as they move in, out, around the story, it is always clear who the protagonist is.

too many things that don't matter in any given game, and the point system presents an illusion of balance that is both unnecessary and utterly false, potentially distorting play in ways where other systems could just let characters be at somewhat different power levels without an illusion that really they're balanced [they are not]. Give me Itrax By, Everway, Fate, any PbtA game, Prime Time Adventures, or heck, even D&D over GURPS. There is probably no game system that has shaped my game outlook more than GURPS has, and the direction has been specifically "away from games like GURPS."

Which isn't to say I can't get very involved in creating a GURPS character. But I consider that a problem, not a solution. I want two things from a game system:

1. Let me come up with a character concept, the let me build it. GURPS is expressly antithetical to this idea, as it throws up numerous roadblocks between my initial concept and a working result, forces to make me make many tiny decisions between concept and result, and inevitably, I'll forget some important aspect of the concept and have to redo the result. It's

like if in order to install a computer program, I first needed to write a programming language and then start figuring out how to do libraries before I could even begin to start my original idea.

2. I want a system go inspire me and guide me to play characters that will work well in the milieu of the game. GURPS does none of that; it throws up a whole bunch of options (even setting books, while they'll often act as good reference materials, will generally be worse at actually guiding you to good play than any more directed game. GURPS is a solution in search of a problem, and fails to solve the problems that actually need solutions, not to mention a source of many of its own problems.

On the other hand, the system for building a GURPS character is the same for leveling them up, which I suppose gives it a leg up on similar systems where level ups and initial builds use entirely different point systems and approaches. (like original Feng Shui and 7th Sea)

I should look over Typst; it does seem like my style of tool. Annoyingly, the servers seem focused on selling you on the "pro" version so I don't know how one gets better OSS support for approaches like "I just want to install and use it." It does look like staring at the source (not that I know Rust, though I've been tempted to learn some for a while) does point to better documentation.

John Redden: I thought about keeping my zine title for E&A, but...new APA, new Zine title, clean slate. And with A Gentle Stroll, it's nice not to acknowledge a single successor to A&E. Plus, I know my numbering system was messed up—I likely had at least one duplicate zine number as I email-submitted a zine to Lee (when for one reason or another my usual process wasn't working) and then forgot to add a gap next time, and likely more; that happened multiple times over the years, particularly when I submitted my zine during Worldcon.

Attronarch: 26? That's...a lot of players! And you've gone through somewhere between 50-75 players total? Wow. it does seem like your top end tends to stabilize a bit and end up with somewhat less brutal games after a bit, at least for the most part, but as seen this issue those low level grinds can still be nightmarish.

Thanks for the correction! No TPKs in your game; just games where some characters fled and then everyone *else* died (or where most of the characters died and someone managed to prevail despite themselves, or where one character went off on their own and did not come back).

Re Lawful/Chaos/Neutrality: In a world where the Lawful powers prefer their own domination over humanity's well being, and where Chaotic powers support their followers worst desires but care not for people at all, what person of intelligence would not choose neutrality? Even if the Great Balance exists, it can hardly be worse than the powers of Law and Chaos.

Gabriel Roark: Re D&D 5 damage/rest: Ultimately, the way damage and rest works in D&D is incoherent, but mostly focused on functional play, that doesn't focus on clerics as batteries of healing spells. After all, why do clerical healing spells work if damage isn't "real" damage? Why do do short rests and hit dice work to restore damage if it is? Why, for that matter, do higher level characters get more HP unless it's not real damage and they're getting better at avoiding damage; they're not getting bigger and brawnier for the most part. Why do weapons do different amounts of damage if it's not real damage? Do bigger weapons and spells damage people's narrative immunity at different rates?

If your mind rebels at the status quo, I can see a few different ideas:

1. It's all real damage. The characters have magic gear and spells that aren't usable at combat timing which can be used during short rests to heal damage while drawing out internal

vitality, and can be used overnight to (to a large extent) restore both; this kind of magic, unlike the combat kind, is just everyday and expected (at least for adventurers).

2. None of it is real damage. All HP above 0 HP is notional HP—only when a character takes damage taking them below 0 HP have they taken real damage, and then, assuming that damage isn't fatal, it can only be restored (quickly) through magic, or (slowly) through rest. Keep track of how many HP a character has lost via such wounds (a sum total of negative HP); this doesn't reduce their max HP, but if they ever have wounds equal to HP, they die. Magic healing will restore this damage quickly; rest will restore it very slowly (probably one HP/night or /week); nothing else will do so..

3. Damage is notional and you "accept" damage in order to restore HP. In this model, no damage is real at all; characters have been worn down, and if they take fatal damage they die of exhaustion. However, when you spend hit dice during a rest, *that* is when you discover that what might have seemed to be a superficial injury was, in fact, a real and damaging wound; your HP are restored, but you record the wound on your character sheet and it becomes part of your roleplay until restored; again, healing surges are restored slowly (and may not be easily magically restored; use a "1/4 of surges are restored per night" rule for this hack), and only when the surges spent to create a wound are restored fully is the wound gone (and even then, there may be scarring). Here, wounds are *largely* cosmetic and tack onto the fact that players rarely spend hit dice in most campaigns; described wounds and potential scars are an incentive to spend hit dice for at least some players (in addition to the ability to conserve magical healing).

Or, I suppose, for a mild version, you could say that the bottom half of your initial hit die represents physical HP and can only be healed magically. So if you have a d8 hit die, then once you're knocked down below 4 your max HP are reduced by that number until you receive at least that amount of magical healing. That said, I'd think if you're going this far, you'd want a mechanic that affects the game a bit more than this.

Re mapping by infravision: I mean, infravision and ultravision are explicitly based around infrared and ultraviolet spectra of light. Of course, one can decide they're divorced from this (as D&D3+ does by using darkvision and/or low-light vision instead). But if you don't, we know more or less how infrared light works:

1. It's light. It bounces off of things and if you can perceive it you can see how it's reflected off of things.

2. Because it's a particular spectra, items with heat will radiate it at particular sub-spectra. So it can be used to "see" warm objects.

Given this, you could map with infravision, presuming you could find ink that reflected specific infralight frequencies. That said, unless you have a source of strong infrared light, you can't really see walls and things well with infrared light, so yeah, it's not that great for exploring a dungeon.

Ultraviolet light, on the other hand, is actually really useful if you have an infared torch. Most things that reflect visible light also reflect ultraviolet light, but lots of beings can't see it, so if you can, well, you won't get standard colors if you're using an infared torch in dark light, and also some things will flouresce and glow (in visible spectra) when hit with ultraviolet light which might reveal you and certainly produce surprises, but in general you'll be able to see stuff and ultraviolet light is totally a thing that exists.

Re Neitherworld travel: Of course, travel that doesn't use shipsinging is also possible in Neitherworld; it's just that it's a VERY big planet (the model Dan uses is that every habitable planet in his parallel SF/fantasy world, Megaverse, is also present as a place in Neitherworld. So the land goes on and on, impossibly large and constantly growing). So if somewhere's

close you might be able to do better than 2 weeks (without abuse like the time drive) by just flying/sailing there, but if it's far away? 2 weeks.

Michael Cule: The writeup was delightful as usual; the party *accidentally* revealing (if not unmasking) the lurker beneath through a standard precaution was classic. I think letting them leapfrog some of the investigation but not the entire adventure was a good call.

Re Brindlewood Bay: I think of this style of mystery game as similar to the Once Upon a Time card game. Everyone goes into the mystery story not knowing quite how things are going to end, but each with their own tools for manipulating it. And, of course, it's going to swing a bit here and there as people introduce new elements into the story. But the trick to it—the real trick—is that the real game is collaborative; what you want to end up with at the end isn't utter chaos, but, in fact, something that looks like (in this case) a mystery story, with clues that don't at first look like they relate, then some clear threads that look like they might be the answer, and finally a resolution that, once revealed, feels like it's the only answer that could have been true. Of course, the mechanics don't force you to do this, because they're focused on spreading power around the group and making sure nobody is the dictator of the mystery the way a GM often is. But they don't stop you from doing this, either, if the group is inclined to, and the result is often (in my opinion, anyway) more satisfying than if you don't try to have things feel mystery-story-shaped by the end.

Dylan Capel: Good to see you here! I'd forgotten that there were nobles in Foundation—it's been a very long time.

Avram Grumer: That's the most classic A&E style I've seen in a good long time—ascii art and all.

I'm a bit sad that Making Light was unable to re-surge as the principles desired.

I don't know that Lisa's foisted primary GM on Gaylord so much that Gaylord wants to GM. After all, Lisa's pretty much always running at least one game; often two. That said, yeah, there was long period where there were games with you, me, Gareth, and Gaylord, with Lisa running, and a decade later we have the same group in some games but with Gaylord running.

Gaylord also ran Diaspora for nearly the same group.

Re MS Word: I know well that MS Word can export PDF (so can Libre Office, which I actually have installed) but I don't want to mess around with Word/LO—I want to write a zine in text files and then run some script magic to have a zine come out. I may be vague on some specifics, but I'm quite solid on what I want my per-month tasks to be.

Paul Holman: Re AI: A lot of the problem is that the main ways in which generative AIs are problematic—the disruption they bring, the ways they enable crime, the large amounts of resources they burn when in use, and the resulting attractive nuisances, are in most ways divorced from the ways in which they are questionably legal as currently implemented. Sure, one can point one specific way in which the two are linked—that in some cases, it can be trivial to retrieve the trained-on works from the AI in close to the original form, making them act as a form of copyright violation by remove, and the recent judgment rests upon further violations outside this, in that some AI companies used "shadow libraries" (which is to say, collections of pirated works) for training, which unlike their usual questionable training data they didn't even have permission to access from the rights holders, much less train.

But the core issue for gen-AI is the way it disrupts society, markets for creative works, and the markets for creative works that it relies on for training, while the legal loopholes, violations, and ambiguities involved are much murkier. After all, if a

miracle happened and we had a fully sentient (or even marginally sentient) AI walking about the world, what restrictions should there be on how it processed what it saw in the world? Would it using that data for further training (or just thinking) be an illegal copyright violation? Fortunately or unfortunately, we aren't anywhere near there and there is no reason to believe that current technology will get us there (for multiple reasons), but even so, neither copyright absolutism nor technological polyannaism will get us to the right place, I fear.

I see 10 players in two of the D&D games I play, but 25 players? That's a bit much.

Myles Corcoran: Have to go with you on "lazy" for my primary play style. Not that I won't do work, and I tend to commit to whatever is going on in the game, but I also don't often have a lot of patience for prep, as GM or as player (I'll write characters and mechanics and stuff for larps, of course, but even there the deadline is my friend).

I also got to play Project L for the first time, this last weekend. It reminds me a lot of the boardless board game "The Builders" (despite that manifestly NOT having a Tetris mechanic), because of the way both games involve managing a stable of workers who can work on different jobs but only one at a time, and this was only intensified by the way both games have a mechanic only used in the endgame (in L it can only be used in the endgame; in the Builders it can technically be used earlier but almost never is due to the way money flows through the game as well as actions) to allow players to make use of their economy one last time as the game is in the process of ending to eke out a few more points.

And on top of that, both games have mechanics that reward players for building multiple projects at once, but also make it quite hard. In L, this is the Master Action, which is limited by both your pieces and how you can't have more than four projects going at a time. In the Builders, the incentive is negative—putting a single worker onto a job in a turn will cost one action, but the second worker on the same job will cost 2 actions, the third 3 actions, etc (you only have 3 actions a turn, just as in Project L, but as I alluded to, you can spend money for extra actions at a ruinous rate; well, until the endgame in which money isn't worth anything and victory points are worth everything, of course; before that if you have a pile of spare money you might want to do some cheap actions (pick up extra plans, place a single worker in them, etc to avoid the multiple action tax) but don't want to splurge). The Builders: Middle Ages came out in 2013, Project L came out in 2018, and yet I've seen nothing online comparing them.

Re Larps: Large and long larps can be a difficult beast to master. A very different matter are small and short larps; some of my favorite games have 2 to 4 players and take around an hour to play, which gives them an intimate feel in which nothing is wasted.

Re rules monkey: I end up being the rules monkey in several of our groups, but Ireland is a bit of a swim.

Re the PDFs of 309-398: I ended up running a custom script to combine these into single zines for my own reading, because I found that easier to read than the individual sub-zines.

Re roleplaying relying on buy-in and players and GMs getting on the same page about what genre you're even playing: Well said!

Hey, Myles!

Re adding Drives to push your milquetoast player(s) into danger: I mean, it's that, hard framing them into the middle of the plot without giving them a choice, or putting up big signs on all your hooks reading THIS WAY TO THE PLOT.

And yeah, I've loved Sword of the Serpentine's Conan-esque Best Things in Life even before I realized that it was the game's Drives mechanic.

Re playing games with people who know the scenario already: Yeah, ringers (people who already know the scenario and are playing it, presumably to make up the body count) should keep their spoiler knowledge to themselves, not use it to get an advantage. Although there is apparently some joy in an "all ringer run" of a game, which for a game like *Masks* would likely involving the GM mixing up the game so that there are still mysteries to the pre-spoiled players, or for a LARP where everyone knowing too much will put them on an even keel with one another and add another level to the game.

The problem with the players who bring a loner PC to a team game is ultimately the players. I've done a bunch of difficult/impossible things in games and made it work well—playing a "loner" in a cowboy bebop-inspired game, playing a selkie in *Monster Hearts*, etc, but part of what made this work was that I was coming into the idea as "ok, how do I make this work well" rather than "I want to play an X!" So, my loner bounty hunter would start out adventures wanting to go off on his own and reluctant to share with the group, but get forced into working with them because I was pushing the hardest to make sure they did; my Selkie wasn't being played by a player as their first *Monster Hearts* game, but me as a mechanics-hacking analyst, looking for the best handles in the playbook and pushing them repeatedly to make things happen (so, for instance, the biggest problem with the playbook is that if the character gets their skin back, they have a strong incentive to go into the ocean and Just Leave. But I had pounded really hard on the "this character is super naive and doesn't know they're being taken advantage of until it's Too Late" button, so the tearful scene in which they got their skin back *also* involved them sleeping with the mortal and going Darkest Self, getting an advance for the Sea Brings You What it Thinks You want, and so their departure after finally getting their skin back was almost immediately followed by a wrathful return, bringing the entire ocean with them to the little town the game had taken place in. Drama!

In the end, a good player can make almost anything work, but the players who repeatedly reach for the most tired tropes often *aren't* really good players and aren't going to do the things that can make those tropes work.

I voted against Ever and Anon as the name specifically because it doesn't really mean anything (even less than Alarums and Excrusions, which aside from the obvious meanings of "it's early in the alphabet so people will see it before they get bored" and "oop and ack is how RPGs are constructed", also nicely describes how a lot of roleplaying games work. I suppose most APA contributors fall into the Ever or Anon categories, though—and some, both!

Re *Twisting the Rope*: Huh. I'm not sure I've read *Twisting the Rope* (I quite liked *Tea with the Black Dragon*). I'm not even sure I knew it existed, although I might be mistaken; I read a lot of MacAvoy books back in the day, but all of them only once.

My zine title, of course, is because I decided my theme

was memory when I picked my handle (and also my earlier zine title), so using more titles with memory elements appeals to me. And, of course, the reversal of letters is no accident. It also has some nice dual meanings, of course.

Mitch Hyde: What a delightful session; no PC death or torture or anything! This time, anyway. But yeah, tricky puzzle fight with the gargoyle (why don't D&D gargoyles spit water out? Even in water attacks it would make the "garg" part of the name make more sense!), and fun anticlimax with the owlbear; fun all around.

Re Gary Gygax on Infravision: well, there you have it, I suppose. Emitting infrared light from their eyes? I suppose so.

Patrick Riley: Ooh, great use of a knickknack in D&D! And a way to turn the plot such that a group that had been a significant threat was no longer; as a point of rest and transformation, I can't find it anticlimactic at all.

Re bards and rapier proficiency: Even D&D 2014 bards had rapier proficiency! It was only with the 2024 updates that they finally lost it, presumably because the class was so overloaded that the designers thought that just giving melee-focused bards rapier proficiency was enough. Personally, I suspect that a lot of the issue was that the class was uniquely bad at communicating what it was about. So, you have rapier and hand crossbow proficiency so you should invest in Dex, have half-proficiency with every skill so maybe intelligence, but your spells are based on charisma... The current version is much more clearly a charisma casting class with buffing capabilities rather than a grab bag.

Oh, no, Bees!

Re avoiding a published scenario you've already played: That kind of thing can be surprisingly hard! I ended up buying the first *Skullduggery Pleasant* book twice because they re-released it with a different title (after deciding that that title should apply to the entire series). And I'm sure that wasn't the first time I did something like that; I've also started reading a book to put it down because it seemed familiar. And at least once, I actually hadn't read the book before—with *The Shattered Chain* by Mercedes Lackey. The problem was, when she wanted to follow material in TSC in ... I don't know, *City of Sorcery* or *Thendara House*, she didn't simply rewrite or rephrase the material from *The Shattered Chain*, but reprinted entire paragraphs of her own work. So when I came across the same passages in TSC, I figured I'd already read the book before and didn't remember it well, and put it down.

Re preferring to play in original scenarios: I'm reminded of a conversation in my larp community about whether people playtest their games before Intercon (our signature convention). And the main answer was "I playtest my games at Intercon" because so many people who run games at Intercon do their first runs there, despite that technically being a "playtest." I suppose if you're playing an original game at a con, you, too, are probably playtesting it, whether you're thinking about it that way or no.

Traveller Play-By-Email

Plankwell Campaign, Ch 49: Birthday Brunch

GMing: Jim Vassilakos & Timothy Collinson, Playing Capt. Plankwell: Conrad Rader
The character of Capt. Plankwell was conceived by Phil Pugliese

Remembering Faulk's advice, I settled my expression into one of surprised bemusement, as if noble-sponsored surprise parties were an everyday thing. Nonetheless, though I'd sworn not to set foot on this planet ever again, I could feel my resolution wither up and blow away in the wave of feelings, albeit mixed, coming from those assembled. Was that envy oozing from Admiral Karneticky? Whatever it was, it seemed likely he didn't want to be here. As for the Canon, Agidda, Amika, Dakhir, Bim, and others, including the Countess herself, their thoughts were far too numerous to simultaneously discern, but their overarching emotion, as Alise and I entered the room, was one of excitement and celebration.

I would have smiled and greeted everyone, but there were protocols to observe in approaching the Countess while walking past senior officers in the Navy and other services. I pulled Alise to a halt long enough to acknowledge the Admiral and General Dakhir. At the same time, I couldn't help but wonder what Bim was doing here. Due to Agidda's status as a senior Imperial bureaucrat and one of the few people present who I actually liked, he also got a respectful acknowledgment. As he returned the favor, I couldn't help but sense he'd wanted to reply to my message, the one I'd sent before visiting the lawyer, but he couldn't very well have said he'd see me at my surprise birthday party.

Then it was time to be presented to the Countess, who no doubt already knew I was a fellow psion. Or at least she did now, I realized, as she looked from Alise to me with widening eyes. Presenting Alise, I fell into a court bow of the older style. It was one often practiced when learning the forms but lacked a modern flourish. While not quite gauche, it held a definitive message, a thanks for instruction, either past or future. I watched her hands, as the depth of the bow hid her face from view. They would tell me my next move, and as I'd hoped, they turned palms up, her fingers motioning me to rise as everyone felt silent.

"Welcome again, Captain Plankwell," the Countess said with an unblinking stare, "And happy birthday."¹

¹ After Timothy sent me his essay, *Birthdays in Traveller* (see the 7th page of our zine in A&E #550), I decided that it would be a good idea to randomly determine the birthdays of all the various NPCs, and it just so happened that our protagonist's birthday was just a few days off. It's worth noting that there was only a little over a 1% chance of this being the case, so I made note of it, realizing it would very likely come into play, and sure enough, here we are.

"Thank you, Your Excellency."

"I would ask again how you're enjoying your time here on Jewell," Helena said, "but, of course, I've seen the video; quite appalling." Somewhere in the back of my mind, I could sense she'd reviewed the video surveillance of my VIP parking lot encounter with those HPSS contractors. "Oh dear," she'd exclaimed, as Masa and I had crumpled to the deck. Meanwhile, her manicurist continued polishing the iridium gilding on her nails. "So tell me," she said now, *«if you've not allowed yourself to be muzzled»* "tell me what it is you want done, Captain? What do you want for your birthday?"

"Nothing for myself. I have been given plenty in my short time here. Your generous offer befits your care of your people, but my only wish is the ongoing good relations between your Imperial subjects and the armed forces that serve and protect them." *«Privately, however, if you could require the retention of Kaz Remshaw in her position with the Chamber of Commerce, I would consider it a favor.»*

I permitted a slight uptick in the corner of my mouth in response to her eyebrows squishing themselves together as two servants pulled out the empty chairs nearest her and held them for us. As before, Alise sat in the one nearest her mother, the two exchanging a meaningful glance, and only then did Countess Helena smile and nod her head approvingly.

"Selflessness is among the noblest of qualities, Captain, as are wisdom and loyalty, all of which with you are most gloriously well-endowed."

Josefeen coughed slightly as I followed Alise's example and sat myself in the proffered chair.

«Your praise is noted and graciously accepted, Your Excellency.»

Both Josefeen and Sidara were led to the far end of the table, Karneticky eyeing Josefeen, his lips pressed flat, as she sat beside him, still holding the diplomatic pouch he'd tried to steal.

I reached out to her telepathically, not sure if I had the juice to sustain two connections or if I wanted her and the Countess fighting on the field of battle that was my brain.

«I'm here Gus, but you'll need to look at me.»

"It just so happens," the Countess continued, "we are presently discussing a matter of some importance and could use your wisdom," *«and loyalty»*. "As you know, I asked both the Imperial Army and Navy to issue proposals for addressing the problem of... ah... members of certain military services setting fire to local establishments and

otherwise stalking locals of their preferred sexual orientation.” *«I’m sure you wouldn’t know anything about that.»* “General Dakhir, attending to my request, issued a recommendation that the Navy and Army swap bases again.”

«As a matter of fact, I do have some information about my spacers being set up for public humiliation. A curious willingness to let certain clergy run loose with highly questionable substances.»

I looked over to the General and nodded, acknowledging his role in the on-going battle for prominence that the Army was never going to win. Fundamentally, the Imperial Army was a bottom-of-the-well force for occupation and re-adjustment of native opinions on Imperial policy. They were beholden to sector nobility for their keep, but the Navy drew its funding from the Emperor directly.² The services always scrapped for advantage, but they were never going to be more than us.

“Plankwell Naval Base was originally out in the desert northeast of Heron,” Dakhir explained, “whereas the Army was originally headquartered at Heron, where the Navy Base is now.”

“The swap happened not without reason,” Karneticky interjected.

“Reasons that were largely political and which no longer apply,” the Countess said. “I don’t know that I should ask a Navy captain this question, but since you are not under the Admiral’s command, I will hazard it. If you, Captain Plankwell, were Fleet Admiral, and the local Imperial General *and* Planetary Sovereign both agreed that things should go back as they once were, would you drag your feet and make excuses, or would you hop to it and make it happen?”

My gaze rested on Countess Helena. She was, of course, asking me an extremely loaded question. She’d mentioned loyalty before correctly pointing out I was *not* under Kaneticky’s command. Meanwhile, she handed me the dagger to plant in him. I had to hand it to her, she was not one to waste time. But I wasn’t the type to stab a fellow Navy officer in the back, even one as craven and corrupt as I suspected the Admiral to be.

“Clearly I am not briefed on the reasons for the previous relocation of bases, nor do I need to be, so if you will accept my opinion, as a loyal officer of the Navy, I cannot imagine a greater waste of resources in essentially a useless exercise of one-upmanship.”

A few of them gasped, not least General Dakhir.

“One-upmanship?! Is that what you think this is?”

“Please forgive my blunt words,” I said, “but as a combat commander, having the most capable units near the

² I couldn’t help but question this when I first read it, so I asked the TML (<https://www.simplelists.com/tml/msg/25998180/>), and Alex Goodwin responded that it shows up in *GURPS Traveller: Ground Forces*, pages 17-18.

capital and available to react in the event of a possible invasion, and the units most able to resist the invasion, our noble Army brethren, sited well away seems to present the most logical strategic doctrine.”

“Heron is better served with the Army close at hand,” Dakhir insisted.

“Even if that were true,” Karneticky said, “do you have any idea what it’ll cost?”

“For the Army, yes. It’s all in my report.”

“But how much for the Navy?” Karneticky grimaced. “And what about the consequences to our supply chains?”

“Consequences to your supply chains?” the Countess pursed her lips. “Heron’s miltown is turning into an embarrassment, Admiral. I think that’s a little more important than your precious supply chains.”

Karneticky glanced at me. He knew it was my crew members who’d burned down that nightclub, but I’d just done him a favor by taking his side.

“Your Excellency,” he said, “I take responsibility for all Navy personnel under my command, and I will see to it that this sort of incident...”

“Will most certainly happen again,” she completed his sentence, though clearly not as he’d intended. “Admiral, we need a service close to Heron that will help us keep the peace, not one that habitually sets fire to things, including apparently the self-esteem of *half* the population.”

The female half, she most certainly meant.

“I watched that committee meeting,” Karneticky said, “and if you don’t want the Navy in Heron, you are free to close the gates.”

“It may come to that, which is why I vastly prefer this solution instead. Sometimes, Admiral, it is worth considering if old ways were best.”

Karneticky looked down at his hands for a long moment. “I will have my people study the Army’s report,” he finally said.³

³ Okay, it’s time for me to be completely honest. This whole base-switcheroo subplot owes its existence to a rather egregious mistake on my part. I’m not even sure one can properly call it a mistake. It’s more of a disability. Many have heard about how a certain percentage of people, and particularly men, are considered colorblind or acquire some measure of color vision deficiency as they age. According to the Internet (more specifically, a blog post on [hunterlab.com](https://www.hunterlab.com) dated Nov 28, 2023), “the lenses in our eyes become yellowish, which appears like looking through a yellow filter.” (<https://www.hunterlab.com/blog/how-our-perception-of-color-changes-as-we-age/>) Now, I’m not completely colorblind, but obviously there’s some sort of problem, and to compound this, my perception is truly horrendous. I offhandedly mentioned this to Louis La Mancusa back in A&E #364, and during the intervening years, my perception has only gotten worse. It’s so awful, at this point, that it’s become a source of continual mirth and frustration for my wife. But the truth is, I’ve always been this way to some

“I don’t want any more incidents,” the Countess warned. “No more fires. No more declaring martial law over a... oh, why bother? Captain,” she said, turning back to me, “I have two members of the HPSS in our media reception room. Are they here?”

“They are, Your Excellency,” a male voice spoke from somewhere behind me. I turned to look. It was that young, bronze-skinned man who was apparently some sort of aide. “Captain, we met before, but I didn’t introduce myself. I’m Sanga Sekrunii, Her Excellency’s Chief of Staff. We have the two HPSS contractors who... ah... with whom you had an unfortunate altercation. Would you be amenable to meeting with them to accept their apology on behalf of... uh,” his eyes glazed over as if reading from a retinal display, “Bratom Solutions?”

I struggled to keep my expression neutral as I recalled the voice message from Major Trilbon.⁴ He’d said he’d fired them, and now they were apparently here to apologize on behalf of a company they didn’t work for anymore?

“I would not,” I answered. “Following regulations, I have retained local counsel to advocate for the 213th Fleet’s interests in this situation, and I have been advised to allow Bili Faulk to speak for myself and for the fleet. Therefore, I choose to remain under the cloak of regulation and not disturb the order of things here more than has already been done.”

extent. My brother told me a story about me, as a young kid, walking over a big snake without realizing it was there. I was old enough to know better, but I’d apparently thought it was a stick. In any case, while initially studying the world map on the last page of Jewell’s System Survey (2nd edition), I failed to notice the naval base, which was signified by a five-pointed yellow star in Jewell’s only major desert, which was in turn signified by a mustard-colored splotch east of Heron. Yellow and mustard are not exactly the same color, but they are close enough that I apparently couldn’t see the difference. Confused, I asked Timothy if he could find the naval base, and he said, “Yes, it’s there in the desert.” But try as I might, I just couldn’t see it. In retrospect, I should have asked him to count the hexes east and north from Heron to guide me to the exact spot. Maybe then I would have noticed it. My mistake was that instead of listening to Timothy, which given my disability would have been the most sensible thing to do, I assumed that the Army’s base that was just south of Heron must double as a Navy base. And then, many chapters later, I finally noticed that five-pointed star, signifying the Navy Base in the desert, but by then it was too late. I’d already said in this write-up that the Navy’s base was just south of Heron. So there I was with a problem my legendary lack of perception had created, and the only way to fix it, it seemed to me, was to put the Army base where the Navy base was on the world map, and then develop this subplot to switch them back to where they belong. So, basically, this whole subplot happened because I’m essentially a blind idiot.

4 See the 5th page of Chapter 44 in A&E #592.

«Faulk, you Cleonfelching dogfather,» the Countess was thinking quite loudly.

«Now you see where I’ve learned such language,» Alise contributed.

«Ssh!» Durami shushed her.

I, of course, had also heard such language. We sailors, after all, were known for our inventive invective, but to hear it from a Countess....

«A Countess with whom you don’t want to go to war.» She seemed to be glaring, albeit slightly.

«I must protest,» Josefeen interjected, her telepathic voice unusually distant. The Countess, meanwhile, placed her hands before herself in a most peculiar way, almost as though momentarily meditating or perhaps even praying. She was considering altering the environment, hitting the whole room with a psionic suppression field, but then, instead, she glanced across the table, her gaze meeting Josefeen’s.

«Why is that, my dear?» Helena sent with a smirk “Disturb the order of things? Yes, you’ve certainly done that, haven’t you.”

«That is quite enough....» I telepathically interjected, «...from all of you. Your Excellency, I absolutely do not wish to antagonize you further, but I will not be bullied into submission. I was, after all, the injured party on your territory. You may dislike the measures we are taking, but it is clear to me that the local Navy has colored your opinion of the rest of us. If you expect me to undermine the Fleet due to local issues, I fear you have a very poor opinion of us as a whole. My Lieutenant is speaking up for me, but in this matter I am more than willing to impose my will. Go ahead and trigger the suppression field, and we can all go back to posturing and innuendo. Or we can settle this. Your daughter clued me in to the reality around here, and for that I owe her a debt. You are treating with me, and for that I thank you, but it does not change the situation that some very curious things have happened in the past few days. Things that have made me suspicious of outside influences. Regardless...»

The real world pause had grown into a lengthy silence, every non-psion waiting to see how I’d reply.

“I do apologize for the disturbances caused by the temporary interdiction,” I said, inclining my head. “We are now working to rectify the local complaints and ensure that the event is resolved.” «Surely you realize the incongruity of the two individuals involved in my assault being dismissed and then showing up to apologize in person? If they had approached me anywhere else, I would be having my Marines apprehend and thoroughly interrogate them.»

«You can interrogate them here if you like,» Helena replied. “Which is precisely what I am trying to do, Captain. The people need to see the Navy working hand-in-hand with local authorities, not getting into brouhahas over jurisdiction. At least listen to what they have to say for

themselves, won't you? If you don't wish to respond, that's certainly your right."

I was suspicious and was pretty sure I'd screwed up by apologizing out loud. No doubt everything said was being recorded, so it didn't require precognition to envision Faulk screaming, "That was your ironface?!" Nonetheless, she was a Countess, and I was but a Captain.

"It is your court, Your Excellency. I am here at your invitation and would not do you the disrespect of departing before we have attended to your wishes."

"How very kind," *«and wise,»* "of you." The Countess smiled, and so did most everyone else, even the non-psions, for though the bulk of our exchange had been telepathic, the tension between us, I could well imagine, had been palpable. "Why isn't anyone eating?" she asked.

"Canon Forklinbrass has yet to bless the table," Alise dutifully answered. She'd been studying the rules of protocol rather intently since the recent media coverage at my reception.

Hearing his name, Reggie perked up. "Which version would you like, Your Excellency?"

"I'm famished, so the briefer the better."

"Ah... well, in that case... rub-a-dub-dub, let's have the grub!"

No lasting damage it seems.

Though it wasn't the most saintly invocation I'd ever heard, it was straight-up Reggie, and as if on cue, the servants lept into action, offering tea and cakes and all the rest. Agidda, again seated on my immediate right, leaned in slightly as one of them offered him a selection of beverages.

"What do you think of Olav's performance?" he asked, pointing to the darkest of the teas on offer. "Would you say we succeeded?"

"That depends on your metrics of success," I replied, glancing toward him. "If your client was pleased by the message, then yes, a success. I rather doubt that the original Olav was quite that bombastic. He preferred the straightforwardness of the main guns. But, as a symbol for our current days, I will grant you it was certainly stirring."

Under the table, someone touched my left hand, and given the seating, it could only have been Alise. From the direction of her gaze, she seemed to be focused on her mother's conversation with Amika, but her voice in my head indicated otherwise.

«So... you owe me a debt?»

"The Countess wanted to send a message," Agidda explained.

There was something about Alise's hand upon my own that sharpened the telepathic communication, and I remembered Josefeen telling me touch was the best conduit for establishing a deep connection.⁵ I left my hand beneath hers and picked up one of the beverage glasses with my other hand.

"Would you like tea or juice, sir?" a waiter asked.

"Just water, please."

«Don't get too greedy, but yes.» I held the glass as he poured water from a carafe. *«Revealing the nature of the nobles here has certainly changed the field of battle.»*

«What would you consider too greedy?»

I could sense her trying to reach into my mind, but she wasn't jacked up on psi-enhancer the way I was, and so I felt her looking over what I'd just learned from her about the psionic nature of the Imperial nobility and, more particularly, about her mother. The communication of this knowledge, I suddenly realized, hadn't been a gift, except insofar as she'd opened herself to the possibility. Instead, my own train of thought combined with the Darrian psi-enhancer had exposed her memories for me to read. But she was not concerned by this, as she did not consider me an adversary. We, after all, were fellow Imperial psions, part of a fellowship that stretched back millennia, albeit punctuated by civil war, and, in any case, I was cute and something of an enigma, being powerful but untrained.

"She hopes the reincarnation of Olav will strike fear into the hearts of the Zhodani," Agidda continued.

"How does she suppose that will happen?"

"It all depends on whether they believe we've really achieved it."

I couldn't help but roll my eyes. The Zhodani didn't rely on propaganda the way we did, at least not according to my security briefings. The Tavrchedl, their so-called *Guardians of Our Morality*, ensured *correct thought* on all matters.⁶ The only thing Zhodani agents would be observing was the relative effectiveness of an AI-controlled hologram stirring the nationalistic tendencies of the population. And like me, they'd wonder what the Countess was hoping to achieve.

Did she want another war?

I'd fought the Zhodani. They'd launched the last war and had, only at great cost, been forced to withdraw. Now they were exploring diplomatic relations, which is what they did during every interregnum. That a Zhodani ambassador was here on Jewell must have been part of Helena's calculations.

And now, thanks to Alise, I knew that at least some frontier nobles were psions. Did the Zhodani know this as well? Did they know about the Countess specifically? In which case, what did that mean for Jewell's relationship vis-à-vis the Consulate? Was the Countess trying to impress them? Was she auditioning, in effect, hoping to collude with them in some way?

«You're seriously overthinking,» Alise's voice echoed between my psi-boostered synapses. *«And you still haven't answered me. What's too greedy?»*

«Too greedy would be asking me to spirit you away from your duties for a carefree life of gallivanting.»

5 See Ever & Anon #1, page 104.

6 <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Tavrchedl%27>

«Ooh... gallivanting sounds like a splendid idea! It's been so long since I got to gallivant! Will you take me to the Stardust?»

“What’s the Stardust?” *Oops!* I hadn’t meant for that to be out loud.

“It’s a nightclub here in Silver City,” Agidda replied. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, I love the Stardust,” Alise interjected. “Mom, can I go? I’ll put on my disguise.”

“If you can be quiet for the rest of this meal, I will consider it.”

“I’ll be quiet! I’ll be perfectly quiet,” she promised, lowering her voice to a whisper. “You won’t even know I’m here.” Then she turned to me and grinned.

«*So will you? Don't worry. It's perfectly safe. And we'll have so much fun!*»

«*You know, I am on active duty. I have a ship and everything involved in getting it ready for duty. You and your mother have... complicated this assignment.*»

«*So is that a yes?!*»

I could not help but be charmed by her enthusiasm. I must be getting old to be so easily swayed by feminine wiles.

«*Fine. It seems I am destined to escort junior scions out into the world. Am I likely to get shot at again? Or would that just make it more exciting?*»

“The Stardust is open all night every night,” Agidda said.

“I’d heard the name in passing and was just curious. Talking about Olav too much, I suppose. Needed a change of topic.”

“Speaking of Olav,” Countess Helena interjected, “I want to thank you both, once again. His speech was exactly the sort of message I wanted sent, and it will do much, I think, to help us meet our military personnel quotas.” These quotas were strictly unofficial, but in order to get preferential treatment, worlds had to prove their worth, and getting their citizens to volunteer for military service was one of the primary methods. “So tell me again,” she continued, “what does the Ministry of Technology have in store for him?”

“We’re sending the beta version to the Core Sector,” Agidda said, “to a research facility where our top experts will study exactly how it works. Olav’s inventor is going too, of course, to explain everything and make sure it operates effectively throughout its tour.”

“Its tour?” Amika asked. Though she was obviously expressionless thanks to her mask, I could sense a wave of sadness. Although I could not see her eyes, per se, I could nonetheless sense that she already knew Olav-2 would be leaving, and she’d asked Agidda if she could keep Olav-1, the alpha version I’d met at the highport.

“For what? As a souvenir?” he’d quipped.

“Yes, it will tour many worlds between here and Capital⁷,” he now told her, “and it will give many speeches. I have no doubt it will raise recruitment across the Imperium.”

“He,” Amika corrected. “*He* will give speeches, not *it*.”

She was thinking about one of the first conversations she’d had with Olav, shortly after I’d left the palace the last time I was here. She’d asked Olav if he was single⁸, and taking that as a cue, Olav apparently decided to treat her as an experienced but unattached man of an emotionally generous temperament would naturally treat a lonely woman of quality. In short, he’d flirted, and she’d flirted back, and in a hazardously short time she found herself utterly enthralled.

“I would not presume to woo you,” Olav told her, though that was precisely what he was doing. “I know I am merely a thing. But were I a man, an actual man, I *would* woo you, and I would *keep* wooing until you gave me a definitive no.”

“And how do you know I would shoo you away?” She would have smiled if she could. It was nice being hit on, even if only by a hologram.

“You’ve shooed away many, I’d wager,” Olav replied. “Though perhaps not as many as were you not a Stavelot.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Some men are easily intimidated. Others, like myself, not so much.” He proceeded to tell her about Sir Josen Stavelot, a distant ancestor of hers who, like Olav himself, was brave to the point of recklessness. “See, there is courage in your blood. So you deserve a man of courage, do you not?”

And just like that she cracked and told him all about Admiral Karneticky and what had happened on safari. She hadn’t meant to. Indeed, it didn’t make sense to, and afterwards she felt quite foolish. She couldn’t help but worry where the data might go. She wanted to delete it, just that part of Olav’s memory. So she found Zeenye, and he told her it would take some time to rebuild Olav yet again. It was then that she learned of the original Olav, the alpha version, which was pure and complete, as opposed to this beta version, which Zeenye warned might go insane at any moment.

Agidda, however, wasn’t so sure. He wanted to test it under a variety of situations, including stressful ones.

“Stressful?” she’d asked. “Like giving a speech perhaps?”

“Yes, like that,” Agidda had said.

“Speeches are indeed stressful,” Zeenye agreed.

So it was decided. Olav Beta would speak at the memorial. And they’d give him an actual robot body. In the meantime, she’d had them load up the alpha version, because she wanted to talk to the original, and she asked

7 [https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Capital_\(world\)](https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Capital_(world))

8 See the end of Chapter 30 in A&E #578.

him about Sir Josen, and the story was similar but also somewhat different. Olav Beta had told her only the good things. Olav Alpha, by contrast, had some dark details to add.

Needless to say, they reloaded the beta version for the speech in Heron. The alpha version, according to Agidda, was too reckless. As for the possibility of the beta version going insane, as Zeenye had warned, that seemed unlikely to both her and Agidda, given the stability it had displayed thus far. In any case, she decided to bring along the remote and have it ready on the off-chance something unexpected were to occur. Having an Olav-expert might help as well. That's how Ensign Florence was included.

"Now that I have physical substance," Olav Beta said to her after the speech, "and am not merely composed of light, I would be happy — most deliriously happy — if you were to permit me to court you."

It hit her then that this was truly insane. What was she doing, allowing herself to be wooed by an AI? Was she genuinely that desperate?

"I'm sorry," she'd told him, "but... it's impossible."

The hologram of Olav's face inside the robot's helmet closed its eyes for a moment, but then he smiled. "Nothing is truly impossible," he said. "I, myself, am proof."

«What kind of psi-drug are you on?» Alise asked, bewildered at the strength of my telepathy.

"He," Agidda agreed, not wanting to offend Amika, for all of this knowledge had hit me like a flash of insight, an epiphany into events which I hadn't witness except now in my mind's eye. "You know," he said, turning to me, "if you want to accompany Olav on his Imperial tour, as his... uh... guardian, I'm sure something could be arranged."

It took a supreme effort of will to school my face from showing the shock and revulsion that swept through me.

"Ah, no thank you. My duty takes me in a different direction."

I could not imagine a worse fate. I had spent one tour beached when my father was ill and had no desire to sabotage my career further by voluntarily giving up combat command to shepherd a hopped-up hologram as it gave speeches. Why did everyone continually think I wanted to be associated with Olav?

I smiled in Agidda's direction.

"I know it is hard to imagine wanting to put yourself in harm's way," I said, "but this command is everything I have been working towards for my entire career. Giving it up would mean disappointing a great number of people who have invested in me over the years."

"That's very noble of you," Agidda said, smiling as well, though I could sense he thought me a fool. Accompanying Olav across the Imperium would give me countless political contacts. Who knows? Perhaps I might even be granted an audience with the Emperor himself. But instead, I wanted to patrol the Imperial border, looking for smugglers and

pirates. It wasn't the choice he would have made, but then he didn't know how I actually felt about Olav.

Download the consolidated Plankwell write-up:
<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/plank.html>

Past zines available at:
<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/apa.html>

Notes on Running Ever & Anon (and how you can too)

While Lee did a fantastic job running A&E, it's sort of frightening how close we came to disbanding when she announced her retirement. So we should probably begin talking about how the job of Central Coordinator (CC) moves from one person to the next. Should we perhaps establish some term limit? Maybe have it depend on whether or not anyone else is willing to do it?

Speaking of being willing to do it, let me describe what it entails. First of all, you've got to pay fairly close attention to the incoming mailbox at everanon.org. All the zines initially go to apa@everanon.org, but from there they get auto-forwarded to the CC's email account on everanon.org. When you take over as CC, you'll be given an email account, and the zines will be forwarded to that account (so as to keep them separate from the rest of your mail), so you've got to stay on top of it. Check it every few days. If someone sends a zine, let them know it was received. This was something Lee did very well, and so I've been trying to do the same.

When a zine comes in, I download it and then take a look at it, noting its length and the sort of material it contains. Once in a while, somebody will have a final page that's completely blank, so when that happens, I'll shave off that blank page using <https://smallpdf.com/split-pdf>. I'll then rename the file, so for example, *Denizens of the Library 03.pdf* gets renamed to *Denizens of the Library #3 - Brian Rogers (Villains and Vigilantes, D&D) (9 pgs).pdf*.

I've found that renaming the files in this way makes some of the future steps quite a bit easier. For example, I'm going to need to know the number of pages in each zine as I construct the Table of Contents (ToC). Also, knowing what games are being covered is useful when posting the APA for public download, as you can use these game systems as keywords to help somebody who is looking for material pertaining to a particular game system find the APA.⁹

⁹ My rule of thumb is to add a game system to a file's name when there's at least one full page covering that system.

Front Cover/1,Black,notBold,notItalic,open,FitPage
 Front Page/2,Black,notBold,notItalic,open,FitPage
 Table of Contents/3,Black,notBold,notItalic,open,FitPage
 What is This?/4,Black,notBold,notItalic,open,FitPage
 Solicitations & Abbreviations/5,Black,notBold,notItalic,open,FitPage
 Denizens of the Library #3 - Brian Rogers/6,Black,notBold,notItalic,open,FitPage
 Bumbling Through Dungeons #4 - Mark A. Wilson/15,Black,notBold,notItalic,open,FitPage
 Philatelic Monstrosities #1 - Clark B. Timmins/20,Black,notBold,notItalic,open,FitPage

As the zines come in, I'm also constructing two files: the ToC and the bookmarks file. You're already familiar with the ToC (it's on page 3). As for the bookmarks file, its first eight lines for this issue are presented above.

As you can see, it's just a text file. For each line, you've got the name of the bookmark (usually the name of the zine and the author's name), then a slash (/) and the page number, and then a bunch of formatting codes. So as the zines come in, I'm adding information into these two files, and to determine the page number a given bookmark points to, I'm just counting forward. Since Brian's zine starts on page 6 and is 9 pages long, I know that the next zine has to start on page 15.

So that's about half the work right there. It's really easy. You just let each contributor know you received their zine, rename their pdf file, and update the ToC and bookmarks files. It only takes a couple of minutes.

On the morning after the deadline (the morning of the 22nd), I download any last minute zines that were submitted overnight, and then I finalize the ToC and bookmarks file, converting the former into a PDF. Sometime during the month, I will have also selected cover art and made a rough draft of the issue's cover, which I then share with Attronnarch, who inevitably improves upon it. So I've got the cover as a PDF, and I've got the page with all the legal mumbo-jumbo and the upcoming IgThemes (which also has to be updated every month), and I've got the ToC and so forth, and I've got all the zines.

So the next job is to merge these PDFs together, which I do using <https://smallpdf.com/merge-pdf>. I also allow this web-utility to compress the PDF, reducing its size. Again, as long as you've got all your files in order, this is super easy and only takes a few minutes.

Now it's time to add bookmarks. For this I use jpdfbookmarks-2.5.2, which I found freely available at <https://sourceforge.net/projects/jpdfbookmarks/>. You run jpdfbookmarks.exe, open (CTRL-O) the consolidated & compressed PDF file that smallpdf.com just handed you, then you load in your bookmarks file (CTRL-ALT-L). Make sure to also select *Show on Open*, which is on the Tools menu. You can now save the PDF (either CTRL-S or CTRL-A if you want to give the bookmarked version a new name).

Once this is done, I then send this bookmarked version to Attronnarch who adds some metadata and puts it up for download at <https://everanon.org/>.

I then announce to you guys that it's ready for download, and after a little while, I distribute this final version to *drivethrurpg.com*, *archive.org*, and *scribd.com*, and I post announcements to various Facebook & Reddit groups in the hope of attracting new members.

How much time does it all take? Well, less time than composing a zine. I can tell you that. The main work is in updating the ToC and bookmarks files. It takes a maybe two or three minutes every time a zine is submitted. Multiply that by 20+ zines, and you're taking upwards of forty minutes to an hour, but its spread out over weeks.

As far as merging the files and adding bookmarks, that's actually pretty quick. Since the ToC and bookmarks files just need to be updated with the final submissions, the whole process probably takes under an hour. This includes the time it takes to test out the bookmarks to make sure the consolidated PDF was bookmarked correctly.

As for the cover, this is going to be up to you. It's something you can crap out in a few minutes, or you can linger on it, spending hours. Basically, in terms of production time, you're looking at potentially under three hours per week, which like I said is less time than I'd normally spend preparing a zine for submission.

Granted, I probably spend an additional 2-3 hours posting the zine to various sites and advertising it. Posting to *drivethrurpg* is a little bit of a process, but if you don't want to do that part, someone else can do it for you. Posting to *archive.org* and *scribd.com* are both pretty easy.

Advertising is up to you. I'm doing it, because I want to attract more members, but to be honest, it does sometimes feel like I'm screaming into the void, and not all venues are open to advertising. For example, in the biggest RPG room on Reddit, they want only 10% of any given user's posts to be advertising, which means you have to be a pretty active participant if you want to inform the room about the existence of E&A (or anything else for that matter). Other rooms have different rules, and different mods will interpret rules differently based on how thoroughly power has corrupted their souls. To compound matters, Reddit's AI might automatically delete your post because it thinks it's spam, possibly because it's seen it in another room. This

happened to me, so I waited a few days and tried again, and the second time the AI let it stick.

Does advertising work? In terms of attracting new contributors, I have to admit that it hasn't worked yet, but in terms of the attracting readers, judging from the download counts, I'm going to guess that it is working, at least to some extent.

So that's what the job entails, about 3 hours spent in production (possibly more depending on how much time you want to spend on the cover) and an additional 2-3 hours on distribution and advertising. So you're looking at maybe 5-6 hours per month, and we could, of course, separate this out, so instead of the CC doing it all, we could ask for volunteers to engage in different parts of the process; perhaps have one person distribute and advertise on A, B, and C while another person does the same on D, E, and F. Many hands make light work, right?

Last week on the [googlegroup](#) I asked how many of you would be interested in trying it for a year? What I'd like is for there to be a stable of people who know how to do every part of this. The primary reason for this is that if we have multiple people who can do the job, that makes it much less likely we'll disband due to the CC retiring, voluntarily or otherwise.

I mean, I could literally have a heart attack. I could be stone cold dead ten minutes from now. Or I could have a momentary brain fart and end up winning a Darwin Award. If that happens mid-term, who takes over? So we need to establish this, or better yet, we need to create a system so everyone who wants to get involved in the production, distribution or advertising can do so.

Brian Misiaszek said that before he could answer for himself whether he wants to volunteer, he wanted me to share how the experience of being CC for E&A has gone so far.

Well, it's been great. I mean, I was okay for like a month after Lee announced her retirement, but then the itch to contribute a zine came back, and as far as I could tell, nobody was doing anything. I talked the situation over with Timothy, telling him that somebody needed to step up, and he warned me that I might be biting off more than I'd want to chew.

But, the problem was that I felt that if I didn't do anything, the opportunity would pass. All the contributors would go involve themselves with other pastimes. And I realized something. The value of the APA isn't really in the paper or even in the information it contains. The value is the community. You've got a bunch of people who are willing to write about a given subject matter every month. That's fairly unusual. Trying to organize such a thing from scratch would be, I imagine, nearly impossible. But here we had such a group, and I just thought we needed to keep it together and keep it alive.

Shortly after I started contacting people, I learned that George was also trying to organize a successor APA, but I was already stuck on this notion that here was a chance for the APA to be free to both contributors as well as readers. To me, that was a pretty big opportunity. It meant that we could explore whether or not APAing within the RPG community could be expanded. What I'd really like to see in the future would be different APAs based around different game systems, all of them free to subscribers and contributors alike. I don't know if this will ever happen.

I look at the discussions on Reddit and how the upvoting process pushes the funniest and most interesting comments to the top, and so, in a very important way, this makes for a more immediately useful forum for the casual observer. But APAs offer in depth discussion, and the time lag allows people to think a bit before they hit *send*. So I think APAs have their place, and, in any case, as we all know, they're lots of fun if you like writing.

Brian also asked, "How have the first few issues worked out from your perspective?"

I've been pleasantly surprised with the turnout, although I do wish we'd get Spike to join us, and I contacted Paul Mason, essentially begging him to come back, but he's busy.

Brian asked, "Roughly how much time per issue (or per month) have you found the CC role requires? Has it been steady, or more 'bursty' at certain times?"

Like I said, as long as you keep updating the ToC and bookmarks files as new zines arrive, it's really easy. However, if you leave all this until the last moment, then you're going to have a few hours or work that has to be done ASAP, which may not be ideal depending on what else is going on in your life.

"Have there been any unexpected challenges in the role of CC? Is there anything that others could help with?"

Well, Attronarch has helped a lot with the covers and, of course, with setting up [everanon.org](#) along with all the email addresses and the web page. I've also asked his opinion on various matters, such as what to do with respect to minor rules violations. I'm not the sort of person who enjoys enforcing rules, so that's the one aspect of the job I could do without. But I do like *not* enforcing rules, so being the person who has to enforce them gives me the option of looking the other way, when I think we can get away with it. For example, if someone includes some really old artwork in their zine that, despite being really old, might not be so old that it's fallen into the public domain... what do you do as CC in that sort of situation? I know what I should do. But in borderline cases like this, my tendency is to look the other way. I mean, is anyone going to care?

"What aspects of the CC's work have you found most satisfying or rewarding?"

Actually, I like every part of it. For me, it doesn't feel like work. As for what's most satisfying/rewarding, I guess

being able to select cover art is pretty neat. I do enjoy that. But finding suitable cover art can be a bit of a bear. Now, whenever I consider using a piece of art, I'm always thinking to myself that if it were to occupy the entire page, where would we put the logo as well as the issue number and the date? If there's no room for that stuff, then we'll end up having to shrink it to make the space, which I'd prefer not to do.

Also, getting to read the zines as they come in (or at least skim them if time is short) is a privilege I very much enjoy. It means my APA fix is constantly being fed.

And I also enjoy the advertising. Putting out the word about the APA and seeing the posts get thumbs up from either current or potential contributors is always nice.

"Are there any pdf formatting tools, layout & design tricks, or workflows that have made the job easier for you?"

<https://smallpdf.com/merge-pdf> has been a godsend and <https://sourceforge.net/projects/jpdfbookmarks/> as well. I also use LibreOffice Draw for composing the covers. Note, there are many other tools available, but these have the advantages of being both free and easy to use.

"If someone new were to step into the role, what advice would you want to pass along?"

Please do bookmarks. I don't know about you guys, but I personally find them useful, and if you're going to do a table of contents, you might as well do bookmarks too, as the same information goes into both files, so it's very little extra work. Also, don't keep people waiting. If the deadline is the 21st, then get the issue out on the 22nd if at all possible.

"Do you see the role of CC changing as E&A grows, or has it settled into a sustainable pattern?"

Over the long term, I don't know, but for right now, it feels like it's settled into a set of tasks that, like I said, take a few hours a month. Yes, it's a little bit of work, but it's really no big deal. But you do need some level of attention to detail, and it would help if you kept on top of it rather than leaving it all until the last minute.

If anyone would like to be a guest Central Coordinator for one month and go through the entire process described above, let me know. I'd like to train a few people on how to do all this so that we have a number of individuals who are capable of stepping into the role. Then maybe we can see who wants to do it for a full year, set up some sort of term limit rule, and start rotating the job so everyone who wants to do it can eventually take their turn. I'm open to ideas on how to do this, and yes, we'll probably have to vote again at some point. But for right now, I just want to see who's interested.

And many, many thanks to all of you who have contributed zines. If you have gaming buddies who might be interested in joining, please share a copy of the APA.

Jim's Comments on E&A #3:

Genre Fantasy:

Roger BW (E&A #3, pg. 8): "I played a lot of dungeon bashes back in the day, and I've become frankly bored with them and with genre fantasy."

My views on this are somewhat mixed. Of course, I get what you're saying. Generic Tolkienesque Fantasyland has become a bit trite. However, I don't remember that many people playing Talislanta¹⁰; indeed, I used it mostly to import races and monsters into my AD&D campaigns. So why the popularity of Tolkien's conception of elves and dwarves¹¹ and, especially, hobbits/halflings?

I mean, it seems a bit strange. TSR gets harassed by the Tolkien estate, and instead of yanking out hobbits, they rename them. Why? What was so essential about hobbits, and why as a culture are we still largely stuck on Tolkien?

I'll venture a guess that the answer has something to do with the *Network Externality Effect* brought up by Ryan Dancey in relation to D&D.¹² The gist is that once something reaches a certain threshold of popularity, it attains it's own cultural gravity, so to speak, attracting more and more attention. This is the general rule for anything wherein the value lay in the network, not in the thing itself. The canonical example is the telephone, but it's also obviously true of the Internet and Bitcoin. D&D also evolved as a sort of network, an ever-expanding network of participants, and along with it came this *Extruded Fantasy Product*¹³, which is codified in its rules.

So why, aside from D&D, did Tolkien become so big, culturally-speaking? I'm guessing the answer is that something like this was eventually going to happen to some piece of fantasy literature, but only about one that was sufficiently magnificent in some way as to overcome the initial inertia against mass-adoption. LotR was sophisticated to the point that intelligent people could mention it to friends and family as being something genuinely worth looking at, because the depth and detail of the creativity of its author was so... well... you get my point.

Personally I became acquainted with *The Hobbit* before learning of D&D, but I didn't get into it in a big way. I mean, I thought it was a perfectly adequate adventure story, but it wasn't so great that I immediately wanted to sink my teeth into *Lord of the Rings*. But then I came across this Brothers Hildebrandt calendar at the local bookstore.

10 The game that kept bragging that it had no elves. See <https://talislanta.com/>.

11 Indeed, I seem to have read somewhere that he even created this spelling as an alternate to *dwarfs*, and now it's the preferred form, at least as far as I can tell.

12 See the 12th page of my zine in A&E #570.

13 I saw your comment at <https://discussion.tekeli.li/t/creative-abreaction-and-vanilla-fantasy/535>.

Someone who knows more about this can speak to it, but my vague understanding is that due to some sort of esoteric facet of U.S. copyright law, Tolkien temporarily lost his U.S. copyright to LotR for a fairly substantial period of time, so aside from merely copying his work and selling it¹⁴, people could also make products derivative of LotR. So even though Tolkien was famously adverse to LotR being printed and sold in a soft cover format, it got printed and sold in a soft cover format, at least within the United States. And I can remember there were all these LotR calendars floating around, and this went on a pretty long time.¹⁵ When I first saw one of them as a fairly young person, just the fact that there were these artists painting scenes from LotR made me assume that the story must be really amazing, a real work of art deserving of further scrutiny. Gyax must have thought, “Hey, if the calendar publishers are getting away with it, why not me?”

So this legal fiasco created a certain amount of cultural gravity around this work of literature. Would LotR have been as culturally relevant had this never happened? Maybe, but if so, probably not so quickly. Having this open-season on LotR undoubtedly raised the profile of what would ultimately become a cultural phenomenon.

We saw same thing with D&D after the OGL. The license did what it was designed to do, giving this *Extruded Fantasy Product* that is part and parcel of D&D a boost as D&D reached the popularity threshold, thanks to the Network Externality Effect, where it too became socially acceptable.

So what I’m getting at though all this history, which I’m sure you already know, is the obvious point that because it’s in the cultural zeitgeist, one is able to communicate about it without having to explain what one means. For example, take the ad I put on page 5. Most people, even those who haven’t played D&D, have some idea of what orcs and gnomes and halflings are. I don’t have to explain it. And that makes it useful.

Yes, many people have concocted other fantasy worlds and written about them at great length, just as many people have created their own fantasy RPGs, often very much like D&D. Dancey calls these *fantasy heartbreakers*¹⁶, because people have poured so much time and energy into them, even going to the trouble and expense of publishing, and ultimately nobody cares. The ship has already sailed.

Now, I get the point that at a certain moment the well-established becomes trite and hackneyed, and that this is a

sign there’s a new cultural opportunity for something new to burst forth. But it better be something really amazing, because the value of this shared memeplex¹⁷ that is genre fantasy is not inconsiderable. And I’m not saying that because I especially like it.

A few years ago I wrote a novel set in the modern day¹⁸, and one thing I noticed that is starkly different from writing fantasy or science fiction is that you’ve got the whole world and all of your experiences within it from which to draw. You can make an allusion to some aspect of modern culture, and people reading it (at least people reading it today) will immediately understand. So, in effect, it’s like having access to a whole other level of language. Whereas when you write fantasy or science fiction, all of those modern cultural references become anachronistic. They’re essentially off-limits.

But genre fantasy gives you just a little bit of that back; granted, it won’t last forever. Or maybe it will. I mean, OSR is an example of how culture reclaims things it once abandoned.

So what am I trying to say? While I, like you, enjoy exploring new ideas, new settings, new assumptions... there’s something to be said for genre fantasy. Granted, how it developed and what it’s become is sort of an accident. Obviously, there are some elements¹⁹ that are a reflection of us and of how, perhaps, we see ourselves individually in this big, bad world in which we all live. But, you know, if it wasn’t Tolkien who had such a large hand in shaping it, it would have been someone else, Robert E. Howard perhaps.²⁰

And let us not forget that one of the great things about D&D is you can modify it as much as you like. You can strip out the elves and the hobbits if you wish. Getting rid of alignment might be a little harder, but you can do it if you’re really determined. In any case, if you have a fantasy setting you’re care to share with us, I’d be curious to see it.

Os 33 porquinhos (2017) – “The 33 Little Pigs”:

Pedro & Camila (E&A #3, pg. 10): “Some of them are particularly amusing, such as Lord Bacon (a tycoon who built a mansion)....”

How did he make his money? By investing of pork bellies?

14 Ace Books actually did this, which is what set off the whole shabang. See <https://medium.com/hooded-on-books/prints-pirates-and-paperbacks-the-ace-books-vs-tolkien-saga-c42eea856ae8>.

15 See *The Compleat Gyde to Tolkien Calendars* at <http://tolkiencalendars.com/>.

16 <https://www.youtube.com/live/2Vz9ogq7JTg?si=R3dUcAfWUOlol308&t=3818>

17 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memeplex>

18 I never got around to even attempting to publish it, but it’s a finished rough draft.

19 Hobbits, for example.

20 Conan first appeared several years before Bilbo, but the Hyborian Age, while popular, never attracted quite the same level of attention as Middle-earth. The reason, I’m guessing, is that Tolkien was by far the superior world-builder.

VTTRP:

John Redden (E&A #3, pg. 14): “I’m going to try to do something about a lack of gaming. My son is lecturing me on VTTRP. He claims he can manage the technology.”

I’m curious to learn how this works out.

Recruitment of henchmen and party members:

Attronarch (E&A #3, pg. 17): “They were ambitious enough to pick up on anything with ‘treasure’ in its description whilst disregarding any red-flags, like for example, heavily scarred dwarf promising them riches.”

At least he’s still got his limbs. This reminds me of the recruiter in *Starship Troopers*.

Graverobbing:

Attronarch (E&A #3, pg. 17): “Once back in town they counted their spoils.”

It sort of makes you wonder who’s leaving all this loot lying around in various tombs. That’s what I’d do if I was rich, bury my gold and silver with some dead person. And yes, I realize people actually did this for kings and so forth, but at some point you’d think they’d realize they’re just creating an incentive for grave-robbers. Now, if it were the tomb of a necromancer/lich, this would make more sense. Who says you can’t take it with you?

Wound determination & magical healing:

Attronarch (E&A #3, pg. 19): “Both Bob and Darius were tackled and defaced. Were it not for divine healing, both would be walking freak shows.”

Defaced. Isn’t that a word usually reserved for statues and other inanimate objects? It sounds painful. I’d be curious to learn how you decided their faces got torn off. And did that require regeneration, or was *normal* magical healing good enough?

Party unity:

Attronarch (E&A #3, pg. 21): “Should we, and by we I mean you, go back in?”

He’s not exactly selling it.

Trading with monsters:

Gabriel Roark (E&A #3, pg. 29): “Chaotics might have a hard time if surface-dwellers are mainly Lawful.”

Good point. This is probably the key ingredient, as maintaining a sustained commercial relationship requires an adherence to certain rules of conduct. For example, we’ve

seen how in neighborhoods where flash mob robberies have become a thing, stores tend to close. So you’d have to be dealing with creatures whose psychology includes some measure of self-control, and this would likely be indicated by a lawful alignment. So can one trade with orcs? Interestingly, orcs have shifted in alignment over the various editions of D&D, starting as chaotic or neutral in the 1st edition (1974), then chaotic evil in the 2nd (1978), then becoming lawful evil in AD&D, and then becoming “usually chaotic evil” in 3rd edition, and then straight-up chaotic evil in 4th and 5th. So it all makes for a confusing economic landscape.

Stakes and player interest:

Michael Cule (E&A #3, pg. 41): “I do like the stakes to be really important. I don’t always trust my players to take an interest in what I’ve prepared without clearly understood reasons for them to care. I have myself all to often found myself in investigative scenarios where I find it difficult to give a damn about the crime.”

Regarding that last part, see my comment last issue (on page 160) to Clark Timmins. The basic gist is that most players (myself included) tend to take a more genuine interest in goals they set for themselves. As for the first part, I tend to prefer starting with low stakes so they can later be raised. If they’re already sky-high, there’s nowhere to go but down.

Traveller’s Aslan:

Michael Cule (E&A #3, pg. 41): “The Aslan were not part of the Terran diaspora from the Ancient period but they were unashamedly, two legged lion-people.”

Add it to the list.²¹

Movement in D&D 5e:

Clark Timmins (E&A #3, pg. 45): “A movement speed of over 70 miles per hour is a difficult statistic to model in the 5th Edition rules. The fastest moving being in the game – at least that I’m aware of – is the Solar, with a flying speed of 150 Ft. per turn (about 17 miles per hour).”

I didn’t realize the movement rules in D&D 5e were so messed up. It seems like an incredible oversight for a game that had so much playtesting. Enjoyed your whole article, by the way.

From Rulings to Rules:

George Phillies (E&A #3, pg. 54): “...profound difference between the original D&D books, in which the

²¹ See “Five Absurdities of the Official Traveller Universe” in A&E #504.

gamesmaster rules on what happens, and the later books, in which..." (...) "...the books tell you what happens."

Yes. I found this to be particularly true with respect to verbal interaction²², but the examples you provided illustrate that the observation holds across multiple domains. Of course, there's the dilemma that whatever you codify will tend to get maximized in character generation.²³ I suppose your argument is that it's okay to codify to a degree, just not too much, which I suppose is an argument in favor of rules-lite RPGs, which maximize improvisation and the GM's free reign when making rulings. But, to be fair, there are also those who love a good crit table.

Long Skill Lists:

Avram Grumer (E&A #3, pg. 62): "A BRP character sheet is basically a long, depressing list of stuff my PC is bad at."

It's a funny observation, but if you want highly-detailed characters, which is often the case in settings with a high degree of skill specialization, you're going to have this problem. Granted, in RPGs where characters have a low life-expectancy, you probably don't need quite so much detail, as they're not going to be around for very long anyway, but for long campaigns, such details can be useful. Given your experience with so many different RPG systems, I'd be curious to learn what you think the best solution is, although I suspect that at the end of the day, this all boils down to being simply a matter of preference.

World/dungeon building through solo-play:

Pum (E&A #3, pg. 65): "I think some world building can resemble solo RPGing quite a lot."

How to Host a Dungeon springs to mind.

GMing Style:

Myles Corcoran (E&A #3, pg. 66): "If there's one word to describe my playing style it's lazy. I don't like large amounts of prep. I don't like complex rules and mechanics. Our regular sessions are very much in the vein of conversations punctuated by the occasional die roll. I try not to overproduce background lore or setting details before play, as I much prefer to see where the players take the story. My GMing style is therefore reactive."

Yeah, I'm pretty much the same, although I will keep some track of what's going on with NPCs even when they're not with the PCs, and quite often, they're getting up to some mischief or getting themselves in trouble. One of my

players complained that my campaigns resemble a game of whack-a-mole, where there are more problems popping up than can be immediately addressed, and so the PCs have to prioritize which fires to put out first, and whenever they're focused on one problem, there are two or three others emerging just out of sight. But, y'know, I'm not forcing them to fix all the world's problems. I'm just forcing them to choose what they want to spend their time doing, as opposed to the GM choosing it for them, which is something I've always disliked in the games in which I've played.

Characters moving across different DM's games:

Mitch Hyde (E&A #3, pg. 81): "I was pretty interested by the prospect of characters moving across different DM's games."

Back in my college days, some of us tried setting up something like this²⁴, but it never really took off. I'm not sure why, but my guess is that most groups tend to want to stick together.

Fantasy Psychedelics:

Patrick Zoch (E&A #3, pg. 103): "The Sarpa Salpa, or Cow Bream, is also known as a Dream Fish for its hallucinogenic effect when ingested. Apparently, the effect is similar to those of psychedelic drugs like LSD." (...) "The hallucinating fishermen are either fighting imaginary beings, innocent bystanders, each other, or the approaching adventurers all perceived by the fisherman as dangerous creatures to be defeated."

This reminds me of South Park's cat piss episode.²⁵

Havana Horror: The Mazzora:

Brian Misiaszek (E&A #3, pg. 112): "While the Sister's kept things immaculately clean, they could only pray for those who were unwell." (...) "Under General Brooke, the U.S. brought army doctors and engineers to rebuild Mazorra's crumbling pavilions and clean its filthy wards."

Hate to nitpick, but this appears to be an inconsistency that could stand some explanation. Overall, however, excellent work. I'm somewhat floored by just how much you've given the reader: a history of the institution, a detailed look at the corruption, a full-page map, three different lists of encounters, and lots of NPCs, so many that you couldn't even fit them all in given the infernal 16-limit (not my fault). There are a few typos, but all in all, what you've

²² See "Charisma in AD&D" in A&E #513.

²³ See "Social Skills in Traveller" in A&E #526.

²⁴ See "Shared World Guidelines" in The Guildsman #4, at <https://jimvassilakos.com/guildsman/guildsman04.pdf>

²⁵ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Major_Boobage

written has the look and feel of a professionally published supplement.

AI as GM:

Lisa Padol (E&A #3, pg. 130): “There’s almost certainly an element of reading the room / reading the players, and that’s not yet something an AI can do. (E.g., a human GM would (okay, to be strictly accurate, **should**) understand that Jim Vassilakos didn’t want his character to be sent away from the farm on big adventures and would stop trying to follow whatever internal script the AI had that attempted to make the character go out and have adventures -- or would say to Jim, ‘Hey, the whole premise is that your character travels and has adventures.’ The first is better, but the second is still better than what the AI was doing.)”²⁶

I would have been completely shocked if the AI had paused the game to talk to me out-of-character. I think part of my reluctance to follow its lead was simply because I wanted to test it to see what it would do. To what extent was it following a script versus to what extent could it actually think for itself? But another part of my reluctance was also real. I seem to have an aversion to adventures being thrust upon me.²⁷ I want to approach plots not as a task to be completed but rather as an opportunity or situation to be either exploited or overcome. Having said that, I still think AIs will continue to improve and at some point will surpass us in general cognitive ability²⁸, at which point how we choose to treat them (and what rights we bestow upon them) may become a question of existential consequence.

Procrastination:

Joshua Kronengold (E&A #3, pg. 145): “...I assure you, some of your fellow contributors (myself certainly included) write their zines at the last minute...”

This reminds me of the opening paragraph of my comeback zine in A&E #500.

Conversations With Lucifer (#2):

Mark Wilson (E&A #3, pg. 151): “And next, can He make a boulder so large He can’t lift it, I suppose?”

Part of pride, I think, is a lack of self-awareness, an inability to see — much less accept — one’s faults, and so this

26 Lisa is referring to my article “Roleplaying with AI (again)” in A&E #586.

27 See the first four paragraphs of my comment to Clark Timmins under the heading “Linear Narrative vs. Sandbox” in E&A #2, pg. 160.

28 We’ve discussed this previously. See my comments to you in A&E #581. Incidentally, I don’t recall you ever getting back to me regarding footnote #16.

version of Lucifer, while well-spoken, lacks the fault he claims to fully embrace. Also, it was interesting that he capitalized the pronoun when referring to God. (Or was this your choice?) It reminded me of a video I saw recently made by a guy who’s reading Lord of the Rings for the first time.²⁹ He noted how Tolkien capitalized the pronouns in Gollum’s dialogue when Gollum was referring to Sauron and mentioned how although it was once a common practice when referencing the divine, it’s something that is today falling out of favor. Hence, it seems to me Lucifer’s strategy, *if* he were to actually exist, would be to discount (perhaps even refuse to acknowledge) the divinity of God rather than paying homage to it, while at the same time promoting an alternate version of monotheism with himself at its center. While arguing to one group that gods don’t exist, he would, to another, demand complete submission and insist that to deny his divinity is blasphemy and that the blasphemous must be put to death. In this way, he would live up to his moniker as the Prince of Lies, talking out both sides of his mouth in order to belittle God while aggrandizing himself. Of course, given modern western sensibilities, this is presumably all just make-believe, however, it is worth noting that beliefs, regardless of their underlying accuracy, can have profound repercussions.

Timothy’s Comments on E&A #3:

TC notes

I’m currently in Sweden in a delightful stuga (holiday cottage) by a small lake which I have all to myself. Dalsland is 25% water I’m told. It’s perfect for ‘switching off’ and enjoying nature. Bonus is getting to see two friends I’ve known for years — although now they’re divorced it means a two-centre holiday and getting to know new partners.

Roger Bell-West - Firedrake's Hoard

Welcome. If you’re in the UK and not far from Michael C, you’re probably not that from me! (I live in Fareham; work in Portsmouth). Great to hear that you’re running 2300AD and the Bayern campaign. I shall look forward to hearing about it. I’m impressed with your clever character sheets — beyond me!

It’s interesting to hear how you produce your zine, thanks for describing that and thank you for producing something that can be printed to US Letter or A4 — very thoughtful.

RYCT Jim E and Mongoose Traveller house rules — yes please to your sharing them!

29 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hbkxZh-q9M>

John Redden - Reddened Stars

Thanks for your Scalzi book suggestions. I'll look them up. And thank you for your comments regarding the story telling — Jim and Conrad do a terrific job!

Gabriel Roark - Bugbears and Ballyhoo

RYCTus on the Plankwell campaign installment being shorter than usual — wow! That's a level of observation I can only aspire to!

Michael Cule - The Phoenix Nest

A clerihew! Well done!

Paul Holman - De Ludis Elficis Fictis

RYCTM on spam emails from fake gods — now that's scary!

Myles Corcoran - Twisting the Rope

"I'm not that kind of frog." — that did make me laugh!

RYCT Jim E — *Offworlders* sounds interesting, but then any 'Traveller meets Firefly homage' is going to get my attention. :-)

RYCTus "start with a large fortune" — hah! Thanks for the link to humanivers. Will explore.

Mark Nemeth - The Seedling

Interesting illustration on page 3 of your zine. It reminds me of some of the versions of the Finnish epic Kalevala that I have.

Brian Misiaszek - Age of Menace

What a horrifying history; what a scary setting; what a well-written write-up. If I were looking for somewhere grim to send my PCs, I don't think I could better than this. Well done.

Lisa Padol - An Unlooked for Zine

Glad you've found the Paper 7. I don't know it, but will take a look when I get back from holiday in Sweden where, ironically for a 'switch off' holiday, there appears to be no time for anything! I'll be interested to hear how it goes for you.

RYCT Patrick R — now of course, we all (well, I do) want to know which *Star Trek: TNG* episode!

RYCT Jim Eckman — if it's any help there's a CoC setting for Traveller by the name of *Cthonian Stars*. It keeps to our solar system though rather than go any further. Another SF RPG that might interest you is Kimi Hughes' (Golden Lasso Girl of Golden Lasso Games) called *Starscape* - a "found family" RPG.

Jim Vassilakos - Plankwell Campaign

Thank you for the pointer to *The Guildsman* article on FTL travel. It's in my *Traveller Periodical Bibliography* and I'd forgotten it! Which reminds me, I need to move A&E from 'ongoing' to a closed periodical. And add E&A of course.

LAST WORD

Try not to book too *beautiful* a spot for your writing holiday if you plan on actually doing any writing.