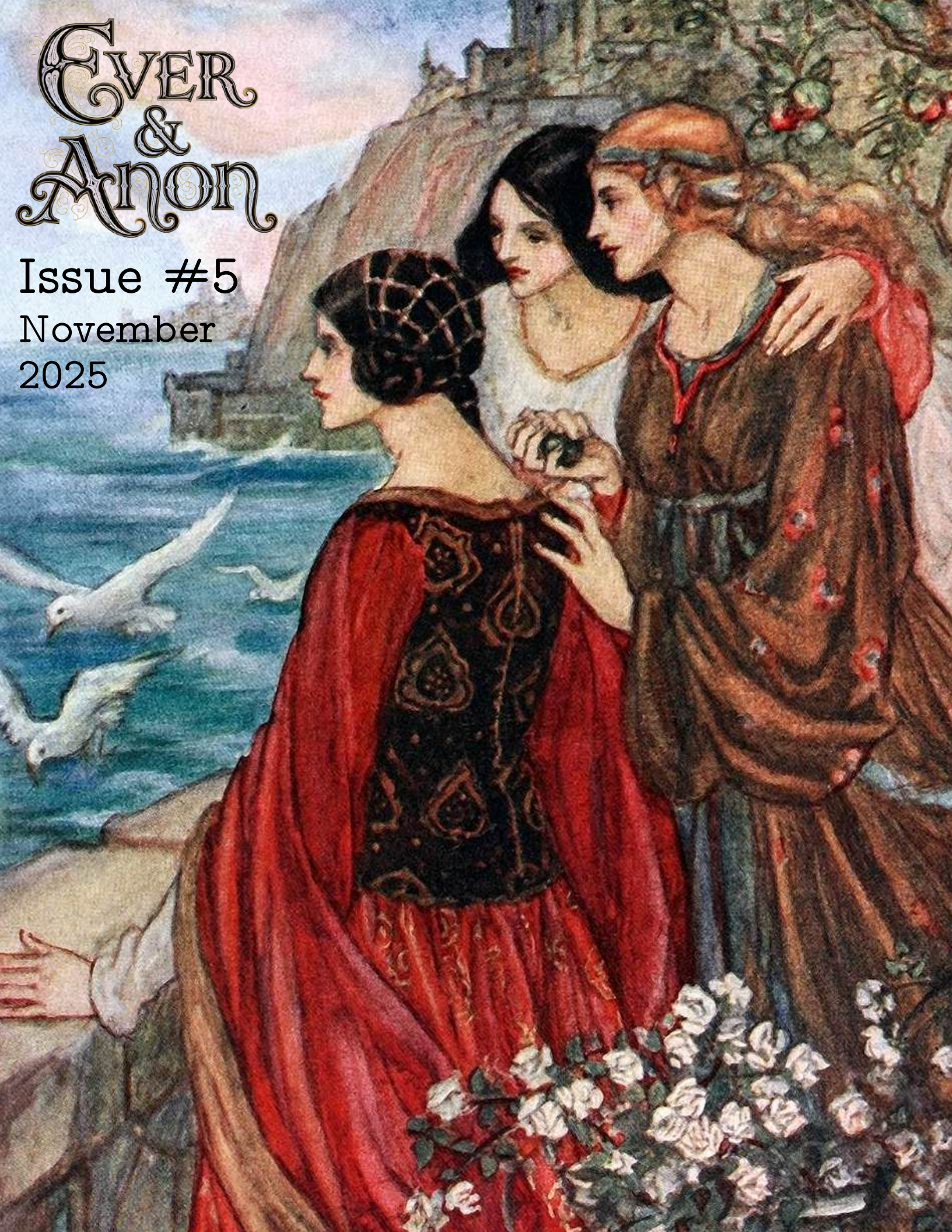


EVER & Anon

Issue #5

November

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 #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?

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

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 #5 (ver. 1) – November 2025

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This issue’s IgTheme is: *What media (novels, film, anime, etc.) have inspired you vis-à-vis RPGs?*

The cover art for this issue was downloaded from <https://www.oldbookillustrations.com/>. The picture on page 5 was generated and converted into a sketch by [Canva](#). The picture on page 175 was generated by [DeviantArt’s DreamUp](#).

What is This?

A Newbie's Guide to APAs

Q: What is this?

A: An APA.

Q: What's an APA?

A: An Amateur Press Association.

Q: What's that?

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

Q: What's a zine?

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

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

A: Exactly.

Q: And each one has a separate author?

A: Right.

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

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

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://attronarch.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 #4

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

All About Me

I'm not going to be rosy and say that everything is great; I'm working to get this finished today (10/5) in order to feel like I accomplished something today. Even mild depression is a kick in the teeth, and having allergies sock me in the nose at the same time is not putting me in the best place. Still, we are lining up small "I can do this" projects for the next week, our daughter is home over that weekend so that will be a boost, and we have a few annual fall events coming up. I'm halfway through a contract work project that the client is very happy with my output, so that's good *and* lucrative.

Spouse and kiddo continue to do well as well: my wife is bummed that she isn't getting as many work hours as she normally does as one of the regular schools has figured out how to take the bulk of the program in house, the jerks (OK that's me), and others that relied on school funding for field trips suddenly don't have those funds available. That's one way for trickle down to work...

It's set build season for the High Schools non-musical and for the 5th year I am *somehow* in charge. It's a strange but rewarding beast. 5 years ago a dozen 'dads' showed up for set build on *Putnam County Spelling Bee*, one of the least demanding sets ever, and it turned into a giant tool <ahem> measuring contest. 4 years ago, I was the *only* 'dad' to show up for *Musical Comedy Murders of 1940* where we had to build a manor house library with secret doors! At least the director's husband was a general contractor and taught me a lot. Then he got sick, and she left the school. I showed up for the first day of *Into the Woods* set and was informed by the interim director that the kids told her I was in charge of set build. WTF?

I've been doing it ever since, even with the kiddo out of school. Some years are better than others – I was very proud '23 sets for *Play That Goes Wrong* and *Little Women*, not so much for '24 and *Peter and the Starcatcher* and *Wizard of Oz* – but this year the kids voted on doing *Puffs*. I am NOT thrilled¹ and weighed long and hard whether I wanted to be connected to JKR's work, but I finally came down on the social obligation I had to the kids, especially the seniors I am teaching set design. But I am not happy about it, and I still don't know if it was the right thing to do.

¹ Seriously, I know this is an easily produced, large ensemble comedy full of kids roles, but why was this even on the voting list?

Inside the Library

The library's "Ridgecon" event was this month, the big cross-fandom event they do every year. A couple years back I tried to do a "this is what gaming is" for confused adults but it was poorly attended, so this year I was booked for 3 hours of drop in gaming for anyone. I was using *Knave* and its super stripped-down rules set to keep things easy and ended up with eight people: three dads and five kids who were all too young for my regular weekly groups. I had 20 premade characters – another advantage of *Knave* was they were so easy to build – and was running the classic module **B4: the Lost City**... at least the opening of it.

If you're not up on your 43-year-old *Basic D&D* module lore, the PCs start this one having been separated from their desert caravan; running low on water and food, they find a city buried in the shifting sands, with only a once secret door (now propped open by an unlucky hobgoblin corpse) into the uppermost level of a stature-topped ziggurat as a way into the spaces below... spaces that hopefully hold water for them and their camels and at the very least will provide shade and shelter.

Despite the presence of some very young kids with the usual young kids' "wait, I can try *anything*?" responses – one kid decided to test to see if one of the spaces in the dungeon was dangerous by pooping into his hand and throwing it into the room, who later grievously injured himself by diving down an open shaft trying to actualize a pile of rose petals to land on, and died by offering himself as a meat-sacrifice to hungry goblins to keep them from attacking the rest of the party² – everyone had a good time. If nothing else, the kids got a chance to play and understand how the game is supposed to work and their dads (who had not played in ages) got a chance to play with their kids.

In the end four of the PCs ran back to the caravan after being wounded, three died at the hands of goblins, fire beetles, and stirges respectively, and the last managed to lure the stirge flock to drive off the goblins and locate the barrels of water in the 2nd tier. He had to limp back to the caravan and tell them where to collect the liquid but was hailed a hero for buying them some more time, perhaps to explore... THE LOST CITY. Or not.

² Said kid also claimed to be a veteran gamemaster and told me he wanted to run the game... sorry, pal, no can do.

Stating up Regrets 4: Speed Centaur

Fourth from Jon Morris' *League of Regrettable Superheroes* is the last survivor of a destroyed world, taken in and raised with kindness and compassion until, after the death of his adoptive father, he goes to the big city to fight crime with his powers of strength, flight, and invulnerability. Also, he's half horse. That's right, name is accurate.



Speed is the sole survivor of a hyperborean community of centaurs; his home and people were destroyed by a mountain earthquake when he was a child. Found wandering the arctic (likely Canada, maybe Alaska?) by a trapper named Norton, the newly christened Speed was raised to hate evil and injustice. On his deathbed Norton revealed that he used to be a crusading newspaperman who was driven out by crooked politicians. He urges Speed to go back to Racket City and use his powers to right wrongs. The first thing Speed does there is save the life of Jake "Reel" McCoy, a reporter for the *Daily Views* – I'm guessing a newsreel company? – who had been pitched out an airplane by the mobster "Killer Diller". McCoy became his companion and interlocutor to the human world (and helped him build a costume horse head to pass for a regular cart animal on the streets of Racket City, while McCoy sells peanuts).

You read that right. He hides his body in a horse head.

Speed's powers are... well first off, he's a centaur. That means mass, strength, speed, and natural weapons. He can also fly; I don't know why. From there the web sources differ; with one giving him animal control and immortality, one 'super-resistance', and a third assumes cold resistance and pegs his strength at x8 human.

Fortunately, *Villains & Vigilantes* has an easy solution to much of this with Animal/Plant Powers. This gives the character 1-6 sub ability from short tables keyed to animal types (mammal, avian, fish, etc.), one of which is 'special', which is an A/PP version of the Body Power⁴.

The sub charts are interesting. I love their design because in 1st edition this was as open ended as other 'make this bit up' powers but real thought went into standardizing the animal powers, likely to make it easier for players and GMs, using d6+d8 for flattened curve. The sub charts include weaknesses at the far edges, so there's only a 2-6% chance of any sub ability being a detriment.

The most common Mammal options are Heightened Senses, Natural Weaponry, and Speed Bonus; the next most common are Height. Endurance, Agility, Strength, and the aforementioned Special. Nothing would look out of place for Speed to get 5 sub abilities of Natural Weaponry, Speed Bonus, Heightened Strength, Special, and Heightened Endurance. That won't make him invulnerable or immortal per se, but it will give him a ton of hit points and it's easy to claim the magical endurance gives him classical Greek centaur longevity. Interestingly some A/P Powers charts include animal control, but not mammal; I'm not sold that he even had the power.

So otherwise, we add Flight. There are comments about super-speed, but since flight speed in *V&V* is set by your strength & endurance, his flight will be plenty fast.

I *could* add the weakness 'Physical Handicap: Centaur' (as there are obvious restrictions with that) and call it a day. But Speed does suffer a playability problem: Basic HTH attacks in *V&V* start with a 25% accuracy; Natural Weaponry ups that to 33%, but his weight drags his Agility score down, giving him a -10% accuracy so we're back where we started. And with a low Agility he's only getting 1.2 actions per round (he needs to roll 9+ on d10 for a second action). The player has too few chances to act, with too low a chance to do hit. I could balance a bit if we gave him another Heightened Strength that would likely quadruple his lift, let him really mess with the battlefield, and do a ton of damage on a hit, but that is a solution for people who enjoy that indirect play.

³ Speed Centaur is in the public domain and was created by Malcom Kildale and Paul Gustavson in 1939. This image taken from the centaur-focused site <https://centaurchronicles.com/personnages/speed-centaur-2/>.

⁴ OK not helpful. Body Power lets you pick a part of your body and assign a player generated ability to it, one of *V&V*'s many 'open ended powers, such as Psionics, Mutant Power, and 711's Willpower.

Let's instead look at Speed's super-resistance, adding the power "Enchanted Body" as a hack off Force Field⁵. This is a great defense with a high action economy cost (1 action per turn to maintain), and a high chance to hit for the assumed low damage of your HTH to simulate a 'push with your force field'...it's very Invisible Girl⁶ coded. Now, by saying that Speed's magical body has an enchantment that *acts like* a Force Field, it means we can have his HTH attack as Force Field, vastly increasing his chance to hit without changing his damage. To keep this from being too powerful, Speed can only use the defense type when he has a 2nd action to brace himself, and it only protects him or anyone he's shielding with his body. This solves his invulnerability power and makes him a highly effective combatant ... one who could punch out The Eye! (Not that he would, the Eye is a fine fellow.)

Animal/Plant Powers – Horse: Special (horse legs, x6 weight, as per the *Dragon* #105 article on centaurs, so he weighs 1230 lbs. for a -6 agility), Speed Bonus (+90" ground), Natural Weaponry (+2 to hit, +4 damage, hooves), Height. Strength (+14), Height. Endurance (+13); Flight (528 mph; he can shift to hyper-flight for Mach 52; if crossing North America in 4.5 minutes isn't super-speed, I'm not sure what is); Enchanted Body (Modified Force Field); Physical Handicap: Centaur.

His basic abilities are 24 Strength and 22 Endurance, 12 Intelligence, 11 Charisma, and a 7 Agility from his weight penalty. Backgrounds of Agriculture (Trapper) and... I'm at a loss. Transport (carriage rides)? Yeah, let's go with that.

Here's some math to showcase his powers: Speed has 100 HP, and a 5-ton lift with a punch that as strong as a medium bomb⁷. He's stronger than the speculated eight men, but here he is flipping a horse⁸, so, I'm good. He can run at 33 miles per hour; That's Secretariat speed, so he's super-fast even without using his Flight power.

Like the Eye, Speed has a companion in Jake McCoy. We could do the 'use the Pet ability to make Jake part of Speed's power set', but with the Eye it give the PC a way to be on the scene; Jake feels more like an NPC⁹ covering for Speed's lack of sophistication and awareness of the modern world and perils of Racket City (and how's that for a city name!).

Yes, but how do you play it?

To me, Speed is filling the space of a Shazam/Captain Marvel, a source of childlike whimsy in a potentially dark world. He completely believes in humanity's potential for goodness, the first person he meets becomes his best friend, and his adventures get delightfully weird. Like Batman he operated out of a cave near the city, but *his* cave led to a fantasy realm which he visited when not fighting nazis, mobsters, or mad scientists (one of which controlled a kraken; there are images of him in a diving suit which I couldn't find but must have been lit). He's a classic Flight Invulnerability Strength Speed hero, even if it was a long ride to get there, and would integrate in any standard super-team. I think he'd be impressed by the Eye while he and Zippo would become fast friends (rimshot). 711 would freak him out.

Regretting what I said to you

Patrick had questions about the brilliant legal ploy that 711 used to get his client temporarily out of jail; yes, clearly there were flaws in the plan. As for the governor giving Dyce a pardon because of his beloved status and high charisma score, well it is an election year, and the press likes nothing more than a "good man torn down" story to see papers. Maybe next year. (More seriously, I didn't make up this nonsense origin...)



Myles commented on how 711 must have a pipeline of painkillers and amphetamines to survive being out all night and in prison all day.

Mechanically that's what his Willpower power helps cover for: Dyce is so driven that 2 hours of sleep/meditation a night see himself through.

Hey **Doc Menace**, you're not feeding these people pills, are you? (But who you need to check is the Spirit, who gets knocked on the noggin much more than is good for him! Ah the world of vigilante sports medicine....)

⁵ The Powers table has Mutant Power & Body Power for boutique abilities, but since I'm basing the mechanics on Force Field, that makes the most sense.

⁶ The rules were written before she had her name change; so is this comment.

⁷ For contrast, Zippo had 20 HP, and did 1d6+8 damage to Speed's 2d10 +4

⁸ Image at https://pdsh.fandom.com/wiki/Speed_Centaur; the ASPCA confirmed the horse is fine.

⁹ If we were building this in 1st Edition V&V Jake would be another PC with the origin type of *Charismatic Involvement*, which is basically letting one of the players be Jimmy Olsen or Rick Jones.

Under the Giant's Shadow

I did promise halflings, familiars and clerics....

My halflings are mechanically similar to their B/X cousins – keen ears, small stature, skill at hiding, superior saving throws – with those from the stout halfling background add their bonus to village and a professional skill being the Hobbits we all know and love while those from a hairfoot halfling background gain bonuses with woodcraft and camouflage and are some other form of faerie-kin. At 4th and 9th level the Stout halfling got to pick from one of three breed bonuses having to do with better combat skills, while Hairfoots got breed bonuses tied to shapeshifting to an animal form, dimension doors, or charming people, but all had to be done in a wild environment. They also gained bonuses on rumor gathering due to their keen hearing, and the ability to, if the reaction roll indicates combat, seize the initiative to look harmless and either run away without being pursued or 'surrender' and force a second reaction roll.

Our hairfoot halfling was a Satyr, Richard Stockton, who also tended bar in Amethyst Spire when he wasn't out in the woods, chosen because he had a 16 charisma and 14 strength; I recommended it to the player since I always loved the idea of a PC Satyr or Centaur.

Familiars occurred as a PC race because Ayleton's player was young, loved cats, and wanted to play one. His mom was playing Aethra the magic-user and we settled on this: small, quiet, agile beings already are halflings, so the familiar isn't too strange. I gave them halfling stats. They could grow to a larger version of themselves that did as much damage as a short sword. They are as strong as their strength score would indicate, so Ayleton was as strong as the dwarves, readily able to drag Aethra's body out of danger once. Obviously, their manual dexterity is limited and based on their Erudition they might only understand their magic-user or go as far as speaking several languages (Ayleton understood Aethra and other humans, but only Aethra understood him.)

The familiar also gave 3 HP to their magic-user, boosted her senses and saves, and held a spell for her, but bonded them so if one died both did. The familiar could scent out magic, evil, or invisibility with a challenging roll if they thought of it. Finally, they had some natural magic, being able to cast the *dancing lights* cantrip at 1st level, and it's reverse, *deepen shadow*, at 2nd and so on up the levels. Their magics were all light, shadows, and illusions.

Aethra and Ayleton ended up thrilled with this; it hit the exact fantasy and generally gave Aethra the cross the board boost *Find Familiar* is supposed to.

Clerics... woof. This is where I deviated the most from baseline B/X, and maybe should have done more, It has always bothered me that the cleric's magic system is the same as the magic-users, to the point of having spells overlap. If clerics have a completely different source of magic then they should have different mechanics, a new flavor as it were, but I didn't want to have the "you have a higher but still small percent chance of miracles" that I remember from other 1980's D&D hacks. So I

- 1) Ditched the idea of keeping the rules consistent to the tools of the late 70's/early 80's and
- 2) Decided to keep a controlled resource array for the players to draw on

And gave clerics a dice pool for acts of faith. They got a number of d10s based on their level (1 at 1st, 2 at 4th, 3 at 9th) plus their divine favor bonus, so Jisethea with an 18 divine favor had a starting dice pool of 4d.

Act of faith level	Target
3 lower than character	Automatic
1-2 levels lower than character	3
At character level	5
1 level higher than character	8
2 levels higher than character	10

Each level gave the cleric a new act of faith, that had several uses. For example, the 1st level one is Exorcism.

The cleric can use faith to drive away the Unnatural: the undead and summoned or created entities (q.v. protection from evil). If the roll is successful, each die that succeeded "turns" (drives off) 4 levels of foes (at least one foe is turned, regardless of its level). If the exorcism is automatic monsters are not turned: they are destroyed, turned to dust, for summoned foes, sent back to whence they came.

Soul echoes, poltergeists, and other weak incorporeal undead are level 0 monsters. Skeletons are level 1; zombies and ghosts are level 2, ghouls (carrion eaters who enjoy making you carrion with their paralyzing touch) are level 3; wights (ghosts possessing corpses that drain life with a touch) are level 4. There are more powerful undead past that, but this will do for now.

So if facing level 0 soul echoes our 1st level cleric would roll 4d10 and every 3+ meant a success driving off 8 of the woll-o-the-wisp type things. But if she didn't get any successes, she suffered a crisis of faith & lost 1 die from her pool until she got to a place of safety and could rest. If she tried it on ghouls, she'd be looking for 10s, not 3s; this gave the player a reliable enough power that I could scale to effects, and they could track their power. For the limited time we had Jisethea as a PC it seemed to work.

Given the B/X rules that clerics start with Turn Undead but don't get spells until 2nd level, I held off on healing magic until the 2nd Devotion. But since I had all HP be combat skill and being brought to 0 HP meant you were finally took a serious wound, Courage worked thusly.

The cleric can use faith to bolster their courage (or the courage of their allies), or to undermine the courage of the opposition. Unlike Exorcism's calculation based on the opposition, Courage's difficulty depends on what the cleric is attempting. All the effects last for one turn (which at the very least is one combat...)

2nd level effect: Remove Fear

This effects one target for each successful die. An NPC will succeed on their next morale check; or any PC or NPC gains a +3 on saves vs. magically generated fear; or any PC or NPC under magically generated fear is released from it.

3rd level effect: Aid

The cleric may add HP to anyone who has not yet succumbed to their wounds (i.e. fallen to 0 HP). Each level of success adds 3x Target's level HP to the target. These temporary HP last 1 turn; any damage taken during that come from the temporary HP first.

4th level effect: Bless

This must be used before melee starts and within a 20x20 foot area. Within that space all of the cleric's allies have a +1 on all morale rolls, a +1 to hit and a +1 on damage. If the targets are in a melee that lasts longer than 10 minutes (a larger scale battle), the blessing lasts 1 turn per success die, but it always ends once the primary melee ends. This is DM adjudicated: if the opposition fails a morale test and flees, the blessing ends; if they tactically fall back and prepare for missile fire or a charge, the blessing continues.

5th level effect: Cause Fear

One target is stricken with fear, or at the very least a deep doubt as to the viability or righteousness of their cause. If the cleric's level + number of successes is equal to or less than the target level, the target must make a morale check. If that total is more than the cleric's level, the target must save vs. spells or flee in blind panic.

This meant that when Jisethea hit 2nd level she could add temporary HP people in in peril (if she rolls an 8+ on at least 1 of her 4d10, so a 75% chance) so they don't dip into their real HP, but she can't restore real HP or heal wounds. The Devotion of Healing comes at 4th level, and curing of wounds is a 6th level effect in it. Healing is rare... but a good roll at 4th level will raise the dead.

The problem is that I didn't commit to this: all clerics were also trained the scholarly arts and got a handful of arcane spells from a limited list (basically anything that overlapped with magic-user or I felt made sense for there to be a ritual for rather than a petition). Jisethea's player appreciated this small, even more reliable resource but it made the cleric class again neither fish nor fowl: They were the only human class that relied on two prime requisites in Divine Favor and Erudition, and when I introduced backwoods cult leaders the cleric structure had stuff that didn't fit. I had no problem saying their luck (i.e. their divine favor) made them skilled in combat and handwaved the limited weapon selection with "Do Not Cite the Deep Magic to Me, Witch" rules for what weapons the god's favored are allowed to carry, which was bullshit but at least thematic bullshit.

Of course, to get the scholarly warrior exorcist of the classic cleric you would need multi-classing rules. Or in this case dual classing, where I did state that between 4th and 5th level you could drop to 1st in another class and start over ala AD&D to make rangers and paladins and fighter/thief/cleric style bards. We never played that far.

Comments on E&A 4

Mark Wilson: re layoffs: that is a big bundle of suck. RE Fantastic Four Movie: As a lifetime Fantastic Four fan I will defend the movie in that it gave me EXACTLY what I was asking for in a FF movie (family drama laced with 1950's SF disaster film) aside from them not even trying to make Mr. Fantastic look as cool as Elastigirl. RE herb related facts: I love this stuff; my play is <wait for it> steeped in it. As for the campaign, personally I found this abbreviated write up charming.

Clark B Timmins: Love me some cryptids! And if it makes you feel any better, according to my daughter's archaeology classes, professional archaeologists also grab onto irrelevant details and insist they are critical.

Roger BW: Caffeinated Chocolate? The fiends! LOL at Homicidal Calamari Robot. RE Bayern I hope this goes well; it sounds interesting. re looking for a Party Game feel: you are already ascribing me too much knowledge of the board game market! I will see if the library has these, though. RE reasons for adventure: The last one you list - society doesn't care about this problem and the PCs do - leads to some great setting structures. Have you looked at [*Moonlight on Roseville Beach*](#) yet, which really emphasizes this?

Patrick Riley: Running *Amber Diceless* is a master class in GMing, in part because as you said there's no randomizer to share the cognitive load, but also because the PCs are SO capable and the mechanism of the

Trumps makes inter-PC communication as easy as the cell-phone age, but also for transport, and the PCs can be on different timescales. It can be unforgiving but once you hit the groove it's remarkably easy... as long as you have players who are equally invested. I ran the hell out of it for about 4 years and haven't touched it since.

Your opinions on *BESM*, *Fate* and *Fudge* all mirror my own; obviously I'd run *V&V* over *M&M* or *Champions* because of my aversions to point systems - like you I enjoy building *Champions* characters while knowing that I suck at it. Nothing like building something you think is a combat central character and having long time HERO players call her a failure for lacking critical optimizations.

Re Dice: I've never seen the 'pick the better d10' option before; the flip flop I first saw as the rules idea for the X-Man Longshot in the Marvel-Phile and have always loved it for its simplicity and effectiveness. When I'm playing with percents I'll borrow from Top Secret/SI where the 1s digit equals randomization and the 10's digit equals skill. So their combat system had the 10's digit determine the damage bonus while the 1's digit was hit location (you can make a called shot at 1/2 skill (then add modifiers) to set the hit location. Of course the game then has criticals on any doubles, and 'lucky breaks' on rolls of 01-04 (and insanely good lucky breaks on 00 because 00 is zero in TS/SI) so there's just too much going on, but I loved its skill v. random distinction.

John Redden: I recently read T'saikovsky's *And Put Away Childish Things* and found it well written but nihilistic; I expect *Alien Clay* might be the same.

Heath Row: I always worry when people say I'm an inspiration. I am taking a look at *Super City* because while I'm highly unlikely to use it the price point of \$1 is good! I do love me some random tables (V&V has a random event generator to kickstart ideas) so this is very helpful. Re Lodoss: I came across the compiled initial Lodoss War articles a couple years back and they are fascinating. Re Art: While I find the current WotC art style tedious I admit to being susceptible to the nostalgia factor of games harkening back to the 1970's and 80's form factors/designs. Eh, I'm old. I also find contemporary rulebook design too damn busy and art heavy - they aren't F'ing coffee table books! - but I see more complaints than I expected about the comparatively low art, high text design of *Draw Steel* so I am out of touch.

re Dungeon Crawler Carl: back in college I had a class in Genre Fiction where Professor Roberts (may his memory be a blessing) discussed how genre fiction can be incredibly compelling without being great, with the example of his reading one of the later Tarzan books, realizing it was drek, and promising that he would stop

at the end of this chapter. The end of the chapter was "And then the gorilla's hands closed around his neck..." and Roberts went "Goddammit!"... and turned the page. Dinniman, while many steps above Burroughs as a writer, has that same compulsive effect. The characters keep getting deeper and the world more complex by revealing authentically broader pictures of what is going on rather than complexity for complexity's sake. I don't think it's for everyone, but it's got magic.

Avram Grumer: so that's what CAPTCHA stands for! Re TTR: The library has the NYC edition, which we may try before the kiddo gets home again, but I know we will have the game back in the house for when shes home for Indigenous People's Day's 4 day weekend.

Dylan Capel re Electrum Archive et al: these sound like things I've been wanting to do with Gamma World for some time. I adore your knight questing for the best feasts. Sounds like something my own knight would have done back in the day. Your comments on layout have me thinking (which I hate to do) about the utility of my images. I'm pretty sure I'm going to stick to two-column just out of sheer stubbornness while admitting that you are correct that no one is printing these out.

Jim Eckman: legit LOL at the *Heinlein vs Norton* plots. RE *Traveller* PCs: to be scrupulously fair, some of them are as young as 22, ad in the Imperium 6 tours of duty is the new 30!

Attronarch: Aaaah, the joys of Open Doors checks!

Myles Corcoran re school full-ness: indeed, every time you walk around college students slop over the brim and splatter everywhere. The Yin/ Yang fish are feeling *Last Airbendery*. Steal from the best! And how many XP for looting the temple?! Re your name: Listen Milles Corky, if you're going to promise no *Mausritter* write up there better be no *Mausritter* write up! REYCT Attonarch: This was the moment I realized I had been misreading it.

RE Dysons: was deeply grateful to Mr. Logos posting all that for free; the kids barely made it out of the opening cave but knowing what awaits from the jump made the summer easier to handle. As for the random gods, it's my preferred method these days. Real world pantheons are seldom as clean as gamers would like, so having random elements come together and seeing which ones popped was inspiring. In my regular game the PCs spent a year as holy warriors for the great tree Ord (Domains: hearth and soldiers; symbol: a tree) that due to it providing shelter and weapons for the refugees entering the harbor where it stood has become a genus loci for the city the PCs have adopted. Re Apple pie for breakfast? Add some cheddar cheese and you're on!

Pum: I've been enjoying the OSR games return to XP for treasure not fights; the players go a long way to avoid fights where they won't overwhelm their foes, whereas when I run more modern games the fight is the reward.

Mitch Hyde: Being part of the generation of players who went from *B/X* to a *B/X/1e Hybrid* to *AD&D 1E* fully about the time of *Dragonlance* that I never played *1E* as the designers intended, and at the end I knew it. That's a reason I find the OSR movement so fascinating. That being said, there are reasons why my current games in that style are in *B/X* or *Knave*; like Myles I'm too old to try to re-install something as complex as *1E* in my brain. I did read an interesting blog post on the [Queen of the Demonweb Pits](#) pointing out that while not GREAT, it's not broken: it's not the capstone of the Giant/Drow modules, it's what happens to you if you fuck up and get greedy after their endgame. That understanding requires deeply reading the modules and grasping how play was meant to be set up: these story elements aren't there as things you have to do, they are a trap you are supposed to avoid... even though you likely won't. That is a million miles away from standard story game adventure design.

Patrick Zoch: RE cribbage - your wife is correct and you are wrong for not enjoying this pinnacle of card games. Thank you for the extensive games review; I agree with your wife on the SK TTR set, as that looks like unnecessary complexity.

Mark Nemeth re Dullstrand: Is there a lot of Greyhawk specific content in this? Re moral dilemma: I appreciated the cold honesty of the situation with the childbirth. There wasn't a 'right' answer which also meant that there wasn't a 'wrong' one... There are simply decisions. Re Daggerheart: I've definitely had campaigns where some sessions are designed around a single PC, especially if we are doing genre simulations like Star Trek or comic books, but I don't know that I'd build the whole system around it like this. And yes, I've long stated that Critical Role can play the way it does because (for example) in the one episode I saw live 4 of the players did pretty much nothing... but they were still on stage getting paid. RE Brand: I really should track down the notes my daughter took as I was reading the Amber Cycle to her, just to confirm my memories of her never quite falling for Brand's line of patter.

Joshua Kronengold: I find it interesting that your list of broken behaviors for the perverse incentive of enemy loot use is called "OSR Play". Seriously, my knave kids would think it weird if the villains ignored the magic they had lying around. But this doesn't surprise me: 25 years on and we are still at opposite sides of D&D design! 😊

Everyone else RAEBNC

[Denizens of the Library pg. 7](#)

Reviews to Fill Space:

Three Bags Full by Leonie Swann is a murder mystery where the detectives are sheep. Apparently, there is a movie coming. It's a cute and philosophical mystery. There is also a sequel, *Big Bad Wool*, which I haven't read.

Murder Times Three by Rex Stout are the last three Nero Wolfe stories, published after his death. Got a pile of 'em from the library book sale and while they are classics, I am lukewarm on these, and much prefer Stephen Spotswood's gender swapped take on the characters in the Parker and Pentecost novels. I guess I just don't have time for misanthropes these days (I also started put put down *Gold by Gemini*, a Lovejoy novel, because I couldn't stand him). Stout's short stories are better for me than his novels; I have 3 more from that haul, and they do make good train fodder, being proper pocket books.

Atomic Robo volumes 12-14: The Specter of Tomorrow, The Dawn of a New Age, and The Vengeful Dead by Brian Clevinger and Scott Wegener: I have been a fan of Atomic Robo since the beginning, and after a decade it continues to hum along nicely. The "New Age" being discussed here is Robo and Tesladyne relocating to the White Sands testing base and rebuilding in the shadow of the very strict homeowners' association with Richard Branson and Elon Musk; a gag that was funnier in 2016.

The Murderbot Diaries Vol 1 and 2 by Martha Wells, which I picked up because of the buzz around the TV show and found them fun with an engaging voice. I'm always amazed by what makes the jump to the screen. These are fine, but I suppose I should watch the adaptations to really understand what the buzz is about.

Peter S Beagle's *I'm Afraid You've Got Dragons* is very Peter S Beagle. That will work for you or it won't. I happen to like Beagle being Beagle so I enjoyed it.

Someone You Can Build a Nest In by John Wiswell should have been a novella. Interesting idea that I shan't spoil that was dragged out much too long with too many "twists" to hit the core metaphor home with a hammer.

Quinns Quest: This is an RPG review series on YouTube where Quinns guarantees that he will run a 10-14 session campaign before reviewing them; this gives you a nicely detailed sense of how the game plays rather than how it reads. He's also doing an actual play podcast *Play to Find Out* where he takes "hoary old games" that kids these days have only heard about (*Jorune*, *Toon*, and *Nobilis* so far) and runs them to see if they deserve their unplayable reputations (spoiler, they do not). He has such positive energy it's a joy to watch. Highly recommended.

Goodnight The Eye, wherever you are.

The Seedling

#52 Even a dog can shake hands

I'm not running up against the real deadline this time, but I am finishing up my zine late at night before departing for a two-week vacation to Eastern Europe, from which I will return about the time this issue of *EC&A* comes out. Since last issue, I've made a trip to Kansas and Oklahoma to visit one of Molly's friends and attend a wedding. I've also reconnected, in person, with two of my cousins (one maternal, one paternal), neither of whom I'd seen in over 27 years. Though I don't think they ever met each other, they were the two main people who got me into hobby gaming long, long ago. It was great to see them both again, and I even got to play a couple of games with one of them.

Some Hard Choices

The Eastlands Campaign | Session 5

Setting: Eastlands (email me if you want a setting guide)

GM: Mark Nemeth

Game System: D&D 5E

Player	Character	Class
Sebastian Luiz	Yanic	barbarian
James Schnedar	Karn Thorn	warlock
Joe Ring	Shadden Tuck	cleric
Polo Schnedar	Grubor Hawkstorm	sorcerer

Prominent NPCs

Ivora	Chaplain of Norvald
Haroot	Steward of Norvald
Rogloth	A local painter, recently murdered
Mutani	Adult daughter of Rogloth
Elia	Veiled woman disfigured by an acid attack
Wudron	Elia's attacker
Noltrin	Abbot of Pineshadow Abbey
Twailiox	Mysterious stranger/criminal/mercenary

Recap

The party has returned from escorting a midwife to attend the childbirth of a woman, Dozira, and her partner, Bloonar, both of whom were exiles forbidden to enter civilized lands. Following a kobold ambush on the way to Dozira's residence, the party arrived to find her in poor health, owing to chronic exposure to a poison that she had been manufacturing. She was unlikely to survive childbirth, and Shadden married her and Bloonar before the baby was born. As expected, Dozira died during childbirth. Bloonar had neither a means of feeding the new baby girl, Nela, nor any aptitude for fatherhood. Over his objections, the party took Nela and arranged for her adoption by a couple in Norvald with whom they were slightly acquainted.

In an unrelated incident, Yanic assisted a different party in apprehending a local petty criminal, Alfinno, who had stolen the reliquary from the chapel in Norvald.

The party's upcoming mission was to deliver a letter to from Elia, a heavily veiled woman from Stolt, who had long ago been disfigured by acid thrown by a jilted lover, Wudron, who was subsequently exiled for this crime and had been rumored to be living in the somewhere far to the west of Norvald. Elia handed the party a sealed letter, which she said contained a message of forgiveness to Wudron; she requested that the party report on his location and wellbeing.

Session 5

A couple of days before the party was supposed to leave on its search for Wudron, Shadden was relaxing in his room above the chapel, expecting the imminent arrival of his friends. There was a knock at his door; as soon as he unlatched it, it was kicked in by a hard-bitten man with a bandage over one eye and a drawn sword



Shadden has an unwelcome visitor. (Illustration created with Reve)

who demanded that Shadden hand over a valuable painting by an Old Empire artist name Bernat. Shadden didn't have such a painting, nor had he even heard of Bernat. He figured, however, that this might have something to do with the recent murder of Roglith, a local artist who had inexplicably painted a portrait of Shadden, though the two of them hadn't been acquainted [sessions 2 & 4]. After a short argument, fighting broke out, and the assailant proved a dangerous adversary.

Karn arrived and joined the fight, followed by Yanic, then, somewhat later, by Grubor. The attacker had rendered Shadden unconscious, and he then tried to flee after Karn, though magical means, had convinced him to hand over his sword. However, the parting blows of the party had him senseless on the floor before he reached the stairwell. The chaplain, Ivora, arrived soon afterward, healing Shadden and, over the party's mild objections, keeping the assailant from bleeding to death. They all decided to revive the man for questioning, which was assisted by Karn's mind-affecting magic. The assailant, whose name was Twailox, blurted out that he had been hired by Aglida—a wealthy woman who had an estate in the hills between Stolt and Porua and who had a reputation for reclusiveness and ruthlessness—to recover a painting called *The Shepherdess*, which had been stolen from her. He claimed to have reason to believe that Roglith had stolen the painting, and also to have learned from Mutani that the painting had been hidden by Roglith in Shadden's lodgings, so the mysterious portrait of Shadden was a steganographic instruction to Mutani on where to find the painting if anything happened to Roglith. At this point, Shadden recalled that his room had once been apparently searched, though he hadn't notice anything missing.

The village steward arrived to take Twailox into custody for later trial. The party then searched Shadden's room, not finding any unexpected items but observing a loose panel in the ceiling that could have been used to hide a painting. The next day, they went back to Roglith's house, which they found thoroughly and professionally searched. There were signs that someone, whom they presumed to be Mutani, had been held captive and perhaps later released. One other usual thing they noted was the presence of several large cheese wheels in the pantry.

With no further clues regarding the painting, the party planned to depart on their mission to deliver the letter to Wudron. During idle conversation at the end of the preceding incident, Ivora had inquired about what Shadden and his friends were up to next. Upon hearing about Wudron, she said that he had been a monk at Pineshadow Abbey about four years previous, when she had last visited. Pineshadow Abbey was near where the party had planned to search for Wudron. Recent rumors about town had suggested that Pineshadow Abbey was a front for devil worshipers. On the basis of her own experience there, Ivora found the rumors unlikely to be true, though the place often took in former miscreants and outcasts who sought to repent from their former ways.

The party decided to head straight through the forest to Pineshadow Abbey, which was faster than traveling along the Drundrin River but had greater hazard. The first five days were uneventful, but on the penultimate day of travel, they sighted a strange bird in the air far ahead; it looked like a giant eagle but also looked somehow wrong and unsettling. Continuing on, directly in their path, they saw a stand of trees that were both extremely tall and distressed in appearance. Soon they began to see large blobs of caustic bird dung, and they observed a massive bird nest atop one of the tall trees, about 80 feet up. From the ground near the nest, they saw tailfeathers of a huge bird, eagle-like but rotten in appearance.

Yanic began climbing a tree adjacent to the nest, then the others followed. As he neared the top, he heard the flapping of enormous wings and saw two of the foul eagles approaching through the air.



The unwholesome eagles approach. (Illustration created with Reave)

One alighted on a branch nearby, while the other gained altitude. Yanic closed to swing his axe at the eagle on the branch, and the one in the air released a blob of dung that would have knocked Grubor off the tree if he hadn't been roped to it. Karn joined Yanic, and they made quick work of the first eagle. A third eagle soon joined the combat, and the remaining two eagles stayed in the air, dropping their caustic dung at the party. However, some well-aimed bowshots and spells eventually took care of them. The eagles' nest contained a mound of rotting debris but held one valuable item: a finely crafted greataxe. The party took the axe and climbed down, then continued onward.

In early afternoon of the following day, they reached Pineshadow Abbey, which lay in a secluded valley. Approaching cautiously, they noted nothing other than ordinary activities on the grounds. They knocked on the front door, which was answered by the abbot himself, Noltrin, who asked their business, as well as how their travel had been. The party described slaying the foul eagles, which pleased Noltrin, who stated that they had been in the area since spring and had become quite a menace. When the party said they had a letter for Wudron, Noltrin stated that Wudron was working in the apiary and invited them inside first, bringing them to the refectory, where a keg of locally made ale was already tapped. After initially demurring, the party accepted the ale and found it to be excellent. Noltrin then escorted the party to the apiary, where Wudron—now early middle-aged and prematurely white-haired—was repairing a hive.

Grubor explained the party's purpose and handed Wudron the letter from Elia. Wudron looked shocked and expressed his remorse, which he claimed to be ever-present. He accepted the letter with trepidation and read it quickly, after which he appeared relieved and slightly confused. Grubor tried to engage Wudron in conversation, but all he revealed about the letter was that, while it



Pineshadow Abbey. (Illustration created with Reave)



Wudron works in the apiary. (Illustration created with Reve)

expressed forgiveness, it was quite short, considering the amount of trouble Elia had taken to have it delivered. Grubor asked if Wudron wanted the party to take his reply to Elia, and he said that he would write something later that night.

The abbey's dinner hour was a little before sunset, which was quite late, as it was then only a few days until the summer solstice. In the meantime, the party was at liberty to roam the abbey. Grubor and Shadden each talked to a monk they had found alone, gently probing for any hint of devil worship. Everyone they talked to told a similar story, with minor variations. Supposedly, a woman named Yarana had arrived last autumn from the Old Empire, seeking to join the abbey after repudiating her former interest in demons and devils. She did, however, bring some books on the subject that were added to the abbey's library, as the monks valued preservation of the written word, even if it was at variance with their own beliefs. One of the younger monks, named Archlo, had taken an unhealthy interest in the books over the winter and had fled the abbey in early spring. Later, he was once seen to the southeast, near the Drundrin River.

The party went to the library, which Noltrin had shown them earlier, but the books were largely unmarked and either shelved at random or organized in a system that the party couldn't make head or tail of. At length, the librarian entered and offered assistance. Grubor explained that they were looking for the books Yarana had brought. The librarian was taken aback and said she'd have to speak to the abbot first. She left, then returned with Noltrin, who granted permission. The party was offered three books, two in Gravonian and one in Ayuntic [*both of which are languages of the Old Empire*]. No one could read Gravonian, but Karn spoke Ayuntic. After perusing the book, he found that it contained an introductory section arguing that the eventual summoning of demons and devils to the world was inevitable, so it was better to be the one doing the summoning. This was followed by information on how such summonings might be conducted, which struck Karn as questionable in its accuracy. The books were returned to the librarian. After dinner which consisted of plain, wholesome fare and the first summer fruits, the party retired for the evening. In the middle of the night, however, Karn arose and skulked through the abbey. The only thing amiss was one of the monks in the refectory, filching a mug of ale and a loaf of bread. After promising secrecy, he joined her for a drink, and she told much the same story the party had already heard about poor young Archlo.

The group departed after breakfast the next morning, bearing a letter from Wudron to Elia. They decided to return along the Drundrin River. On the second day, they encountered a glade that had been extensively trodden by hoofprints resembling a bull's, which formed a maze-like pattern. They were unable to follow the prints elsewhere, as the glade was surrounded by rocky ground.

Later that day, they came upon a decomposed human body wearing a robe similar to the ones used at Pineshadow Abbey. It was too decomposed to tell for sure, but nothing was inconsistent with the possibility of it being Archlo's body. A little farther along, saw an island in the river near the north bank, in which a path had been cut through the thick underbrush. Crossing the shallow side channel, they followed the cut path until it reached a stone stairway descending in to what appeared to be an ancient underground ruin. There were many hoofprints of wild hogs throughout the area.

They entered the ruin and immediately encountered several aggressive wild boars, along with a gigantic specimen of their kind. After prevailing in combat, they found a few more uninhabited rooms, one of which held a pile of blankets. Opening the door to the final chamber, they were quite surprised to find a devilish-looking entity there, along with a boar that it had apparently been tormenting. After preparing for a tough fight, they were relieved that the devil—for such it was—was less formidable in combat than they had expected. When it was slain, its substance quickly dissipated into thin air.

The chamber appeared to be an ancient chapel, with an altar at the far end, on which were an ornate but half-burned candle, a large brass devil idol with garnet eyes, and a strange geometric form of dull metal, the surface of which seemed to squirm in a way that was both disturbing and fascinating. As they watched, it slowly grew faint and eventually vanished. Taking the remaining two items, they traveled back to Norvald without further encounters.



The party's first encounter with a devil. (Illustration created with Reve)

Observations & Commentary

My observation and commentary on these sessions appears below.

Another Experiment

After my satisfaction with session 4's unorthodox plotline, I tried another experiment this time. I asked Joe to show up about ten minutes early and began the fight between Shadden and Twailiox before anyone else had joined Fantasy Grounds. The other characters then joined in as their players arrived. This isn't something I'd do all the time, but I think it was fun as a novelty. No one complained to me about it, at least.

Exposition, Yet Again

I've been trying to cut back on the exposition in the Eastlands writeups, but you wouldn't know it from session 5. I've realized that one of my creative tendencies, both in RPGs and in fiction, is establishing situations that can be properly understood only with a lot of background information. In session 5, the gameplay wasn't all that slow, even though we got through more content than I'd expected. It was a little longer session than usual, but we exceeded our scheduled time by less than half an hour. (The players decided

to finish the final encounter, even if it meant running a little late.) I'm still not sure whether my tendencies are a problem or not; I'm

trying to anchor most of the encounters in greater context, but sometimes I may overdo it.

Comments

On E&A #4 (part 1)

Brian Rogers

Your *D&D B/X* rules modifications were very interesting. All the thought put into it was impressive. If I understand correctly, it appears that you tend to use fixed, rather than random, damage for spells and weapons. What's the theory or preference behind this?

Mark A. Wilson

Best of luck with your job interviews.

Clark B. Timmins

I don't know how it occurred to you to turn postage stamps into monsters, but I love it. The artwork is great.

"Removing the orc...IMHO it was a stupid move." I heartily agree on that one. It seems like a questionable idea to conceptually invalidate most products your company published over the last 50 years.

Thanks for the explanatory link on *xandering*. Upon reflection, I've always used this technique to construct big, multi-session dungeons, but not necessarily for single-session adventures. It's a concept that I probably ought to devote more conscious thought to.

Roger BW

In my current and historical *D&D* campaigns, it was usually a lot easier to sell magic items than to buy them, as you suggest. In our own society, it's a lot easier to sell rare, valuable items than to buy them, too.

Patrick Riley

Regarding your comments about the *Amber* RPG, as someone who loves Zelazny's books, the RPG was fascinating as a work of literary criticism. I can't think of anything else quite like it in that respect.

I think drawing dungeons without graph paper, as you did in the case you described, is generally better, unless there's a good

reason the dungeon's constructors would have been quite precise. (So maybe use a grid for the dwarven king's halls, but not much else.) The more organic form of the gridless dungeons is more aesthetically appealing to me. Your maps looked good.

I have similar dissatisfaction with magical healing. It often seems to simply prolong combat. On the other hand, some players seem to really like healing others, and, even though my personal preference is toward the more lethal side, it can mitigate a PC's bad luck.

Heath Row

Back in 2006, I did a self-guided tour of Lake Geneva that was very similar to what you described, and it was great. I even got to see Tom Wham working in the public library and Gary Gyga slurping a soda on his porch. I hope you have a wonderful time.

Jim Eckman

Your "Robert Heinlein versus Andre Norton" section reminded me of Richard Hugo's "Krebs/Snopes" categorization of poets, which I described in greater detail a couple years ago in *A&E*. The basis for Hugo's classification was essentially between people who have access to comfortable society and are disenchanted with it, as opposed to people who perceive themselves as desiring but lacking such access.

Myles Corcoran

Aren't college students *always* ready to go clubbing at a moment's notice? I'm not sure I dressed for it, though. In fact, I had several kerfuffles with club employees who either wouldn't let me in because I was wearing shorts or hassled me to tuck my shirt in. On the other hand, my friends and I later began frequenting a working-class bar where I suspect our presence may have grated on some of the regulars.

One great blemish in the popular mind of America, and the prolific parent of an innumerable brood of evils, is Universal Distrust.

—*Charles Dickens*

Cowman Baloney Face

THE NEVERENDING SAGA

NOW IT CAN BE TOLD!

A SQUALLID TALE OF GAMING, MATH, PETTY FEUDS
AND LIMITLESS FAFFING ABOUT BY MATT STEVENS
8 HILLSIDE AVENUE, GOLDENS BRIDGE, NY 10526
KENT.ALLARD.JR@GMAIL.COM
(ARTWORK IN THIS ISSUE BY BILL FITZGERALD)



Hello citizens! Been a long time since I've spoken to many of you. I felt a twinge of regret when I heard of A&E's passing, so when I downloaded E&A and saw familiar names, I decided to slap together a zine.

The zine name? Cowman Baloney Face was invented in the early 80s by my middle-school friend Bill Fitzgerald, who drew his image (shown upper right) on my original D&D *Blackmoor* supplement. He further scribbled

He is Blackmoor's leading god and encyclopedia salesman. He created aquatic potato chips, nose rippers and black cows. He is very shy to other gods but he knows he could whip their asses. He has his own spells which are not magic and receive no saving throws by monster or god: Belch, Summon Cows, Rot Face, Break Ass, Rip Eyes, Decapitate, Dismiss Face. He has a sword of nose ripping

Stats followed but I think you get the idea. Entries and images for Nose Rippers, Cow Lasers, Pants of Devouring and others came later. His notes may have reduced the book's resale value but I'm glad I have them. Sadly I have no idea what happened to Bill, as his name is virtually un-Googleable and no one kept in touch.

TWENTY-THREE YEARS OF SOLITUDE

For those who don't know me, I grew up in the Boston area and discovered D&D at 13 in 1980. I made my first A&E contribution way back in (gosh!) A&E #103, made a few others, then went off to college and forgot about A&E and RPGs for a while.

I moved to NYC for grad school, where I picked up RPGs and A&E again. I also met the Cthulhupunk crowd of Lisa, Josh and Avram. I played with them, got my Ph.D. and made my last A&E zine in October 2002. Since then...

- I worked on redistricting jobs. (If you aren't from the US and don't know what those are, don't worry, you're better off.)
- I taught classes, mostly for NYU. Still doing so, teaching is fun.
- Gaming wise I drifted out of the Cthulhupunk orbit and played D&D with folks in their 20s and 30s. I had fun but no one got my Nixon jokes. (When I saw a demon with a Nixon face I went, "I'm for the demon majority, not you bums, blowing up the underdark!" Blank stares.)
- More or less finished my vintage (pre-1980) TTRPG collection. Still looking for *Simian Conquest* but that alone doesn't justify constant eBay browsing.

- Indulged in a bit of videogaming, which I'd avoided for a surprisingly long time. Entrapped by *World of Warcraft* and other MMOs, then moved onto single-player, becoming an early enthusiast for *Minecraft* before it was a kid's game.
- I wrote two editions of the pulp RPG *Two-Fisted Tales*. First one got a lot of buzz, second none at all, which depressed me, but shouldn't have surprised me.
- Oh yeah: I married my wife Kimberly. We're still together, fifteen years later, living in the burbs with three cats and a dog.

Overall life's pretty good but I miss the geek life.

MY TROUBLE WITH STORYTELLING GAMES

I was having fun with the Cthulhupunk crowd when I drifted away. Why did I leave? There was no ill feeling, far as I remember. Part of my motivation was I hadn't played D&D since the 1980s, third edition had come out, and I wanted to expand my friends circle.

A bigger reason, though, and one relevant to this zine, was the Cthulhupunkers were experimenting with storytelling games, like *My Life with Master* and *Prime Time Adventures*, and they weren't my bag. I *wanted* to appreciate them. I remember former A&E James Wallis saying traditional RPGs had grown boring and stale, and he was right. The new games were innovative, and rejecting them meant becoming a cranky old gronard. I had my reasons, though.

First, I had trouble with the cliched question "What's my motivation?" I felt I wasn't playing a character, I was playing a character AND a member of the writer's room, being asked not only for my toon's motivation, but what would make for a "good story." (This was explicit in *Prime Time Adventures*, of course, but implicit in many others as well.)

Second, because the rules were intended more to enforce story conventions than to simulate any kind of "realism," they were baking cliché directly into the narrative, foregoing possibilities for innovation and surprise. Normally those could be provided by a Game Master, but the GMs role seemed diminished if not abandoned entirely.

Third, I saw a dynamic that's familiar in cooperative board games: Some players tell everyone what to do, and others sullenly follow. And yes, that can happen in conventional RPGs, too, but it's mitigated when every player has their own autonomous character. Storytelling games blur those roles because you don't have your own space.

These feelings were reinforced, more recently, when I looked through *Fiasco*. Now I **like** the heist-gone-wrong genre, so *Fiasco* should've been a treat. But there's an immediate disconnect between me and my character: The heist is *supposed* to fail disastrously; it's baked into the game's premise; I'm supposed to direct the story to that inevitable conclusion; but if the PC believed that they *wouldn't go on the heist*. Traditional RPGs wouldn't have this problem.

Now I would be happy to hear that I'm wrong! I don't like banishing a whole new medium from my repertoire, keeping me from fun activities with friends, and even from writing opportunities. I can't shake my misgivings, though.

COMPLEXITY AND FALSE BINARIES

I joined a few Facebook RPG groups, and some of them are surprisingly good. I have to remind myself that I've been talking about RPGs a loooooooooooooong time, though. Topics that may sound fresh and exciting to newbies have been DONE.TO.DEATH in other forums, and I have to keep the groaning to myself.

One inevitable topic is Simplicity v. Complexity. Looking back from the 1980s I'd say the forces of simplicity have won: No one would force a *Universe*, an *Aftermath*, or a *Chivalry & Sorcery* on the public today. Nor should they! Let's be honest, those games were *badly designed*. Their rules easily could have been streamlined and simplified, and whatever virtues they had -- in authenticity, detail, or scope -- could have been preserved with fewer burdens on their players.



No, when players talk about “complex TTRPGs” today, they mean Pathfinder and D&D 5E, versus storygames and the OSR. Now combat *is* slower in the former than I like; if you want to see my preference see *Two-Fisted Tales* from PIGames.com. (Buy now! Beat the rush!) But I wouldn't say they're badly designed, not by a long stalk. They have greater ambition: They want to give the DM guidance for almost every conceivable (combat) situation, and if that means hundreds of pages of rules, well... so be it.

Minimalist games, by contrast, will tell the GM to roll 2D6, add a modifier or two, and ... guess. I have no doubt that (sometimes) it's the right approach, better than frantically flipping through rulebooks in front of bored players. But I also feel that these minimalist games are kind of cheating. I want to scream, *You're the game designer! I don't need you to tell me to make up shit! Do your fucking job!!!!* I would rather have rules I can ignore than no guidance at all.

The fact is “simple” and “complex” are cruder categories than they appear at first. “Complexity” is multi-dimensional: How many steps are involved? How much math do you do on the fly? (Or in chargen?) How standardized are the systems? How much do you have to remember? How comprehensive is the rulebook? Does rule complexity vary across fields? How much of the complexity is optional?

The answers tell us how burdensome the “complexity” really is. I don't care if spaceship repair is complicated if it's easy to throw a punch or fire a gun: It can be looked up outside of combat, and doesn't interrupt the action. Game reviews that ignore such distinctions are, IMO, doing their readers a disservice.

COMMENTS ON E&A #1

May I say I'm happy to see all of you here, both newbies and folks from the old days. I find comments harder than essays, though, and if I responded to everyone I'd never meet the deadline. So here are a few quick reactions:

George Phillies

You played *Tactics II* in 1958, *Space War* in 1963, AND D&D in 1974?! Wow. So you were there at the creation of **three** great gaming mediums. Impressive.

Patrick Zoch

Interesting NPC traits. I had NPC “Tag” tables in *Two-Fisted Tales*. They focused more on outward physical signs -- “plays with toys,” “thick accent,” “baby faced” -- but it was a pulp game so that made sense.

Patrick Riley

Sympathies for your job loss. Damn. Capitalism sucks. :(

Brian Misiaszek

It’s great -- if a bit humbling! -- to see Lauren grow up. I’ve been hearing about her, and seeing photos of her, since she was a baby.

Loved the Pulp Heroes vs. Fascism summaries. Hopefully there were few *pro*-fascist pulps, like there were pro-Klan stories in that infamous *Black Mask* issue. (Maybe Arthur Empey’s Terrence X. O’Leary stories?)

COMMENTS ON E&A #2**Brian Rodgers**

Very much enjoyed The Eye. The Golden Age was like the Cambrian Explosion of comic books. Unsophisticated but with shocking variety.

Pedro Panhoca da Silva

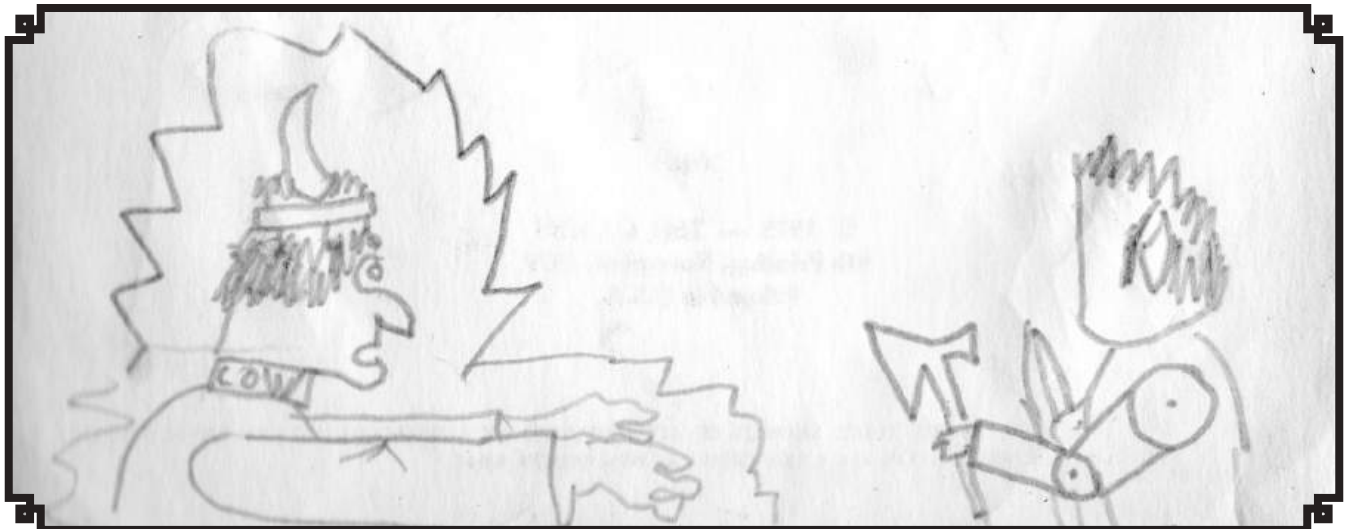
Loved the Brazilian gamebooks. I would love to see them in English someday, though I suspect the Portuguese puns might not translate well.

Mark Wilson

Glad you were happy with the Murder Mystery One-Shot, even though it sounds like the kind of storygame experience I dislike (see essay above). Interesting nonetheless!

Brian Misiaszek

Fascinating Cuban history you have there. This is why I left conventional 1930s gaming “travel logs” -- the stuff you’d see in *GURPS Cliffhangers*, for example -- out of *Two-Fisted Tales*: Those short entries couldn’t possibly do each country’s rich history justice.



Firedrake's Hoard

Number 3: 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.



Recent Games

Neutral Currents: This is the other continuation campaign from my magical WWII game of a few years back (mentioned last time). We're the Imperial Airways crew of an Empire flying-boat, travelling to various neutral countries on intelligence-related business; I play Jacky (don't call her Jacqueline) Bishop, a 'tween-wars air racer¹ who's ended up piloting the boat. At the moment we're conveying the Duke and Duchess of Windsor (yes, the abdicated King Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson) to his new post as Governor of the Bahamas; we are impaired by our passengers, the generally lackadaisical nature of affairs on (currently) the African coast, our own incompetence, and occasionally even enemy action. We shall not speak of the chicken-slaughtering incident.

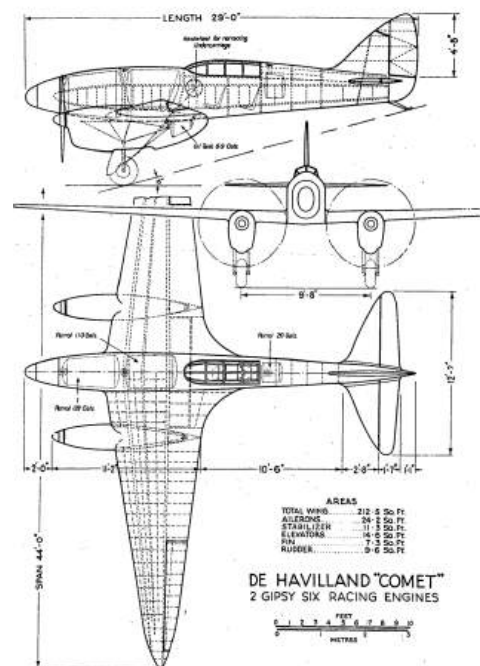
"Jacky's land-side skills mostly consist of driving unreasonably fast and starting fights."

"We're going to have to use the Duke as a blunt instrument to start opening doors."

The Day After Ragnarok: with the group that had been playing *Cold War Pulp*. In the dying days of the Second World War, Nazi magicians summoned the world serpent, but

¹in this slightly alternate history she was the pilot of G-ACSR *Lilith's Apple* in the [MacRobertson Air Race](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MacRobertson_Air_Race) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MacRobertson_Air_Race), though she didn't place any better than historically.

Truman sent a B-29 with an atomic bomb... now a scaly curtain has descended across Europe, Britain is mostly gone (but the Empire is run from Australia), barbarians roam the poisoned wastelands of the USA... this is a Ken Hite setting designed for pulp adventure. Starting from the idea of a biologist who was in the right place to learn about the new serpent-derived "ophitech", I seem to have generated Steve Irwin about fifty years early. Or rather, since I've never seen the original *Crocodile Hunter*, the [Irregular Webcomic](https://irregularwebcomic.net/cast/steveandterry.html) (<https://irregularwebcomic.net/cast/steveandterry.html>) version



NACA Aircraft Circular (1941)

of Steve. Crikey, these tentacles are a bit stropky.

So far I have wrestled a giant goanna, not entirely successfully.

Cried the Lady: We've been doing lots of research, and we've found some suggestion that a certain shipwreck may have been an actual murder by magic rather than, as we'd thought, a magical side effect. Still tracking down what we can actually *do* about it all...

On Minigames

I started role-playing in the 1980s, and given the state of hobby board- and wargames of the era that meant I got into some of them too, like *Car Wars* and *BattleTech*, because there wasn't a hard boundary between the things.

In those days before widespread Internet access, I had lots of time when I wanted to do game-like things, but didn't have access to other gamers. And I scratched that itch with what I'd now call minigames: designing a car or 'mech for the combat games, designing a new spaceship for *Traveller*, putting together a subsector, and so on. These were not, I think, ever processes that were really meant to happen at the table; if we were playing a *Car Wars* arena game, we'd agree on building constraints for the next match, everyone would go away for a few days with their building tools, and we'd bring back our designs to try them by fire. And in the RPG space similarly, they were often regarded as part of the GM's preparation process.

Some games still have this sort of thing, but most of them don't. And I think that is because we *do* now have the Internet: if you want to get a "gamer" feeling, you can go onto a forum or other medium and talk about games. Chances are you can find someone who plays the specific

game you're playing and knows what you're talking about. It's not necessarily that we don't have the time for minigames, though there may be some of that too, but there are easier ways to satisfy most of the psychological itch they scratched.

I think the character generation in **GURPS** may fall into a similar hole: where *Traveller's* generation can be an enjoyable group activity (you roll the dice, get a disaster, and everyone laughs with you, as with the boardgame *The Quacks of Quedlinburg*), putting together a character for **GURPS** is essentially head-down, looking up details of traits. (In fact with relatively inexperienced players I've found it best to do it one on one: they talk about the sort of character they want to play and what they should be able to do, and I translate that into the rules' representation.) Looking at the original [designer's notes](https://medium.com/@SJGames/the-35th-anniversary-of-man-to-man-423d83995ee1) (https://medium.com/@SJGames/the-35th-anniversary-of-man-to-man-423d83995ee1) for *Man to Man* first published in *Space Gamer* #76, it's explicitly a design goal that it doesn't really matter how much time character generation takes, because you'll be doing it *rarely*, sticking with the same character for a long campaign² in a way that doesn't fit the modern trend for shorter and more varied campaigns.

I miss minigames. I don't want to *have* to do them, but I'm often a solitary sort of chap and I still want to get that *frisson* of RPGing without having either to talk with other people or actually to put some work into writing something. Also, and perhaps from nostalgia, I like the idea of a setting in which not only do I develop extensive background detail but also that detail is recorded in a standard format that

²and potentially even porting them from one campaign to another.

other players will use, so that I can share my creations with them and also borrow theirs. (This happened a lot with BattleMechs; I think some of us ended up enjoying the design game more than the combat game. I see that modern *BattleTech* is much more focused on using the standard models of 'mech, not to mention buying and painting miniatures, and while I hope the players enjoy it it isn't the same as the game I played.)

Of course these days you can play a full-on solo RPG. I have done very little in this space, perhaps because I perceive it as an unsatisfactory compromise between playing a normal RPG and writing a book I still have a copy of Paul Elliott's [Star Trader](https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/118337/star-trader) (https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/118337/star-trader) which is essentially a wrapper round the *Traveller* trade system with a set of random complication generators; it's apparently been superseded by his full-on SOLO system.

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

Surprisingly few, at least directly. It's not that I don't enjoy them; but most linear media (i.e. books, films, television, non-interactive forms with no branching points in the story) don't feel to me as though they're a good basis for a game. The *Morte d'Arthur* and other sources give us *Pendragon*; but the failure of Arthur's marriage, his lack of an heir, and his defeat at Camlann, are all *predestined*. In linear fiction you can go along with that. Some role-playing groups can go along with it. But to others, including me, it's *frustrating*: here are our PCs, people who explicitly solve problems (I regard the Arthurian knight as essentially the roving troubleshooter of his day), and these problems *are*

foreshadowed, but they have to pretend they don't see them or be happy with constant failure to resolve them. (Or you *can* allow them to be fixed, but at this point it's more inspired-by than an actually Arthurian game.)

Similarly with *The Lord of the Rings*: generations of publishers, especially Iron Crown Enterprises, have given us lots of gameable detail about the world, but the Big Story, the one thing everything else ties into, is the Ring Quest. If your PCs aren't doing that, what's the point of being in the world? If they are, again, they have to stay on the rails or end up making a completely separate continuity, and then all the background material is potentially invalidated because the events that made it happen that way have come out differently.

The fiction I find most useful, in fact, is *bad* fiction, and bad in particular ways. Good fiction that has a bunch of ideas ties them together: one element relies on another and everything ties into the main conceit. But bad fiction, especially fiction that copies elements from other and better media, will generally just set each one down on its own, which makes it easier to steal them again for one's own games without carrying along other chunks of the source material.

So *Firefly*³ has some barking mad astrophysics, but it's easy to steal the crew of war veterans from the losing side, and the hypercapitalist setting in which there is essentially no appeal to the authorities so you have to solve your own problems. I ran a *Firefly* game a few years ago using Genesys, and was aided by [the fan wiki](https://firefly.fandom.com/wiki/Main_Page) (https://firefly.fandom.com/wiki/Main_Page), because it contains essentially *every* piece of information that was ever published about the

³Not in my opinion all that bad, as these things go, but it's a useful example

various planets and people. It's not so much that the answer is in here, it's that if the answer isn't in here nobody ever said what the answer was so I'm free to invent it.

In a more vague and fuzzy way, all books feed my mindset. Much of the fantasy I've been reading lately is by T. Kingfisher, and one of her recurring themes is that while the gods may be great and powerful it's the humans who have to *do* stuff. Life is unfair, unless you fix it yourself. That will be in the back of my head next time I come up with a character, and it may well inform them.

We Also Heard From

Comments on EC&A number 4

Thanks to those of you who welcomed me. For those who didn't, the acid-sweating dice lice are being farmed in my Hidden Lair.

Brian Rogers: ah, the ending of a long campaign. My early days of RPGing tended to see campaigns peter out when the GM got bored or moved away, but I do like a comprehensive ending, even though I don't like to force more than is unavoidable. (It doesn't need to make the campaign world unplayable thereafter, but to me it should be the end of *this* story.)

GURPS makes a fast mover without super reflexes easy: either buy up Ground Move, or buy Enhanced Move which gives you higher top speed but not acceleration. On the one hand that means more things to juggle, but in cases like this you can at least pare down the specific effects you want. (Now I want to play someone with a supernatural power to use The City's public transport to get anywhere within moments. More for a modern magician than for a superhero, I think.)

RYCT Mark A. Wilson: I've enjoyed the *Mission: Impossible* TV series much more than the two (?) films I've seen. When the first film's closing music shifted Lalo Schiffrin's sublime 5/4 theme into a generically danceable 4/4... it felt entirely in keeping with what they'd done to the original concept of the show. I like the idea of the caper show with heroes who aren't criminals; I have plenty of generic action.

Mark A. Wilson: good fortune! I've been in one company bankruptcy where a client realised that if they simply didn't pay us for all the code we'd written for them, for a critical few weeks, we'd go bust and they wouldn't have to pay at all. Not fun.

re Lantern Bearers: this is a pattern that many of my campaigns tend to fall into, that the PCs are some sort of roving troubleshooter group, theoretically with official backing but often acting far from where official backing can help them.

Patrick Riley: About the time the *Amber* RPG was released, I went to a talk by Eric (at GenCon, still in Milwaukee in those days) which confirmed me in a similar opinion: he may run amazing games for other people, but this is not for me.

re *Savage Worlds* I think the problem of lack of flavour may be inevitable with a system that is both generic and light (so there's not much to it, and to some extent games start to feel basically like other games). While I don't love it for other reasons, I do like what *GUMSHOE* has done in terms of having a core set of mechanics that's not playable in itself, so while each game will have a completely new list of skills and powers, the basic "which dice do I roll when" can carry over from one campaign to another.

re Dice Corner, I think the origins of the bonus die in single-die systems like *D&D* become obvious when one considers the problem that, as you say, when one of the rolls is zero you can't just take the higher/lower every time. I do find it very significant that bonus dice (and flip-flops) give their biggest benefit when the initial odds are around 50%. Is this a goal of the designer? Should it be?

The most recent edition of *Mongoose Traveller* combines a traditional bonus/penalty modifier and this sort of advantage roll (roll 3d6, sum the higher two), and as far as I can tell everyone hates it. One or the other really is plenty.

I wonder whether some of the preference for this is players who have been taught basic arithmetic so badly that it makes them unhappy and its presence will actively put them off a game. Thus dice pools, of which advantage/disadvantage is just a specialised and limited form: nothing that feels like arithmetic is needed if you're taking three dice for the stat, two dice for the skill, rolling them all and counting the sixes. (I have genuinely met people who claim to prefer roll-high to roll-low systems because "subtraction is much harder than addition".)

I've proposed a system similar to yours for making the *Call of Cthulhu* 7th edition character sheets a bit less busy. One problem, though, is the optional but commonly used rule for spending Luck after the fact to modify a roll: you need to know that with your skill of 70 your Extreme threshold is 14, because then when you roll 16 you can decide whether to spend two points of Luck.

John Redden: RYCTM I did essentially nothing but Perl for about twenty years, but I've branched out a bit recently, and I try to

maintain a basic fluency in several languages; a lot of them have particular ways of doing things, like Perl solving most problems with hashes and regular expressions, and I find I write better code when I have the way other languages would do it in the back of my mind. Still writing a fair bit of Perl, gradually shifting to Rust; PostScript when I want to have fun. (And Typst is a programming language in itself — which any sufficiently complex markup system tends to become, but the designers baked it in from the start which makes life much easier.)

Blasted Heath Row: I start a lot of stuff, and then I tend to neglect it. Working on that.

RYCT Gabriel Roark on Blasted Heath and Infernal Wilson: as I'm sure others will inform you, Harold Wilson and Edward Heath were two British prime ministers of the 1960s-1970s.

RYCT Dylan Capel: I'm sure I've missed great systems because the marketing copy has put me off. But I won't ever play every system anyway.

Avram Grumer: "Right thoughts, right words, right angles." Love it!

I've noodled with *Troika* a little and my abiding impression is that the mechanics are really only there to keep the people who insist on mechanics happy. I think it's fair to characterise it as a "persuade the GM that your ability in X also applies to Y" game. But it sounds as though *Longshot City* is a lot less "anything can happen" than the early (pre-Gygax) D&D feel I get from baseline *Troika*.

(Though as with *GURPS Goblins* I think there's a trick to succeeding in a failure-heavy system: be funny, and when you really want to succeed at something, make it clear that success would be funnier than failure.)

RYCTM: indeed, I won't argue that Typst is the perfect tool for every user and every task. But it does fit a lot of what I'm doing at the moment.

RYCT Lisa: there's a specialised language called Simplified Technical English that's used for documenting some aircraft maintenance procedures, on the basis that whoever has to do them may be a competent mechanic but not idiomatically fluent in English. It tries to remove ambiguity; for example instead of "deactivate" you might write "stop", "disconnect" or "isolate" depending on the exact meaning, and there's a reference booklet which lays this all out. I sometimes feel that game rules, especially boardgame rules, would benefit from something similar.

Dylan Capel: One of the things that's always stuck me as odd about *Pendragon* is its tonal split. On the one hand, knights errant in the Malory tradition, dealing with monsters, wizards, and most dangerous of all women⁴; on the other, your manor is in Dead Horse Mire (every campaign seems to have one) and if you are merely Averagely wealthy you are probably never going to have a live heir. I still haven't worked out to my own satisfaction how to reconcile those.

Re Meta: I think in my mind I'm aiming for something that *could* be printed even if nobody's going to. This is after all being produced in PDF rather than ePub, which would probably be a better choice for a digital-only medium since it can be converted more readily into a variety of layouts and display formats. (It's less able to maintain arrangements of things through those changes, though, and

⁴In Stafford's pre-*Pendragon* boardgame *King Arthur's Knights* this is literally the ranking of the dangerous things you can encounter.

the tools to produce and manipulate it are much harder to use.)

RYCTM: I've used LaTeX, but quite apart from its fiddliness I think it suffers from its age (e.g. support for TrueType fonts, or Unicode characters, while possible are a lot more work than they could be). I mostly don't use services I can't host myself; there's too much risk of them going away, or being made worse, and I have a reasonable level of technical competence.

Jim Eckman: The way I see *Traveller* character generation, it's not so much end-of-career retirement (though it can be) as "this was the point when I got bored going back and forth on the utterly safe corporate freight run between Agricultural World and Industrial World, and decided to do my own thing instead". In other words, PCs are not the normal people of this setting.

RYCTM: yes, while the Typst web site mostly talks about their live web editor, I run it entirely locally (editing source files with emacs). They've just redesigned the web site, but details are [here](https://typst.app/open-source/#download) (<https://typst.app/open-source/#download>).

Michael Cule: I thought we might be talking about this on the podcast, and sure enough a few days before deadline we did, so I won't say much more here. Though I will note, as I have said to you before, that my experience is that many players will simply glaze over if asked to read more than about a page of background information before the game starts, rather than taking it on board organically during play.

I confess I've always found the world of Yrth (Banestorm) rather contrived⁵. We've got all these human cultures and their religions

⁵Which any fictional world is, of course, but it shouldn't feel like it.

showing up, but thanks to a great and powerful conspiracy, the tech base is clamped down to a fairly standard fantasy one. In other words, the idea of the fantasy setting (with strong borrowings from Norton's *Witch World* series, modern humans dropped into it and finding they can be great heroes) very obviously came before the rules of the world that allow it to happen, and one would expect those rules to produce a different result if the field were level. The Ministry of Serendipity, the organisation that suppresses the tech (and free-thinking in general), is such an obvious strangeness that it feels to me that campaigns in this world should be about fighting it... but one is expected just to get on with doing standard fantasy things.

Re IgTheme: *another* new edition of *Ars Magica*? I can't claim any great virtue here, I've never run it myself, but there's an awful lot of Stuff out there for it; does it really need a new edition?

Yes, I definitely think that games I run are likely to feel like "a Roger game" more than they do "a {World War II | 2300 | whatever} game".

RYCTM: I coined Extruded Fantasy Product myself, when I heard them talking about rotefant. (Though it was probably invented elsewhere too.)

RYCT Gabriel Roark: the trick is, then, what sorts of "super damage" go directly to the physical HP ignoring the luck? If you're restrained and the Big Villain shoves his glowing black sword through your chest, I don't care how many hit points of what sort you may have, we're in story territory.

Myles Corcoran: RYCTM and *Bayern*: once the voyage gets to the target area, there's a minigame in which you can build up science points from various sorts of observation, and of course some observations may produce side

effects. It's not terrifically detailed IMHO, but it's serviceable. (By coincidence, both my groups have ended up with one PC a dedicated scientist, the others more evenly split between sciences and space skills.)

RYCT Michael Cule: the Aslan appear in *Library Data A-M* (copyrighted "1980, 1981"). But certainly the first time I came across them a year or two later I assumed that Cherryh had been an influence.

RYCT Patrick Riley: I knew a long-time *RuneQuest* GM⁶ who referred to the use of a sequence of different weapons or other skills as "tick hunting". This was mostly so that he could punish it by bringing on the Hunting Tick, ten feet long and heavily armoured.

RYCT Brian Rogers: as late as WWII films you get the heroic lieutenant telling his men to take their "pep pills". Of course, your classic noir detective gets the same effect with bad booze.

Mitch Hyde: I'd certainly be interested to read your further thoughts on *Call of Cthulhu*. I think we're looking for quite different things in our games, though many of the goals are compatible. However, I would argue, after Ken Hite, that while meeting and surviving a monster is "horror", going out and looking for more monsters is "monster hunting", and these aren't quite the same genre; *pace* Sandy, I think the purest *horror* gaming version of *CoC* is a one-shot with a potentially high casualty rate (and not just at the end).

Patrick Zoch: ah, I remember a visit to a ginger plantation in Australia where they made the chocolate by coating a half-inch cube of ginger in a thin chocolate shell. No half-measures.

⁶alas, now deceased.

I've seen a few mentions of *Captain Flip* recently, and played a game on BGA. Nothing offensively wrong with it, but I'm honestly surprised it's garnered as much interest as it has, given how many games come out every month.

I rather enjoy *Rock Hard: 1977*; I see your point on the "candy", but given the theme I think it would have been unrealistic to leave it out. According to the designer Jackie Fox at Essen last year, "not everything on the hangout cards happened to me personally".

Mark Nemeth: RYCTM: I think the script coordinator is a phenomenon of the carefully-staged, heavily-edited, high-budget "actual play" like the stuff Critical Role and lately Chaosium have been putting out. I've tried listening to a few of these and I find them deeply unsatisfactory: they don't feel like a game.

I've tried Scribus but found it very hard to specify things like "this document should be in double column format, exact same layout on every page, except for the occasional page heading which covers the whole width of the page".

RYCT Gabriel Roark: you said "I did this so that the PC could have some adversaries they could attack without compunction" and that simply isn't a thing I want in my games any more. I'm glad the hobby has room for both of us, and that there are things we agree on too!

RYCT Lisa Padol: I'm quite fond of the approach in *Trail of Cthulhu* which explicitly asks the *players* to come up with reasons why their characters are putting health and sanity on the line to fight monsters. Not only are those reasons more convincing than ones the GM might come up with, but it encourages the players to buy in to the going out and doing stuff mindset,

Brian Christopher Misiaszek: Hope you've feeling a bit better now!

I'm always a little edgy about portraying insane people in games; popular culture tends to frame them as criminals much more than the victims they tend to be. But I may well be able to use some of these. Thanks!

RYCTM: I'd summarise *Cthulhu Eternal* as "never annoy an Australian"; going by my recollection, Dean Engelhardt was happily publishing various Australian-focused supplements for *Call of Cthulhu* when Chaosium suddenly changed their licencing structure so that you could either be a tiny part-time hobby publisher or a great big professional partner — nothing in between, where he was. (Also, nothing for editions before 7th could be sold at all any more.) So he took explicitly OGL components from *Legend* (the Mongoose Publishing not-*RuneQuest*) and *Delta Green* to assemble a fully free rule set, which you can either run as it stands or use as a base to build a more specialised game. It's also broadly compatible with pre-7th edition *Call of Cthulhu*. So you can freely publish an adventure for *CE* and if someone else wants to run it with their old *CoC* they can. Declaration of interest: I did the localisation for the World War I and World War II era books.

As for free software, I was working at a large ISP in the UK in 1998-1999, and when we switched entirely to free software, we were able to free up one of the five sysadmins, whose full-time job had become chasing down licence keys and renewals, to do something useful instead.

RYCT Jim Vassilakos: it's worth bearing in mind that the protracted process of reading a Tome does not, at least in classic *Call of Cthulhu*, cause an immediate screaming bout of

madness the way seeing a shoggoth does. It just nibbles away at your ability to cope, as you learn more about the fragility of the world of human experience than you wanted to know.

Lisa Padol: Re cat/dog cam, I've been in a two-node remote game (all but one of the players convened in one house, but the other was several hours' travel away and on call) in which the households' respective cats used the video link to stare and mew at each other.

Re convention one-shots: the combat opening also neatly establishes who the bad guys are (the ones shooting at us) and often what we need to do (get back the thing they just stole / find out where they're coming from and stop them doing it again / get ourselves back to civilisation after they wrecked our jeep/airship/starship).

Re Dracula: given how much the vampire tends to stand for the forces of aristocratic conservatism, a mild neophilia could reasonably be turned to explain why Dracula persists when other vampires are hunted down and destroyed.

Joshua Kronengold: RYCT Patrick Zoch: I remember in my *Rolemaster* days realising that a few crude swords could be much more valuable than the nominal treasure dropped by low-level monsters. But then, in the dungeon in my head, the PCs are usually going in with a specific mission goal (find the necromancer, rescue the prince) rather than just "kill them and take their stuff".

RYCT Lisa: my assumption when running RPGs at cons has generally been that I would run a thing I'd written, but I've heard of a few exceptions (and even played in one, a solid run of the *Call of Cthulhu* adventure "The Derelict"). I mostly don't do convention RPGs now, because most conventions will insist on jamming 3-4 games into one room, and it's

hard to build up an atmosphere when the next table is shouting "I hit him with my warhammer!".

RCYTM: obviously I won't say you're wrong about *GURPS*. Your criticisms are fair, and the circumstances that made a generic system a valuable thing may very well not exist any more (most of us aren't playing super complicated games, so when one campaign ends and another begins there isn't a lot of new system learning to do, and hardly anyone wants to port a character from one campaign to another in a different world); I wrote about this a bit under "minigames", above. That said, it does things I like and many games don't offer, and if my inchoate system design ever condenses as far as being playable it will owe a lot to things I've learned from *GURPS*. (Also, when I write stuff for Steve Jackson Games, they pay me what they agreed and on time.)

I put the link for running Typst locally in a comment to Jim Eckman above, but [here it is again](https://typst.app/open-source/#download) (https://typst.app/open-source/#download). Yes, they want you to use their shiny on-line editor, but that is not at all the way I work.

RYCT Patrick Riley: for a few years I'd write an original scenario for each Yog-Sothoth.com Games Day (in September-October), and playtest it first with my regular groups, then run it again at the following UK Games Expo (May-June). By the time the Expo play came along, it was my third or fourth run and I had a lot of ideas about what PCs might do and how that should affect things.

Jim Vassilakos: As a newcomer, but quite a technical one, I found this fascinating. Honestly, my reaction to your description of the process and tool chain is to think of ways in

which I could build a more automated version of my own: for example, the machine can trivially discover how many pages a PDF file has, so you shouldn't ever have to copy that information yourself. (And I have now done this.) Of course, the obvious way to test that out would be to start a separate PDF-APA of my own...

For the **GURPS** fanzine [The Path of Cunning](https://tekeli.li/path-of-cunning/) (<https://tekeli.li/path-of-cunning/>), the two co-editors advertise to communities where we're each known, and we ask various friends of ours to mention it to communities where *they* are known; nobody wants a poster who only shows up to publicise their thing, even if it's a free thing.

(I'm not on the Google group, because Google. I still host my own mailing lists.)

RYCTM: yes, to be clear, even I have no objection at all to fantasy that tries to do something *other* than be generic! I think one of the appeals of genre fantasy, though, is that it's familiar. There isn't a genre sci-fi in the same way (though *Firefly* and especially its derivatives can come close): you can drop someone into a genre fantasy and they know what to do, mysterious stranger in a tavern, go down a hole in the ground to kill things and take their stuff, no complicated background to learn. It has become part of the cultural *Zeitgeist*.

To be fair, while people think of Tolkien as formative to genre fantasy, I honestly think the assumptions in *D&D* have much more of the pulp to them: Conan, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, Elric, all tossed in a tumbler and their distinctiveness ground away. Certainly the standard lawless frontier setting with orcs just over the border is straight out of the pulp Western that gave so much to pulp fantasy.



Unknown Artist (1887)

Tolkien's most distinctive features, his world-building and linguistics, hardly make it into the *D&D*-esque genre fantasy at all; they're *hard*.

RYCT Astronarch: as far as I'm concerned the reason the complex was built and the purpose it's being used for now jointly determine both its form (the actual physical layout) and its function (the defenders, treasure, etc.)

RYCT Gabriel Roark, Tolkienian orcs must surely be Lawful; they exist to be the Dark Lord's army. There aren't any separatist orcish communities. Biology is destiny. (Which may be one reason why later approaches have tried to vary them a bit.)

RYCT Avram Grumer, now I'm picturing a system in which your character starts off with one skill, but as they survive and develop they get to improve it in higher resolutions.

Timothy Collinson: RYCTM - the house rules are mostly the character generation material I noted in *Starting Bayern* (Firedrake's Hoard 2, E&A 4).

John Redden



Reddened Stars number 3
(E ka hoku o ula`ula `ole)

johnredden@AOL.com
(public facing e-mail address)

Web sites:
johntredden.com
southkonafarms.com
johnreddenauthor.com

Other e-mail:
southkonafarms@gmail.com

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

310.418.1550 mobile

808.328.2328 land line

Mix Natter And Anti-Natter

Regardance

I finished Alien Clay, by Adrian Tchaikovsky. As mentioned before, it is very well written. The Mandate reminds me too much of what is going on in the USA. That changes at the end of the book. Adrian has an amazing ability to describe alien life on alien worlds.

We are also watching Foundation starting with the first season. I am enjoying it.

Sum Comments

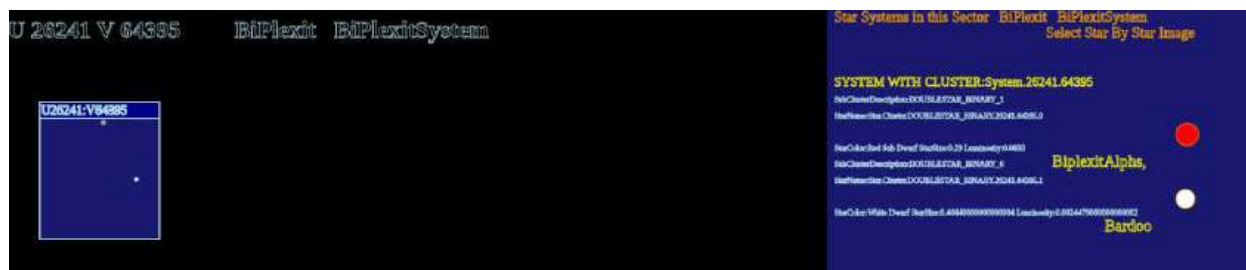
WRT game conventions. I still feel down and out because of the loss of HawaiiCon on the Big Island. It was simply the best convention set I ever attended. I tried OrcCon remotely during COVID. It was okay at best. These days I will not get on a airplane to attend a convention.

My son sent me a link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i1Zb1utxLfs>
It has The Untold Story That Changed Dungeons and Dragons Forever. The author, who seems to live in Pasadena, is named as "Daddy Rolled a 1". The author knows about Lee Gold, Aero Hobbies, Barry Switzer, A&E and others.

Does anyone actually know who “Daddy Rolled a 1” is?

Those of you running D&D might find Mike Gunderloys Dirty Tricks List useful. It can be found in The Lords of Chaos and an early A&E.

I mentioned this a number of years ago in a zine. If you would like a detailed star system with planets, moons and atmospheric content, try john-tredden.com. Ignore a number of the top entries, but Explore the Cosmos, Select an Existing Cosmos Sector, Rename an Existing Cosmos Entity, Travel to a Renamed Cosmos Entity and Build a Star System you might find useful.



Brian Rogers, It's nice to see some modifications to D&D (current version I believe). Back in the late 1970s and and early 1980s This was a common practice.

Mark Wilson, I continue to enjoy conversations with Lucifer.

Clark Timmins, Monster postage. I didn't see that one coming.

Pedro Panhoca da Silva and **Camila**, Johns and Marie's. Interesting.

Roger West, I enjoyed the notes on Cold War Pulp.// In the past I have used a simplified version of GURPS with only few selected skills. I do throw in Cross Training, which is like JOT with the exception the Cross Training skill set must come from the regular selected skill set and below any PC with that chosen skill.

Patrick Riley, I played the Amber dice-less game one time years ago at a WorldCon at Brighton in the UK with Eric as the GM. I don't remember much about it.//When Origins had a con in Los Angeles, I played Champions run by an A&Eer whose name I don't remember. I loved it until combat. I swore I'd never play it again.// I can't remember when I played a game with bonus dice. It might just be my old brain.// I believe my A&E account had about \$90.00 in it. I had planned to donate it to Ever and Anon. Barry should handle this, but I'll let it slide.// I am also a map fan.

Heath Row, how about angry farmers? Happy farmers?// You have a useful list in your zine.

George Phillies, I enjoyed the wrap up of Small Giant Class Liberation Army. Please contribute when you have time.

Tiffanie Gray, a beautiful image. Did you use AI to generate it?

Avram Grumer, the metric system isn't Communistic, it violates the Kings foot.// POG? Passion Fruit → English; Lilikoi → Hawai`ian.// I stand enlightened on the second season of Andor.

Dylan Capel, I read Neuromancer years ago. I liked it, but don't remember much about it.

Jim Eckman, I enjoyed Heinlein versus Norton.// GURPS and Traveller. See my notes to Roger West.// Out of character in an FRP works if you time it appropriately. As in "excuse me, I need to go to the water closet."

Michael Cule, nope. Never played Banestorm.// I continue to enjoy adventures in the Lunar Empire.

Attronarch, yet another beautiful zine. Those characters just have to learn to stay out of dungeons and decayed temples.

Myles Corcoran, I continue to enjoy the Mausritter write ups. My son runs Mouse Guard and he adds a bit of humor to it. But. He does call it "national guard with mice". We will be playing it during the holidays when we visit Santa Rosa. //My wife plays TTR all the time on her smart phone.

Paul Holman, we spent the night in the equivalent of a castle in Lockerbie,

Scotland in summer of 1988. A beautiful place. In December 1988, the castle was nothing more than rubble after Flight 103 destroyed it after a bomb went off in the airplane. Sometimes it's just a matter of timing.

Mitch Hyde and Vincent Napoli, COC can vary a lot, but it's different than D&D. D&D is almost always in a medieval reference even when it's not a building crawl. COC can vary from deadly to humorous. "Hotel California", which I wrote up in A&E had a humor element with danger. In that game the PCs had power if they performed the task in a reasonable way. I've played in COC games that ended up in a TPK. But they were still entertaining.

Patrick Zoch, I appreciate Dice Tower Retreat. My son, wife, granddaughter, daughter-in-law and myself play board games.

Mark Nemeth, what a beautiful zine for E&A #4.// My family, especially my son, will be filling the space of lost regular games. My NoCal group of old gamers still plans to plan to gather once a year.

Brian Misiaszek, seriously. If you get the time you should publish your collected notes of Habana Horror as a COC (or another system) module. I want to use it at the next NoCal mini con. I'll have to extract key parts so it can be ran in one session. That's my job.

Lisa Padol, StoryBrewers Discord Bingo looks to be very useful when designing characters with back stories. The Regency sheet seems odd. // It has been a long time since I was introduced to a new game system. The only thoughts I have are 1.) It can be somewhat crunchy 2.) Overall simple game concepts. 3.) Characters are within genre and simple to create 4.) Story creation is fun during the game. My pet peeve: I tend to burn out very quickly on medieval archetypes. I'm not quite sure what you mean by "emotional play". For example, I would refrain from criticizing the GM.

Joshua Kronengold, my favorite science fiction games center around traveling to new star systems and discovering, for good or bad, what is there. // Don't worry about comments. Write what you have time to write.

Vassilakos, Collinson and Rader, I continue to enjoy the campaign write-ups. I must admit, it is unique for a Traveller game.// I found the details on how to put together E&A interesting. I don't think I could do it. I already have too much on my plate: book writing, playing in two bands and full time farming.

Humor

When two men invented the radial tire, everyone said they made a nice spare.

Children's interactive fiction – part VI: *João e os 10 pés de feijão* (2016)
by Pedro Panhoca da Silva <ppanhoca@yahoo.com.br> and Camila Lourenço Panhoca
<camiladopetro@gmail.com>

João e os 10 pés de feijão (“Jack and the Ten Bean Stalks”, in free translation) (2016)¹ is another joint creation by José Roberto Torero and Marcus Aurelius Pimenta. The illustrations are by Jean-Claude R. Alphen, an award-winning Brazilian illustrator.

This interactive version of the well-known Brothers Grimm fairy tale “Jack and the Beanstalk” is even simpler than others in the collection: the narrative follows a linear path for just two pages, then opens up into a wide range of choices.

João is a boy from a poor family, who make a living by selling milk from their only cow. One day he goes to milk her and nothing happens. So, his mother sends him to sell the cow at the market. On the way, he meets a man who offers him a mysterious magic bean in exchange for the cow. João, who thought it was more important to have a magic bean than money, accepts the exchange. Following the stranger's instructions, he plants it on a night with a full moon. At this point, it is up to the reader to choose the only fork in the book and find out the result of the planting, that is, choose whether João bought purple beans, red beans, white beans, black beans, adzuki beans, cowpeas, pink beans, ball beans, brown beans or striped beans².

What can vary in this interactive reading is the length of the chosen ending. Endings such as “purple beans” and “adzuki beans” take up only two pages, while black beans and pink beans take up six. Almost all beans are planted successfully, but the result is the humorous situation that the choice provides: when purple beans are planted, João and his mother harvest giant beans that make them fart all the time. When red beans are planted, João climbs the beanstalk, rises up to the clouds, invades a giant's castle to free a captured duck, and runs away with it, sawing down the beanstalk and causing the giant to fall from the heights (later he is captured by humans, tied up, and shrinks every day because he doesn't eat, until he is the size of a normal human, when he is released and starts working as a farmer). When he gives the white beans to his mother to plant, he discovers that she didn't plant them, so he goes back to the market, meets a man with seven cows on the way and offers him the magic beans. The old man plants the beans, climbs the enormous plant, and goes to the giant's castle (but is eaten by the giant, so João is spared a violent fate, in addition to getting seven dairy cows). João's entrepreneurial spirit also appears at the end when he plants ball beans: Instead of climbing the plant and going to the castle in the clouds (sensing that there may be a man-eating giant in the clouds), John turns the beanstalk into an amusement park, with slides, cable cars, and merry-go-rounds.

Perhaps the most creative ending is when João tries to plant the adzuki bean: a beetle eats the bean and becomes giant. It becomes fond of João and does everything he tells him to do. So João decides to innovate and uses his new giant pet as an “AeroAdzuki” vehicle, earning a lot of money in the air transport business. And, unlike Torero and Pimenta's other interactive fictions, in *João e os 10 pés de feijão* there is a very sad ending: when João plants the cowpeas, he discovers that he has been deceived and his family starves to death (this ending is so sad that it is the only one that does not have a moral to the story). There are also endings with metalanguage, such as when João chooses to plant pink beans: the beanstalk grows, João climbs it to the castle in the clouds, rescues a guinea fowl that clucks almost at the end of the escape (alerting the giant

¹ An excerpt from the book can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSArIs_2E1Y&t=1s, unfortunately only in Portuguese.

² We are not bean experts, so we are not sure if these translated names are correct.

to the theft) and the narrator writes “The boy was almost leaving the castle, notwithstanding (sometimes there is a “notwithstanding” in the stories)”, which breaks the reader’s expectation with the narrator’s “invasion” with a personal comment.

The authors show that they are not concerned with teaching children something, but rather with stimulating their creativity. The only ending that may contain some academic knowledge is that of the beanstalk, when João plants the striped bean and four other bean stalks sprout (totaling five), which become 25, 125, 625, 3125, 15615 and 78125, which could be a good story for teaching potential, for example. After all, literature has never had just one function, right?

COMMENTS #4

ROGER BW: Great points! Yes, I consider it interactive fiction for children precisely for that reason: thinking that it will be new to a young reader, the reading may shock them if it offers so many choices. In any decision, the reader wins. I find it particularly discouraging, as it can even affect replayability, since the reader would only read it again to discover other possibilities, but not so much to improve their performance.

JOHN REDDEN: Us too, hehe.

HEATH ROW & JIM ECKMAN: We agree 😊

MYLES CORCORAN: If it’s the kind of book that’s split down the middle and the reader forms hybrid animals, we have that too. They’re a real monster factory.

BRIAN CHRISTOPHER MISIASZEK: Uhm, it’s a great idea, but it would probably make the product too expensive 😞

JIM VASSILAKOS & TIMOTHY COLLINSON: LOL! Tycoons always have obscure origins... with this little pig, it was no different.

DREADWORD 4

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No AI was used making this zine.

www.dreadlordgames.com



Another short one this month. As I write, I'm speed-painting a platoon of "Evil Men" with black, ochre, and fiery red shields. Those are the colours worn by the Temple of Elemental Evil's various cults (more on that shortly). After that I must copy out pre-gens onto my fake Goldenrod character sheets. After *that*: a few more Ral Partha miniatures need painting. And then? Then I really ought to re-read the two modules I wrote.

Why?

Because I am preparing for the greatest Old-School convention on Earth: [Cauldron](#).

Held every October in Germany, Cauldron Convention is a focused celebration of TSR-era D&D. It hosts games of OD&D, B/X, 1E, Chainmail, and strange offshoots like SVoZ. This year there will be ninety participants gaming over three days. I'll be running two dungeon crawls from my own campaign: *The Setian Vault* and *The Coliseum of the Lunar Lion*.

Our own Attronarch will also be there, running a host of 3LBB games including *Thieves' Fortress of Badabaskor*, his Wilderlands campaign, and a community-built megadungeon. I've gamed with Attronarch for years but this will be our first time rolling dice across the same physical table. I'm hyped!

The Evil Men I'm painting will serve as fodder in a recreation of *The Battle of Emridy Meadows*, fought using the **Chainmail Fantasy Supplement**. There are

said to be around 1000 points per side. Multiple generals will enter the field. Will good triumph once again? We will soon see. The Cauldron crew use 1/72 scale miniatures for their mass battles, and last year I took part in a massive naval engagement where I commanded the Scarlet Brotherhood (and their allies, the Mi-Go of Yuggoth). I was allied with a treacherous Slave Lords fleet against the ADDKON city navies. It was one of the most memorable games of my life. You can read full writeups [\[here\]](#) and [\[here\]](#), and also an in-character report from a player who fielded a high-level PC during the battle [\[here.\]](#)

This year's recreation – the Emridy fight – is based on study of Greyhawk lore and Gygaxian canon. I'm told the research was meticulous. Expect a full battle report when I return on my website. As you're reading this, I'm likely knee-deep in dungeons somewhere in the German West, rolling dice after a champagne breakfast.

CONVENTION ROUND-UP

I've published two play reports on my site this month. Both from *The Owlbear and Wizard's Staff* con in Royal Leamington Spa. A fantastic event. I ran two games, one from my own milieu, and the other a high-level crawl through the 1982 Judges Guild



1/72 Evil Men (including [Dark Alliance Cimmerians](#))



Some of the Forces of Good

mega-dungeon **The Glory Hole Dwarven Mine**. Both reports are [\[here\]](#) and [\[here\]](#).

That wasn't the only con I marched into. I also woke at 1 AM on a Sunday to log in to the

[Virtual Greyhawk Con](#). This being an American con I only managed one game, but I wanted to play under as experienced a DM as possible. As I've said before in this zine: if you want to become a better referee, *play under better referees*.



Ral Partha prepped and ready

I managed to get a slot with **Allan Grohe (Grodog)**, co-owner of Black Blade Publishing. They publish OSRIC hardbacks and dungeons by luminaries like Rob Kuntz. We played *A1: Slave Pits of the Undercity*. I was not at the top of my game unfortunately (hey, I can blame the time slot.) We didn't score too well. A few players got bogged down in sewer logistics and we lost a lot of time. Still, I learned a few things. I had fun.

THE IGNORABLE THEME

This month's IgTheme? Lets go. I'm only going to write about one piece of media that affects my games: the one that mattered.

A little history.

I grew up in the '90s. Back then, Video Stores were king. We were lucky to have a small, family-run place just a street from my parents' house. It was, with great imagination, called: **VIDEO SHOP**. It was the front room of someone's house. For our story, let's call the owner *Margaret*.

She was stern. Little intonation in her voice. BIG perm. She'd usually be found behind the counter, chain-smoking. Sometimes she'd be on the floor behind the counter, also chain-smoking. She said it helped her back. The floor, not the smoking.

Friday night was video night. A ritual. My brother and I would walk up there with our Mum, pick something out, and watch it over Chinese takeaway. That changed when we got a Sega Megadrive one Christmas. Margaret also rented game cartridges.

Suddenly we were taking trips up there on non-Fridays. Alone. No parental supervision. I must've been ten or eleven years old.

During this time I was *deep* into **Goosebumps**. My parents were just glad I was reading. But Goosebumps doesn't scratch the itch forever. The stronger stuff

was calling. Margaret had the juice.

At the centre of the Video Shop was this black binder atop a plastic plinth. It sat there like some eldritch tome. Azathoth's Black Book. Above it: a red-painted sign that read simply **HORROR**. Beside it, a laminated blow-up of the 18 certificate logo.

I needed to look inside.

One day, thinking Margaret wasn't watching, I opened it. Ghouls. Skeletons. Slashers. Barely-dressed women. Blood-soaked fonts. The sleeves of a hundred video nasties, each one promising terror and gore. I looked up.

Margaret was watching. Smoke curled from her mouth. Eyes narrowed. I'd been rumbled.

"Two pounds." she said.

She might as well have said: *What's your pleasure, sir?*

Thus began an unholy pact. She'd rent to me, quietly of course, only if no one else was around. And I wasn't to tell my parents.

The first tape I chose bore a snarling pale-faced man, head pierced with nails, cradling a golden puzzle box. The tagline promised: **"He'll tear your soul apart."**

I had discovered **Hellraiser**.

Give a man a horror film about S&M demons who confuse eternal

torment with pleasure, and he'll have an interesting nights entertainment. Give a ten-year-old that tape, and you will *change him*. I was terrified. And hooked.

What had existed of me had indeed been torn apart. The thing that had been reconstituted had been forever changed. It had emerged with a taste for transgressive horror and practical gore effects. *Hellraiser* is the film I unconsciously channel whenever Demons or Devils show up in my campaigns. Blasphemous deals. Soul rending traps. Damned souls

in search for escape. Want and need colliding with cosmic cruelty.

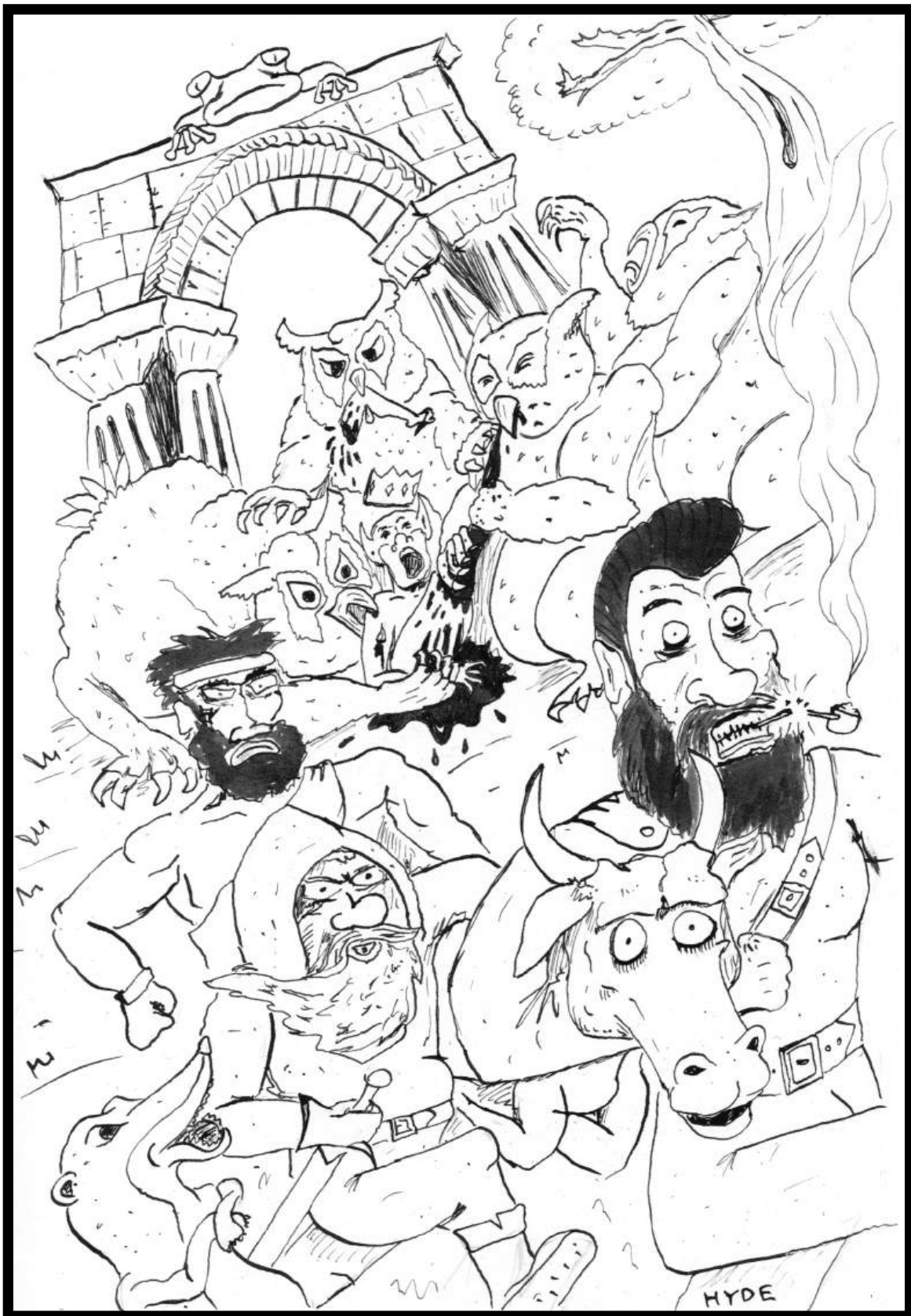
There were many tapes after this one. Oh yes, Margaret would make sure I'd was well supplied. I'd come back with the box under my shirt. Slide it across the counter through the waves of her smoke, her ash. She'd cough a phlegm clogged chuckle. Ask how I liked it. *Hellraiser* was the first. The first is always the first. You never quite catch that high. Doesn't mean you won't try.

It's still one of my favourite films, thirty years later. It made me a better, more terrifying DM.

So, I'll leave you with the only real question you should have after this brief story:

What alignment are the Cenobites anyway?





The above image depicts a scene from the Thisium Campaign by Gabor Lux, aka Melan. I'm currently playing Fighting-Man Giacomo in this game. In the image the PCs are stealing a sacred cow from the lands of Faery, in the background the Elf King is being torn asunder by a random encounter of Owl bears. One of the PCs had been turned into a giant weasel by his magics. Good times. Play report [\[here\]](#) under section titled 10/06/2025 THISIUM.

COMMENTS

Brian Rogers / Denizens of the Library:

Draw Steel's use of "The Director" for DM? It made me wince. Sounds like someone's prepping a dinner theatre.

Patrick Riley RE PvP:

Do you dislike other competitive games? Board or war games? PvP hasn't come up much in my RPG life – maybe a handful of times. I did run a one-shot with hidden objectives, and two of the six players went into conflict. Memorable stuff. I'd do it again, but not every game wants knives at the table.

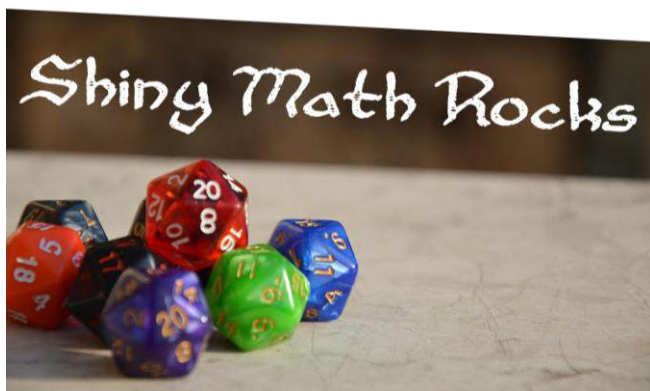
Jim Vassilakos, RE Multi-DM Worlds:

I've heard whispers that WotC's new edition is encouraging shared world campaigns. Rotating DMs in a single setting. Perhaps this is their answer to the "DM Crisis." Are the times changing?

Attronarch: See you soon!



My Adventures Printed and Prepped.



SMR Issue #1

October 2025

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

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Introduction

Hi; I'm Elf, and I'm new here. I was never part of A&E. I knew about it; it seems like I've always known about it. I remember local gaming stores carrying issues of it in their discount boxes, along with older issues of Dragon and White Dwarf. I vaguely assumed it was another commercial magazine with lower production values. Some time later I found out it was a fan-run thing. ("APA" was a much later discovery.)

A few years ago, I was trying to sort out how APAs worked, looked into the ones I'd heard of that were still running, and found A&E and FAPA were both open to new members. I wound up joining FAPA for various reasons; I wasn't sure I had the time for both and didn't want to join two at the same time.

I'm still not sure how much time I have available, but I'm now comfortable enough with FAPA to look at other APAs. I found a link to Ever and Anon on Bluesky, was sad to read about the closing of A&E but glad the community is continuing.

I don't expect every issue of SMR to include a lot of personal info instead of gaming activity and game-theory thoughts; I wanted to do an intro issue first. I started playing red-box D&D in 1978. I gave up playing AD&D before 2nd Edition came out. I'm somewhat aware of the various changes because I've been active in gaming spaces online since the late 90s. I've absorbed some of the lore and concept changes while

Zine title comes from a Tumblr post:

[greytailzawritesthings - Apr 4 2019](#)

I have come to realise that there are only three types of DnD players in regards to dice.

- Halflings: I'll just borrow dice off my friends
- Elf: I have 1-3 carefully selected fancy dice sets that I use for everything.
- Goblins: the shiny math rocks make click-clack sound. Needs the more. All the more.

I own far too many dice. Especially since I don't even play games that use polyhedral dice anymore; it's all D6s and Fate dice.

remaining oblivious to most of the mechanics updates.

Too many games

I'm currently involved in four weekly online games and have picked up a potential fifth. I'm also in a once-a-month in-person game ...That is too many games. (Stupid day job getting in the way of my gaming time.) The problem is, they're all *different* and I'm very much enjoying them. (Two Fate: one Core; one Dresden Files Accelerated; two GURPS: one modern, one fantasy (the in-person game); one Blades in the Dark; soon to join a Brindlewood Bay game.)

Monday night: No gaming. Monday will stay a no-gaming night; Monday is my in-the-office day and I can't count on having energy for gaming after.

Tuesday: My longest-running group – was Fate (some kind of end-of-the-universe sci-fi game; I joined after other players dropped out), then Monster of the Week, a single session of [i'm sorry did you say street magic](#) which was supposed to be the worldbuilding/prep for a Jadepunk game that didn't happen, and we're now doing Dresden Files Accelerated.

Wednesday: No game. Escapade convention concomm meeting. (However, that's short, and I could potentially put a game after it. I'm trying to avoid that.)

Thursday: Recent Blades in the Dark game. I was going to drop this one because I have at least two other Thursday-evening events I'd like to attend at least sometimes – but after several weeks of missing 2 of our 5-player group, we got one back and had a lovely planning session working on a major score. (As in, the client said “price is no object” and “10 coin? Honey. Take 12, plus expenses. And what else would you like?”) (We are all very, very worried about what that means for the difficulty of the job.)

The job is “I accidentally sold a precious piece of jewelry and I want you to get it back for me. Note: the target wears it at all times. Also he is ridiculously rich and famously reclusive and lives in a castle that he never leaves. Also note: He will absolutely notice if it's missing – it's magic – and you really don't want to wear it because it has, um, side effects you won't like.”

Friday: Fate – This was “convert Shadowrun 2 to Fate,” it's now “Convert D&D 3.5 to Fate,” and that is about to wrap up, so we are pivoting to something else. (I did warn the GM that, while I am very familiar with AD&D as a setting and I gather 3.5 isn't much different, I haven't touched D&D's mechanics in decades.) The GM is interested in handing off the workload and has suggested GMless games. I made a list of the ones I have from buying game bundles.

Saturday or Sunday (it keeps moving) –this is where it gets extreme. GURPS game where we are [SCP Foundation](#) agents. The game is at 8 am (because 3 of the players are in Europe), and I am probably going to replace it with the (sigh) 5 am Saturday Brindlewood Bay game. I don't expect to stick with that one unless it's gloriously fun. (5 am. On Saturday. I don't know if they're on the east coast or in the UK.)

Once-a-month Sunday: In-person GURPS high fantasy, with a longstanding group (well, 3 people of a longstanding group, including me) that are all former D&D players but have been doing GURPS exclusively long enough that the D&D-ish flavor has worn off. New campaign starting later this month.

I occasionally see posts at [r/lfg](#) and Bluesky complaining about how hard it is to find a gaming group, and I don't know if most of them mean “in person,” or it's really that hard to find a compatible D&D or Pathfinder group. I don't play anything remotely like D&D or PF, and I have more games than I have time for; I have to stop myself from signing up for other games I'd like to play. (I also like superhero games.)

If they're looking for in-person games, I can understand that's harder. If they're looking for online games... is the online D&D community full of toxic

sludge? Or is it just that it's so huge that it's nearly impossible to find people you'd like to play with?

The not-D&D community is much smaller – which may mean it's pre-selected for “people I'm more likely to enjoy gaming with.” I have sometimes found non-D&D players I didn't click with, games that turned out to be more of a chore than an enjoyable way to pass an afternoon. But they've been the minority.

Solo TTRPGs

In addition to rather too many online RPG groups, I've recently (last several years) gotten into solo RPGs. I have a huge collection of them. (I buy huge game bundles – that'll be an article of its own at some point.) I've played about a dozen of them and read dozens more, and they are *fascinating*.

1. It's arguable they don't involve “role-playing,” definitely not as it's done in games like D&D or GURPS or Call of Cthulhu.
2. Some of them are not “games” by any definition most of us would recognize. (The phrase “lyric game” is common, and it roughly means “poetry in the shape of a game.”) (There are viable, if simple, [36-word RPGs](#). Arguably viable [12-word RPGs](#): games that are mostly based on a coin-flip to resolve questions. There are “2-word RPGs” which are not actually playable.)

But “solo TTRPG” is the label we're stuck with. (“TTRPG” instead of “RPG” because, sigh, more people these days think RPG means video games, and if you say “solo RPG,” many people will think you mean “like The Witcher instead of Fortnite.”) (I don't like it either.) Most of the solo games have obvious connections to standard RPGs – either the core structure is shaped like a standard RPG, or the way gameplay works is obviously inspired by dungeon-crawl adventuring, even if it's obviously not remotely related to that. Some of them have less-obvious connections – they were inspired by a game inspired by a game inspired by a weird indie project that may or may not be game-related.

There is so much variety in these games. The biggest split in categories is between “journaling” games and others (there's no common label for the non-journaling ones) – many journaling games are more like “guided writing prompts” than games. Some of the others are like “D&D without a GM or other players – here, roll on this random generator to see what happens.” But between those, and outside of those, there are hundreds of kinds of games.

Not “hundreds of games.” I own over a thousand solo RPGs, and almost all of them are from game

bundle purchases. (Meaning, there are many thousand more available; the majority of indie game designers don't put their games in charity bundles.)

I am probably going to talk about solo RPGs quite a bit; I love them, and I have a lot of them, and I have a lot of thoughts about them. I have acquired multiple tarot decks for gaming purposes, since many of them use a tarot deck instead of dice or playing cards.

I've written 6 solo RPGs, all with different systems (one of which is "just writing prompts; no system"). I'll probably continue to do that until I find one that stands out as the one I most enjoy playing, and make modules (or whatever passes for "modules" in the relevant system) for it.

At some point, I'll probably write up details about all of them here – design thoughts, why this system and not that one, what I hope people get out of playing them, and so on. For now, just the list:

- **Wandering Visitor:** A post-apocalyptic solo TTRPG using the [VRBS](#) system (Uses 1d6)
- **Quill Untamed: A Solo TTRPG:** A letter-writing TTRPG for a single player in the world of MDZS, based on [Quill](#) by Trollish Delver Games. (Uses a few d6, max of 4 needed.)
- **Lost World of Ur:** You are isekai'd into the world of an MMO after the servers have shut down. A Carta game. (Needs a deck of playing cards, with a joker, + 1d6. Someone did a [livestream of it](#) and I am delighted.)
- **The Seventh Artist:** A solo journaling game about art, fame, money, and the consequences of dealing with the fae. (Pure journaling – no mechanics.)
- **Lord Moon's DIED:** Meet Lord Moon in the labyrinth beneath his Pleasure Palace to provide him some exotic entertainments. ([Second Guess](#) system: d20 & d6.)
- **Day Trippin':** A solo journaling game about travel, introspection, and botany. ...Okay, mostly about grass, and the smoking thereof. ([Anamnesis](#) system; uses tarot cards. This one's designed for a [very specific deck](#) of tarot cards, but it will theoretically work with any normal deck. But the prompts may not make sense with different imagery on the cards.)

Solo TTRPG Recommendations

Six Figures Under by Sam Leigh (Blinking Birch Games): "Solo micro-games about being a freelance necromancer." (Alternate title: "You Went Through Ten Years Of Necromancy School And They Never Taught You How To Market Yourself.")



This picture, and the other game pics, are from itch.io's listings of their games. They are presumably copyrighted by the game authors.

This is my go-to intro-to-the-hobby recommendation. It needs 2d6, but is mostly journaling: Writing in response to prompts, with a few random generators (e.g. someone comes to hire you; roll to see who.) It claims to have "micro-games" but they're more like stages or chapters – they flow seamlessly into each other.

Part 1 is writing your craigslist ad – without using any forbidden words like "death" or "alive" or "necromancy" or "revive." Part 2 is recording an answering machine message. Part 3 is where you shift away from writing prompts; it involves someone seeking your services, and there are a few tables to figure out who it is and what they want. But it's still a journaling game: You write up the details of what happened; there's no mechanics for "how much are they willing to pay" or "were they happy with the results?"

The prompts are a very basic "this happens" – you decide the details and the impact it has on you and, for the most part, the world around you.

I did a playthrough of this recently and turned the results into a fanfic:

[Catcalls by Elf_Herself](#)

Summary: Wei Wuxian is just your average everyday working single-parent necromancer living next to a cursed and haunted graveyard. People are welcome to call him to hire him - if he has phone minutes this month, which he probably doesn't.

A Fool's Errand by Mike Free: “Solo-Journaling game about the futile effort of trying to warn a king about their inevitable destruction”



A one-page game that's surprisingly complex in play. The premise is a bit bleak – (you are going to fail; you will not stop the conspiracy – but hey, maybe the king deserves whatever they have planned.) The mechanics are simple; the details can be elaborate.

This needs a **deck of cards and a journal/notes** document. All journaling games claim you need something to record what's happening, but you often don't need anything more than a sheet of paper to jot down a few notes about interesting decisions. The story is being built in your head, and how much you care to remember is up to you and often doesn't affect play. In this one: You need to record who's visited, because some of them will return, and you'll need to note what changed since last time.

And that's where the fun is. Why is this wine seller returning for a *third* time to petition the king? A diplomat and a revolutionary visit back-to-back – are they talking about two versions of the same problem? The story develops from the details you create, and the ones you make first will influence what you choose later.

This could easily be used for worldbuilding for a standard RPG, a way to set the details of “the former king was overthrown 20 years ago” by using the encounters here to establish who was working with and against the conspiracy, and what factions were just concerned with basic survival and weren't paying attention to the political drama.

Note: As with most solo games, it doesn't provide details, just the prompts. If “a merchant” is petitioning the king, it's up to you to decide if that's a wine merchant from a local vineyard or a foreign trader selling exotic fabrics.

Golden Oldies by historical killer queen: “A Second Guess solo journaling rpg about semi-retired superheroes”



Another one-page game; in this case, the Second Guess System is designed for single-page games that use a d20 and a d6 (although this one only uses a **d20**) and some way to track what happens; there are twenty journaling prompts, and when you encounter one a second time (or third, or fourth), you add a twist to the original results. (Also you usually increase risk by gaining a point of whatever you're trying to avoid.).

You could build a whole superhero world history by running through a single game. It'll be focused on one character, but the backstory and minor details you add in can be enough to be the basis of a campaign.

This one results in much longer games than most Second Guess System games. Most of them are tracking a stat that goes 0–6, whether it starts at 0 and moves up, or starts at 3 and can move up or down. This one starts at 10 and can move from 0 to 20, and that's a lot more prompts before the game is over.

I'm suggesting it instead of one of the more standard [Second Guess](#) games because (1) I like superhero RPGs; (2) this one is not about *young* superheroes; and (3) it's free, so people can look it over and decide if they like the system. However, many of the not-free games are under \$5, and several include the full text of the game on the game page as a small screenshot.

As these are one-page games, the details provided are very sparse. You need to understand the superhero genre to play (or you aren't likely to enjoy it). It offers prompts like “a supervillain attacks” and “a world-shattering event occurs” – but there are no names or additional details; you provide as much or as little extra content as you wish.

Ironsworn by Shawn Tomkin: “A tabletop RPG of perilous quests for solo, co-op, and guided play”



This is probably the best-known and most-recommended solo RPG, the one that is closest to “D&D without a GM.” It uses **2d10 and 1d6**, and has a complex character sheet.

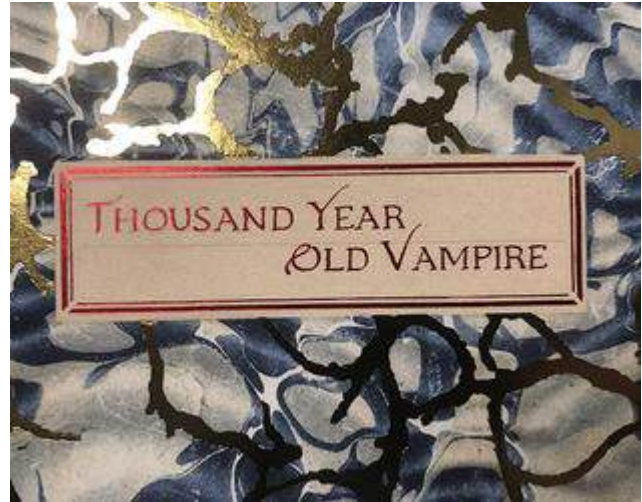
I am not fond of it for the same reasons I’m not fond of D&D: Heavy focus on stats and combat and random encounters with things you’re expected to defeat or kill. But I can recognize a well-made game even if it’s one I don’t want to play.

This is no single-page “here’s some prompts; write about what happens” game. This is 270 pages of system mechanics and worldbuilding, with a whole section on the “oracles” you use to generate events, NPCs, and reactions to your activities. And it’s free, which means it’s easy to check if it appeals to you.

CHARACTER		EXPERIENCE	
[Character Name]		○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○○	
+10	EDGE HEART IRON SHADOW WITS	+5	
+9		+4	
+8	BONDS	+3	
+7	□□□□□□□□	+2	
+6	VOWS	+1	
+5	○ TROUBLESOME ○ DANGEROUS ○ FORMIDABLE ○ EXTREME ○ EPIC	0	
+4	□□□□□□□□	SPRIT	
+3	○ TROUBLESOME ○ DANGEROUS ○ FORMIDABLE ○ EXTREME ○ EPIC	+5	
+2	□□□□□□□□	+4	
+1	○ TROUBLESOME ○ DANGEROUS ○ FORMIDABLE ○ EXTREME ○ EPIC	+3	
0	□□□□□□□□	+2	
-1	○ TROUBLESOME ○ DANGEROUS ○ FORMIDABLE ○ EXTREME ○ EPIC	+1	
-2	□□□□□□□□	0	
-3	○ TROUBLESOME ○ DANGEROUS ○ FORMIDABLE ○ EXTREME ○ EPIC	SUPPLY	
-4	□□□□□□□□	+5	
-5	CONDITIONS	+4	
-6	○ WOUNDED ○ SHAKEN ○ MAMED ○ CORRUPTED	+3	
	○ UNPREPARED ○ ENCUMBERED ○ BURDENS ○ TORMENTED	+2	
MAX		+1	
RESET		0	
IRONSWORN		STATUS	

Ironsworn character sheet by Shawn Tomkin

Thousand Year Old Vampire by timhutchings: “PDF and HARDBACK available. A beautiful, sad, solo RPG about the crush of time and vampires.”



This is the *other* “everyone recommends it” game. It has a price tag of \$15 but literally thousands of free “community copies” available. It needs **1d10 and 1d6**, and something like a character sheet (there are five traits to track; they change often) in addition to whatever journaling you want to do.

Once you have finished with your vampire, they will have three Skills, three Resources, a Mark, at least three Mortals, one Immortal, and one Experience in each of their five Memories.

I haven’t tried this one because it’s another detailed, elaborate game: Nearly 200 pages, full of public domain artwork (which, in this case, nicely fits the tone of the game), newspaper clippings, and hundreds of event prompts to encourage complex story development. I’m holding off until I have a good setup for play, something that feels immersive but still lets me do my journaling on a computer. (I’ve discovered I dislike taking notes/doing journaling on paper. I am deeply annoyed about this; I would love solo TTRPGs to be my time away from the computer. Alas, my physical note-taking skills have degraded over the years, and, more importantly, I don’t find it enjoyable to write out notes and story details longhand anymore.)

IgTheme: Media

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

I wrote a version of [Quill](#), a solo RPG, for The Untamed, where instead of the standard 6 character classes, you play as one of the main characters in the series. [It’s on AO3](#) instead of itch because it seems

weird to publish it without images, and I can't find anything appropriate in public domain/creative commons sites. (I'll probably get over that and put it on itch.io someday.)

I'm in a Dresden Files (Fate) Accelerated game, but we're not interacting with canon. Our game is set in the same world, on the other coast; none of the book series' events or characters is making an appearance. We do like the setting, though.

I want a TTRPG based on Sense8. I thought of trying to write one up using Fate but didn't get past some rough notes for how the visiting & sharing worked. I realized I'd never find players for it and stopped trying to make the game. I'm never short of projects that want to eat up all my "spare" time, and this one wasn't going anywhere.

I've owned several RPGs or supplements based on popular media. I've played very few of them, either because I couldn't find a group interested in the same game, or because I loved the idea of it but the actual game was mediocre or worse.

I have the Midnight at the Well of Souls boxed RPG. It's terrible. I would love a remake in some system that's not 80s-style "you have six stats that we're going to pretend aren't the D&D ones and levels that we're going to pretend don't work like D&D classes."

I have GURPS Discworld (and Discworld Too), Wild Cards, and a couple of other media tie-in books; I haven't played any of them. I have a handful of media-source boxed games like Elfquest (and I backed the remake on Kickstarter; I have the PDFs and am waiting for the print version), Wizards (from the Bakshi movie) and Dr Who (the 80s game, not related to the newer seasons), and I suppose Call of Cthulhu is technically media-based, but the rpg has been around longer than most of the other media inspired by the original stories. I have PDFs of the Firefly game, Avatar: The Last Airbender, Indiana Jones, and at least one version of a Star Wars RPG.

I have played almost none of these. I never seem to have a group of friends interested in the same media I am. And most media sources don't lend themselves to dungeon-crawl style games, which is what most players are used to.

Small exception: I was involved with a group playing Wild Cards in Champions many years ago, which seemed like a better representation of it than GURPS. I would like to see it updated for 4th Ed. GURPS, because they put a lot of work into making superpowers run more smoothly, but I still think Champions is likely to work better.

I've been toying with "play solo TTRPGs with my favorite fanfic characters as the protagonist." I played

a game of "If You Loved Me" (a duet game) with one player running Wei Wuxian (me), and the other running Vriska from Homestuck (my daughter) and that was great fun as well.

I barely know Homestuck and don't know Vriska. She only knows Untamed from what I've babbled about it and the pretty gifsets on Tumblr. Fortunately, you don't actually need to know much about each other's characters for the game to work. (...Given that it's based on Goncharov, I suppose you don't technically need to know anything about your own character.)

Comments on E&A #4

With FAPA, I reply to/comment on every zine, every issue. But those are (1) quarterly mailings and (2) about 15 people at a time. (FAPA has gotten very, very small.) I'm pretty sure I'm not up to commenting on every zine here every month.

I may get there. But definitely not this time.

Firedrake's Hoard #2 – Roger Bell_West

GURPS was my favorite system for a very long time. (Fate is edging it out, if only because it's more forgiving to new players who haven't bothered to learn anything about the game before grabbing a pre-made character sheet and jumping into the adventure.) I love GCS (available at <https://gurpscharactersheet.com/>) for character creation, even if I usually have to adjust a few things or grab sourcebooks I wasn't expecting to use.

...Why does the basic book equipment not include writing materials? I get that low-tech people were often illiterate, but if you think bit-and-bridle is worth putting on the equipment list, why not parchment-and-ink? In a setting with mages and dungeon-crawls that need map-making, you'd think someone would've considered "how much does paper cost?"

It's only recently that I've realized that GURPS is not a "game"; it's a "game system." The GM or player group has to provide the setting and rules that apply. (Same applies to Fate.) GURPS is a structure, and it includes details that are assumed to apply to any world (e.g. the damage a sword does; how fast a horse runs, and even how alchemy works), but, setting aside the ability to alter the core details – there is no gameworld. It has info for How Fast Can You Swim; it does not say whether there are oceans. Or lakes. Or even rivers. Maybe you live in a techno-dystopia and water is all piped in from Outside the Dome and nobody has seen free-standing water in a container larger than a kitchen sink. (In which case, the GM probably bans the swimming skill entirely.)

Quasipseudoludognostication #4 – Patrick Riley

I have played Amber, or rather, set up a character for Amber, exactly once. I remember being very excited for it and looking forward to play, but the group collapsed and didn't have a second session.

I have no idea how you'd bring in players later to an Amber campaign. They can't do the bidding for stats at the beginning.

I remember thinking that it seemed it'd work well with a skilled GM you trusted to be fair, and ...not, if you didn't have that. (We did, and I'm sorry I didn't get to play it.)

Regarding chance-of-success statistics: A growing trend in rpgs involves playing cards. (Especially in solo rpgs; however, those are more often used as prompts/event randomizers than success-checkers.) The whole bell-curve system does not work with cards-as-randomizers, where your odds change depending on how many have already been drawn.

Going to be Ad-Libbed #2 – Avram Grumer

I haven't played Troika but there are certainly a lot of supplements and modules for it in the game bundles I've picked up, especially a few years ago. I see a lot of things written for it but very few reports of it actually being played.

One skill. Huh. I've seen at least one of those: TWERPS. ([Review link](#)) I've seen quite a few more with two stats. None of these are pitched as "the perfect game for your next 3-year campaign!" They're mostly advertised as "you have three hours and four players who've never seen a TTRPG before, so..."

But Troika has a zillion expansions, which implies a long-term game. Or maybe that it's just fun to write expansions for something where stats are just not relevant.

Attacks of Opportunity #3 – Dylan Capel

I am using two columns because, while I don't expect to print this (or have it printed), a single-column text line can be too wide to comfortably read on the screen. (Also, I expect to occasionally run into the page limits, and more text fits on a two-column page.) I first tried a complex layout involving two columns on a split page, top and bottom, so the top and bottom parts wrapped separately, with a line between them, but (1) it was horrible to set up with Word's section breaks and (2) the PDF did not look easy to read; it was hard to force myself back to the top.

I am considering using landscape pages and 3-4 columns. Decided my first entry should be "normal," or whatever passes for normal here.

...I did spend several hours playing with layout and fonts before realizing that the ones I really

wanted won't embed in the PDFs. I may wind up playing with those settings again.

The Phoenix Nest #4 – Michael Cule

I very much appreciated the "history of the Banestorm" article. I play GURPS; I'd collected G. Fantasy when it came out, and promptly ignored it – it was too much "our version of D&D, only with an imported actual Catholic church." (...I played D&D at the time in part to get away from Christianity; no way was I playing a high fantasy game that deliberately brought it in.)

I was vaguely aware of the Banestorm history but it wasn't relayed in a way good for gaming – as "ok there were these races, and these factions, and then BOOM, and now there are a zillion more races, each of which has its own factions. We will now all pretend this is not our twist on Middle Earth or Greyhawk, complete with the popular stereotypes and racial biases of their eras."

The issue of "which species can cross-breed" was always confusing to me in D&D. Elves and orcs are fertile with humans but not each other, and dwarves, halflings, gnomes, and a zillion other sentient bipedal races are contained within themselves... why?

Unless there was some wizard back in history who worked to allow humans to cross-breed with these two species, this makes no sense.

I like the alternate idea that elves & humans share enough ancestry to breed, and orcs are designed from elves, while everything else is a separate species.

Twisting the Rope #4 – Myles Corcoran

Regarding the name misspellings: Autocorrect may shift "Myles" to "Miles." Or "Mules," I suppose. I sympathize. I've had to tell a lot of people, "It's Erica with a C. No K." It's not... important, but wow is it weird when it's in an email where my name is *right there* in the "to" field.

De Ludis Elficis Fictis – Pum

Windows 11 does feel like a downgrade. My work computer has it and I keep tripping over new "features" I don't want. My home computer has the extended support for Win10; my travel laptop does not, so we'll see how that goes.

...I just love how all the articles about Win11 say, "It's not so bad! Here's how to get used to it! Here's how to disable the parts you don't want!" rather than anything like "Here's the list of actually better features that you've been waiting for!"

I want WinXP's file explorer search options back. I want the option to move the taskbar anywhere I want on the screen. I want new windows to never

open partially covered by the taskbar. I want to jump to the new window when I open a doc or program.

I don't want AI anything, much less AI that eats hard drive space and bandwidth and keeps trying to send my data to Microsoft.

The Dragon's Beard #89 – Patrick Zoch

Both Fairy Ring and Tea Garden look interesting to me. I doubt I'll pick them up – I have negative table space available and nobody to play with – but I'll watch for them at conventions and see if there's online versions somewhere.

An Unlooked For Zine #3 – Lisa Padol

Thanks for the mention of Curseborne – the [ashcan version is free](#) on DTRPG until Halloween, and it sound interesting if not quite my kind of game (I have quite enough of “bad things happen to good people” in real life), so I'm very happy to pick up the free early/draft version.

I agree that “demo game to test the system and create player appeal” probably shouldn't end with “actually, you lose; sucks to be you.”

I also like group character creation and wish more games built that into the game. I like the way PBtA games do it – where part of character creation is asking other players, “Which one of you once helped me do something terrible?” or picking another player and announcing they were destined to be your mentor – and *they* get to say how this was revealed.

I'd love games where “session 0,” the “establish characters and decide on the starting point,” was more structured and less “everyone talks and the GM kind of manages things, and some people offer a lot of detail and some just throw some numbers on the page,” and there's no way to resolve differences of opinion other than “the GM says you can/can't have that on your character sheet.”

Accidental Recall #3 – Joshua Kronengold

I agree that one of the flaws of GURPS is that it's very easy to make incompetent and useless characters – the game system itself, and even the sourcebooks, don't help you figure out the difference between “skills everyone in the campaign should have” or “advantages that should be common among PCs” or “disads that still allow for viable play” vs “NPC skill that you might have for flavor but don't expect to use it every session, or even every campaign” or “advantages that you will have to build your entire character concept around” or “disads suitable for NPCs or that need special cooperation with the GM.”

I love GURPS; I picked up the boxed set as soon as it was available, and then spent about four years

trying to get my D&D/Champions gaming group to play it. None of them would touch it. (One objected purely because he hated the name; he thought it sounded ugly.)

I disagree that GURPS doesn't allow “let me come up with the character concept and then build it” – or at least, that it's no more difficult to do so than most other RPGs. I will grant that its range of usable character concepts is substantially more abstract than many (most?) RPGs. And it pitches itself as “everything,” and it is most certainly not “everything,” even if you have a ridiculously high point total.

IMHO, GURPS works best for low-power mildly cinematic games. (Fanciful enough to handwave past some laws-of-physics concerns; realistic enough to say “no, you can't jump from building to building; they just aren't that close together. No, there is no roll for this. You are not Batman.”) It doesn't do supers well; high point characters wind up with too many skills to keep track of; the magic system is... not to everyone's taste. (I love it. I am aware that many people don't.) I tend to think the magic system could use an overhaul to establish “starting character magic” vs “experienced sorcerer magic” vs “look, yes, we have a system for this, but YOU are never going to use it.”

And while GURPS was obviously made originally as an alternative to AD&D, it's only going to appeal to those players who were frustrated with a very specific set of AD&D features.

Traveller PBEM: Plankwell, Ch 49 – Vassilakos, Collinson, and Rader

Notes on running E&A: If you, or whoever is running E&A, find yourself needing PDF help, let me know. I have Acrobat Pro (at home, in addition to on the work computer) and over 30 years practice with it. (There are features from Acrobat 4 that were removed in 5 that I miss.)

It's nice to see the list of utilities/apps you use to make E&A, because my thoughts start with Acrobat – rename the PDFs with numbers in the front; make a placeholder PDF for the TOC and an Excel sheet noting the titles, game info, & page counts; wait until they're all in; combine the PDFs in Acrobat (which will auto-create bookmarks). Then build the TOC PDF and swap out that page. (And probably link the TOC to the individual zines, which is manual but quick enough when the bookmarks are already there.)

And while I have great tools for working with PDFs, it means that when someone online says “How do I do this thing?” My answer is usually, “Uh.... I pay \$20/month to be able to do this thing. I could... do it for you? This time?” But I've had Acrobat Pro long

enough that I'm very hazy on what free widgets are available online, and what low-cost software is available for more specialized purposes.

Anyway – whether or not I could “do the CC job” (I'm not even going to consider “maybe I could” or “probably not” in my first issue), I could help with the PDF production if that's ever needed, and could probably do “assemble all the PDFs & TOC” in an hour or two. That might drop to 30 minutes if I had a coherent system set up.

Advertising E&A: The ttrpg space on Bluesky is very active (and where I found E&A). There are gaming communities all over Discord, but, well, they're on Discord: They don't connect to each other, and you can't search for them.

Regarding old artwork that might not be in the public domain: With the note in the rules that you expect people not to infringe copyrights, you should be clear for “we publish what people send in; if someone thinks it infringes their copyright, they can file a DMCA takedown and we'll remove the content from the issues available to the public.”

Comments on Not-E&A

Weird Place at Bluesky: PBM Games¹



My reaction: Um. My dude. I. Uh. Look. Yes, PBM was an important part of TTRPG history. It still happens, although PBEM mostly overtook it and later, chat programs mostly overtook those.

But. I feel compelled to note that *PBM was always an exception* to the norm. “How did people play multiplayer games without the internet?” THEY SHOWED UP IN PERSON. At someone's house. Or a game store, or the library. She seems to completely ignore the idea of *playing games together in person*.

Rulebook POV Question²



tmr-timmix posted in indy ttrpgs · 3d

...

Do you guys prefer 2nd Person or 3rd Person in rule books?

2nd person:

In order to decide what happens next: you must first declare what you want to do, after that you roll the **dice** in order to figure out if your action is successful or not.

3rd person:

In order to decide what will happen next: the player must first declare what they want to do, after that the player will roll the dice, in order to figure out if the action was successful or not.

Which one of the two would you personally say, fits better?

Which one do you prefer?

2nd Person

3rd Person

This poll will be long over by the time E&A 5 comes out. Results are currently about 57/42 in favor of 2nd person, but the discussion underneath mentions the importance of context: Are you assuming the rulebook is being read by players or GMs or both, and does passage apply to both, or only one group? If only one, is it very clear that this is “instructions to players” or “instructions to GMs?”

I'm with the majority on this one; I expect rpg gamebooks to speak to me as “this is something **you** are/will be doing.” (This also nicely dodges the issue of declaring the player/GM's expected gender.) I've seen a number of small games use 2nd person POV apparently because fewer words are involved – if you're trying to fit a whole game on 1–2 pages, the extra characters for “the player rolls” as opposed to “you roll” make a difference.

It's an aspect of game design I was aware of (because I don't like being referred to as “he”) but had not consciously considered until I saw this poll.

¹ bsky.app/profile/weirdplace.bsky.social/post/3m3gipp5tms2v

² www.tumblr.com/communities/indy-ttrpgs/post/797374538636722176/

BUGBEARS & BALLYHOO #43

October 18, 2025, for Ever & Anon #5

Gabriel Roark

Rancho Cordova, CA

gabrielroark@gmail.com

I inscribed this hastezine shortly before pencils down. Consequently, B&B is a comment zine & perszine this time around.

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COMMENTS ON E&A #3–4

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- A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #3
- Going to be Ad-Libbed #1–2
- De Ludis Elficis Fictis (E&A 3–4)
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Reddened Stars Numbers 1–2 (John Redden)

Number 1: Good for your granddaughter, playing in a concert! A red Stratocaster-style guitar, eh? Emma was learning electric guitar on a black Samick Silvertone Strat with white pickguard & rosewood fingerboard.

Cotati is a nice, quiet town. My wife's aunt lives off Railroad Avenue west of U.S. 101.

RYCT on ice-skating & equilibrium, see, "I Would Have Made a Terrible Frost Giant."

Thanks for the humor. I miss it when you don't include it (same for the Zen thoughts). I bet the pitch with which Noah covered the ark's inner & outer surfaces (Ge 6:14) would have discouraged termite activity. Noah better have packed untreated wood.

Number 2: I am glad that you are enjoying the many-flavored D&D writeups in this APA. I hope you get into a game with your granddaughter; it will be a hoot if she gets into it.

Overlord's Annals 4(7) (Attronarch)

Thawmist 5th was brutal for Hagar's party.

"They broke his spine, scalped him, and then took out his brain." Soon afterward, the enterprising zombies went to work at Fridey's, Fast Food Restaurant of the Damned.

Fun writeup & I enjoyed the gameplay details in your response to Myles.

The Phoenix Nest, E&A #3-4 (Cule)

I bookmarked the How to Host a Dungeon page (<https://tonydowler.itch.io/how-to-host-a-dungeon-v2>) & will probably purchase the game. Thanks for mentioning it (E&A #3).

In your zine in E&A #4, you asked a series of questions concerning the work you did for your game world (I reorganized the order):

- Would it have been better if I had asked my players for input?
- 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?

You concluded "no" for the first question above & I tend to agree. Start with your vision & feel free to supplement with player inventions or thoughts as play proceeds.

How much of this stuff is needed? It depends on the game. Seems to me that such detail enriches verisimilitude for your players & that is a Very Good Thing. Racial, cultural, species, & organizational relationships add color & nuance to a game, even to a

straight-ahead dungeon crawler. Besides, if your players are anything like mine, they will ask seemingly inane or random questions about the reproductive viability of odd pairings.

RE Glamour Days and Nights, page 91, the revelation that the Spider's commandeering various bodies was responsible for cavalcade of renters was an excellent touch.

REYCTM about hit points (hp): The Arduin Grimoire & a couple other games have race & Constitution-based hp that increase upon level according to one's character class. I like this & it suits Arduin, which has critical hits & regards hp as physical. Adding some luck-based hp has some appeal but is that not simulated, after a fashion, with the to-hit roll & saving throws? Again, it depends upon the game system & its assumptions. Luck is taken under advisement.

Four Things (Clark)

Your description of the tunnels through that the Rolling Thing leaves in thorn forests really stuck with me. This creature's tunnels will make an appearance during the next overland random encounter in our AD&D campaign! Will the Frog Leg Gang take the bait?

A Rhodomontadulous Promenade #3 (George)

Thank you for the pointer to "Rulings, Not Rules: A Foundation, Not an Oversight."

Going to be Ad-Libbed #1-2 (Grumer)

It's great to see you contributing to E&A, Avram. I find your writing style clever & fun. Props for the old-school look of your zine.

Thanks for sharing a summary of Scum & Villainy; it has some interesting chargen procedures.

“A BRP character sheet is basically a long, depressing list of stuff my PC is bad at.” TRUE!

Ah, Evlyn Moreau. She has some cool games & I dig her art style. Have you ever peeped her *Paper Biome* game?

In GtbA-L #2, I guffawed at your PCs having to take the job because of their bar tab.

About Troika! I do not have *Longshot City* but have played about five sessions of Troika with my daughter many years ago—probably pre-pandemic. We had a lot of fun with it & the success/failure/concern with probability-fiddling did not bother us at all. I think of Troika like a Fighting Fantasy RPG (which it essentially is) with an OD&D ethos of referees filling in gaps in the rules. It is true that a PC with low Skill is unlikely to be heroically effective. In addition, the character improvement rules are such that PCs will only improve their Advanced Skills but not their Skill score. That said, referees & players could contrive other ways to increase Skill that make sense in the game.

Troika strikes me as a smooth peanut butter-RPG as opposed to a crunchy one. I think it sits well with players who want the rules out of the way of roleplaying & immersion. To return to your question about Troika being a “failure is fun” game, I don’t think that is the intent of its design. Maybe the system is less suited for a supers RPG but I doubt it; one can design around that easily enough by increasing default Skill levels or the like. I own & have read about 10 Troika adventures. They strike me as leaving plenty of room for PCs to achieve success with a high ratio of good decision making to

the vicissitudes of polyhedrally determined probabilities & outcomes. In other words, players in Troika should work to eliminate as dice-rolling as possible if success is their primary aim. With suitable care, a referee should be able to fashion adventures that do not rely overmuch on dicing for PCs to prevail.

I do have gripes about Troika, though. For instance, it bothers me that it lacks a comprehensive equipment list with prices & no clear way of establishing basic cost-of-living. Can I make it up? Of course I can. But is this how I want to spend my time preparing a campaign? Nope. At least newer printings of Troika include a starting adventure that gives the prices for some goods, which provides some basis to work out these economic matters.

De Ludis Elficis Fictis, E&A #3–4 (Pum)

Thanks for letting us know which A&E issues you have.

RYCT in #4 about USAan politics, I understand that the US’s influence on the world stage is enormous & would not gainsay folks elsewhere for having opinions on our politics, &c. Although different polities & societies will have their own domestic matters, the sooner that humanity realizes that we are in this together & learn how to have productive, civil discourse across boundaries, the better off we are all likely to be. I dunno—maybe that’s just the Connemara talking.

RYCTM in #4 about infravision & mapping. I am certain that I ran infravision liberally when I was younger & think most refs in the area did, too. Given some of the advantages that AD&D demihumans get, such as infravision, racial abilities, & extra

languages, adjudicating its weaknesses in addition to its obvious benefits strikes me as fair—and makes the players think harder about dungeoneering logistics.

Twisting the Rope #3–4 (Myles)

From TtR #3, “As a player, my style is very much informed from being primarily a GM for most of my role-playing history. I try to give feedback to the GM, grab plot hooks if I can and err on the side of action over inaction whenever possible.” You sound like a model player, Myles.

RYCT Brian Rodgers’ CT Pum (also TtR #3), many players struggle with expending resources in OSR & old-school D&D games. We spent time talking about this at the table before starting our Temple of Elemental Evil (AD&D) campaign & it paid dividends. It definitely required the players to “cooperate”, though. Once adventurers start banging around the Temple, the module suggests its own version of a countdown clock: it provides recommendations for recruitment & replacement of losses at the Temple. My players figured out that the Temple factions were not static & strive to keep the pressure on.

Hella lolz about collecting chimaera heads.

RYCT me in #3, as a rookie ice skater, I sometimes wish I was small & perfectly formed :D. Microlite D20 in its numerous iterations is a lot of fun. Thanks for the info about your subzines.

RYCT Brian M. on the meaning of *Twisting the Rope*, terrific choice. Since you cited the Sligo Heritage website, I have to tell you that I recently picked up the first US release of a whiskey from a Sligo distillery: Garavogue’s 20-year single malt. It is a beauty on par

with Middleton’s Very Rare offerings & I am looking forward to the distillery’s unsourced releases.

In #4, you shared thoughts with Pum about the resource-intensive nature of LLM-AI. I’ve spent a lot of time at the state government department in which I work analyzing the cultural heritage impacts of building some of the Silicon Valley data centers required to support LLM-AIs & I’ve had a good look at water & electricity use (in addition to natural gas- or diesel-fired backup generators) of these things. You have the correct view of things.

Dreadsword 2–3 (Mitch)

*Gabriel casts *haste* to make the E&A due date*

In Dreadsword #2, Burspur sounds like a scary dude. RYCTM about the ToEE write-ups: I’ll email you the A&E-era Bugbears & Ballyhoo issues that cover about the first six sessions of the campaign.

RE Dreadsword #3, page 4, I admire your players’ planning. That is good playing. You allow your PCs to travel at 5x speed when using their map? I am curious how you arrived at that number, not that I dispute it. I have gone with double speed when my PCs are passing through mapped areas. Bravo for keeping your dungeon fresh!

Love seeing the overbearing & pummeling tables in use, too! We have been using them in the ToEE campaign for the first time. They are great.

Quasipseudoludognostication #3–4 (Riley)

In Q #3, you wrote, “While my in-game choices are based on ‘what my character would do,’ I try to make it constructive to the game experience and if I need to modify my choices to

make the game better, I try.” This is a helpful gaming style. Also, good job coming to a sensible & satisfactory compromise with your player’s silly armor scheme. I get a lot of that at my table, too. The archaeological quest was an enjoyable read.

In Q #4, you bemoan a pet peeve of mine, representing natural caverns in a way that is both tactically meaningful & satisfactory in an exploratory or cartographic sense. I do not have a good solution. You might be on to something with the ledger paper mapping that you did. It seems a very promising way of presenting the verticality of an adventuring site.

RYCTM on hp & healing in 5e, I agree—spending HD is a terrible use of nomenclature. Being able to heal all of one’s hp on a single long rest *is* cinematic, in my opinion.

I have also wondered how magical healing would affect the game world outside of adventuring parties as well. In our ToEE campaign, two of Matt’s PCs are part of the Church of St. Cuthbert (one is a paladin, the other a cleric) & initially came to Homlett to start this novel institution known as a hospital. Matt really wants this to happen in-game, so during one of the party’s extended training periods, I determined who in the hamlet had gotten sick, with what maladies, & the timing of onset. It turns out that three PC healers & three NPC healers in town were ample to handle the illnesses that arose in one month. Beyond that little experiment, I don’t know.

Happy belated birthday!

Denizens of the Library #2–3 (Rogers)

Thank you for the description of Dyson’s MegaDelve & the Knave game. Good stuff (Denizens #2).

It’s grand to hear that your children are doing well.

In your third zine, you laid out your B/X homebrew rules. I am going to need more time to digest these. You have my interest, though! Time just got away this month.

RYCT Riley: Mahjong tile names?? I’m dead.

The Dragon’s Beard #88 (Zoch)

RYCT on Dungeon Crawl Classics character funnels, how *does* the referee or game determine the character class of survivors?

What great wargaming tables.

Engines & Emulators #3–4 (Blasted Heath)

RYCTM in E&E #3, I am pleased to have avoided snow & ice in my daily life; hearing details of your & other’s lake skating & so forth seems so exotic. Thanks for emailing the shipping address & your good wishes to my mom.

Your expanded supers options are inspired. Fun, but not as fun as the origin of the Infernal Wilson. I shudder to think what the young’uns would think if you lived on 6-7 Wilson Street.

Age of Menace 240–241 (Misiaszek)

Thanks—mom’s had it rough! Speaking of having it rough, it is a relief to hear that you are recovered from COVID-19. I’m happy that you, Chris, & Trevor have maintained such lasting friendships. Good job, lads.

Fantastic Hârn collection! Drool.

An Unlooked For Zine #3 (Lisa)

RYCT on *Tatters of the King* & spellcasting tactics: this is such a boon in published adventures, especially in higher-crunch systems like AD&D. ToEE, happily, is liberal with suggestions of this sort.

What a terrific handling of Dracula!

Accidental Recall #2–3 (Joshua)

RYCTM in AR #2: Thank you for the encouragement. RYCT Zoch in AR #3, having NPCs possess backup consumables that the PCs could find (should they prevail) is very sensible. Yoinked with gratitude!

RYCTM in AR #3 about hp: those are some usable contrivances, but as you suggested, I choose to regard hp as a gameplay convenience while running AD&D. In the next campaign, it might be a different matter altogether.

Traveller Play-By-Email, Plankwell Campaign, Ch. 48–49 (Jim & Timothy)

RE Jim's CTM in Chapter 48 on the riskiness of villainy: I am sorry for your loss. That is mighty funny, though. In Chapter 49, you sketch the alignment of orcs over various iterations of D&D. Here is a related ToEE anecdote: raiders of the Temple might encounter two orcs who are imprisoned by the Earth Elemental Temple faction. They are willing to join PCs in fighting the Temple factions generally because *these* orcs are expressly lawful evil, contra the chaotic evil types that make up the rest of the Temple servitors.

RE Timothy's CT Michael Cule in Chapter 48: That is how my coreligionists & I handle movings of the Spirit, as Quakers are wont to call them. Jesus teaches us to love God with all of our mind, among other

capacities, after all. Sadly, none of that helped me write a less pithy observation about your previous zine 😊.

Bumbling Through Dungeons #4 (non-infernal Wilson)

I look forward to hearing a terrific job report for you & your girlfriend. Your attitude & preparation are commendable!

Philatelic Monstrosities #1 (Clark)

Thank you for the link to *The Royal Harvest Festival Apophenia*.

Children's interactive fiction – Part V: Joões e Marias (Pedro & Camila)

Thank you for the observations about gamebooks & your participation in Beuren's project.

Attacks of Opportunity, Issue 3 (Dylan)

A *Feast Crashers* campaign could be hysterical!

Am I printing out E&A to read? Nope. I like double column text on the screen better than single column for both reading & writing, though.

Ronin Engineer #4 (Eckman)

Good point about Traveller characters & retirement. This question, however, could be resolved with character or campaign backstory.

The Seedling #51 (Nemeth)

RYCT about the PCs revisiting the big dungeon: I am also looking forward to reading about the party's exploits.

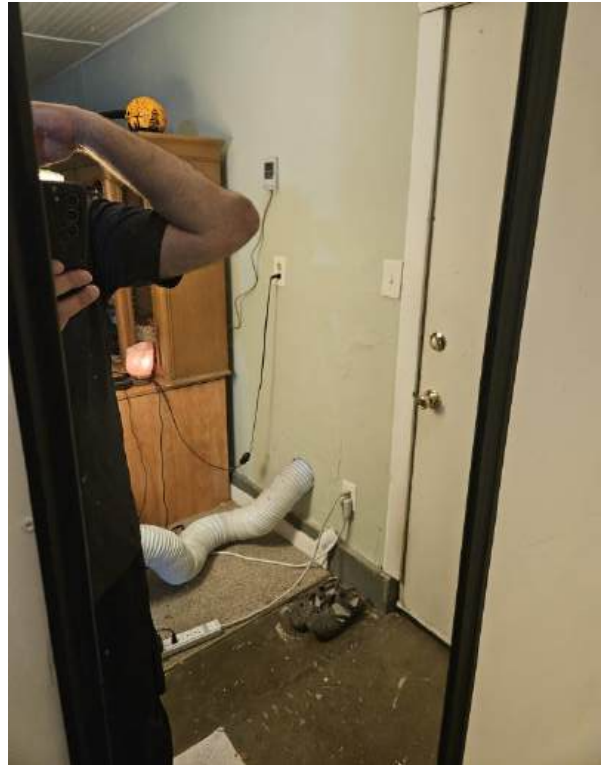
I think I would have a hard time getting my players to accept the conceit of humanoid monsters that don't negotiate because they have a hard enough time with so many

demihumans, humanoids, & monsters possessing more-or-less set alignments.

I WOULD HAVE MADE A TERRIBLE FROST GIANT, OR "I WENT TO SKATETOWN AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS HEMATOMA" (NATTER)

As of this writing, Celeste & I have made it to about 18 public skate sessions & three group lessons. At the beginning of September, Celeste tried on some Jackson Soft Skates (recreational) in the pro shop & marveled at how much better they felt than her generic starter skates. We bought them on the spot & it got me thinking that I needed to get out of the rental skates that I used every week, not least because they had started agitating an old skateboard injury on my right medial malleolus. I ordered a pair of Jackson Classic 552s, which are intermediate between recreational & proper figure skates; I am a big fella, so a boot with strong ankle support seemed indicated.

On Saturday the 13th, I was standing on the ice in the beginners area, trying to see where Celeste was in the snack bar area. I must have leaned back slightly while looking for her, cos my dull rental skates skittered out under me without warning. I was down on kiester and elbow. I got up & skated another 40 minutes. When we got home, however, my elbow looked like this:



I had it X-rayed at urgent care & the doctor did not find any breaks or fractures, just an olecranon bursitis. This just three days before my new skates were due in --. My entire forearm ended up swelling & bruising quite handsomely:



My skates came in & I skated in them numerous times. They are great! I am wearing hockey elbow guards now (they have the bonus of being supportive) & knee pads in addition to a helmet.



NEXTISH

- Comments on E&A #5
- ToEE Play Reports & XP Tally
- IgTheme essay

Twisting the Rope #5

Myles Corcoran - 20 Brookfield Park, Cork T12 K7V7, Ireland
myles.corcoran@gmail.com - <https://mastodon.ie/@deetwelve>

Walking like his head's full of Irish fiddle tunes

It's been a tough month for me. Work is frustrating, Sam's been ill with a nasty cold virus, and I have been suffering with hip pains or something like sciatica. On top of that I've not been sleeping well, which leaves me short of focus and patience.

I finally caved and got an appointment with my GP. Now I'm off work for 2 weeks and starting some anti-anxiety medication. We'll see if that helps, but like all SSRIs it's not a quick-acting solution.

I did see a performance of *The Rocky Horror Show* in the Cork Opera House last month. Sam and I had a great time and thoroughly enjoyed the performances, the staging and the music.

Mutterings

This month's new game was the remarkable *Brass: Birmingham*¹. One of the regular UCC gaming group proposed a semi-regular evening session for meatier, longer games than those we would usually fit into a lunchtime hour, and the first choice was *Brass: Birmingham*. Four hardy players sat down after work to play through nearly four hours of this clever game. I greatly enjoyed it and must play it again. The multiple paths to victory, the difficult choices every round, and the impact of other players' actions kept my attention even during other people's turns and I hardly noticed the long play time. It's definitely worth the time to play.

Kriegsmesser - Landau Before the War

Back in 2022 I ran a campaign of *Kriegsmesser*², a game by Gregor Vuga, a love-letter to *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* by way of the Forged in the Dark mechanics and character generation from *Troika*. It's was an entry in #zinequest2021 and comes as a neat A5 pamphlet about 32 pages in length, beautifully illustrated with images taken from 16th Century woodcuts.

I set the game in the German city of Landau in the summer of 1617 not long before the outbreak of the Thirty Years War. The characters were:

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

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

¹ <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/224517/brass-birmingham>

² <https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/357104/kriegsmesser> and <https://gregor-vuga.itch.io/kriegsmesser>

Alfonzo Meemo, pragmatic graverobber (Marie)

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

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

With a Shakespearian nod, both Sam and Kate's characters are women passing as men in a sexist 17th Century world.

Session 1 (2022-09-28): Fixer for the wealthy Azzo family, Dorf Eidermann offered a purse of silver (roughly 15 s per head) for our worthies to put a stop to Agostino Cavalcanti's printing of inflammatory Catholic pamphlets praising the Hapsburg claim on the Rhineland.

Udo von Liechtenstein first makes a friendly visit to the print shop to warn Cavalcanti to put an end to his printing of Gerbhart Weiss's propaganda.

Cavalcanti is not swayed, so Franzis makes a more aggressive argument with threats, dropping a severed thumb (courtesy of Alfonzo's latest customer) on the shop counter. Much play is made of the potential for body part puns as Alfonzo tots up the coins to be made from all the required corpses.

Agostino Cavalcanti gets rid of Franzis but shuts up shop and hurries to the Weiss townhouse in the rich quarter. On his way, Jaroslav strikes up a conversation and finds him a sympathetic companion equally at the mercy of the rich and their stingy payments. Lazaro remains to watch the shop, but the apprentice keeps the shutters down and receives no visitors.

Cavalcanti gets Weiss to provide three toughs to guard the shop. Later in the day, Udo, keeping watch, is accosted by one of the men but has a civil conversation and manages to sow doubt as to Weiss's ability to pay his strongmen.

Alfonzo takes over the job of watching the shop while Udo starts spreading rumours that Cavalcanti is about to skip town back to Milan to avoid his debts.

Session 2 (2022-10-06): Udo leaves Alfonzo at the pie shop watching the printers and encounters a street fight between the Guild of Bakers and the Guild of Cheesemakers arguing about the upcoming allegorical pageant and their respective places. Prompted to Christian action, Udo attempts oratory to talk the crowd down and is soundly beaten for his trouble³. He is rescued by Oswald Sforbeck of the city guard, who pushes him on his way and cracks a few heads among the brawling guild members.

At the printers on Murgundsplatz, Alfonzo is surprised by Grumble the Greedy, local beggar and informant, who rushes up to Alfonzo and presses something small into his hand. He then flees, followed soon after by a large man of mercenary bearing. Alfonzo checks and finds he has been given a gold signet ring of French make, and he resolves to return it to Grumble later.

Lazaro swaps places with Alfonzo at the pie shop, and trades insults with Balthazar Rumbold, a post courier. Rumbold has a very fine new sword, which he shows off to Lazaro with taunts. Jaroslav arrives and Lazaro requires him to ask around about Rumbold's new sword and source of regular income.

³ The first of many beatings. Landau is no place for the faint-hearted.

Alfonzo tracks Grimble down at the Cow and Bucket, a low-class tavern, where he returns the purloined ring and asks Grimble about it. Grimble is unconcerned about the mercenary but does mention Lotta Lippi, the widow living next door to Cavalcanti's Printers when Alfonzo describes the stake-out.

Jaroslav spends the rest of the day asking around town after the courier Balthazar Rumbold and his new wealth, but makes no headway. His questions are brought to an abrupt halt when two burly stablehands corner him outside an inn and beat him soundly as a warning⁴.

Back in Murgundsplatz, Lazaro witnesses the arrival of 5 soldiers in the Prince Bishop of Speyer's livery, led by a sergeant. They drive off the two remaining bravos from Weiss, before arresting Cavalcanti, who is taken to the schloss. They board up the shop.

Lazaro commiserates with Martin Richter, Cavalcanti's apprentice, who bemoans the loss of his job and livelihood. Someone will come from the schloss and take possession of the type and the printing press.

With the aid of Alfonzo they talk their way into the Widow Lippi's house and observe when a wagon with several labourers arrive to disassemble the printing press and take possession. The wagoneers are accompanied by another man with ink-stained hands. Martin recognizes the new arrival as Ridolfini, a rival printer from Milan who blamed Cavalcanti for the theft of his press designs.

Udo tends to Jaroslav and his own wounds at the Golden Cock, before meeting up with Alfonzo to talk to Eidermann about payment. Somewhat reluctantly, the fixer counts out 40 silver albus to pay them for ridding the Azzo's of the troublesome printer.

Session 3 (2022-10-20): Jaroslav receives a commission to paint a commemorative landscape of the Building of the Landau Fortifications. He hitches a lift with Lazaro to the building site.

Lazaro is busy ferrying nobles and hangers-on to and from Landau to the fortifications, and arrives with lesser nobles Weimer and Miglioresi who want to see the works.

Jaroslav talks to Pflaume the Chief Architect. Pflaume expresses an interest in a possible portrait from Jaroslav once the work is done on the landscape.

The while, Alfonzo and Udo make their way to the building site to follow up on the deaths of two workers and rumours of a curse on a copse of trees unfortunately in the way of an outthrust batiment. Udo finds signs of folk or pagan practices, red threads wound around old ash trees.

As Udo investigates, Alfonzo examines the recently halted works, and discovers, by way of falling in, a sloping tunnel down to some buried chamber. The stonework is old, but sound, and incised with Latin script.

Jaroslav arrives to assist with the translations and descends into the chamber where he and Alfonzo find the tomb of 'Gaius, Son of Gaius, Favoured Son of the

⁴ Beating No. 2.

Franks'. Some work with a pry bar destroys the door to the tomb and allows the two men entrance.

Balthazar the courier passes by and exchanges further taunts and smack talk with Lazaro⁵. He rides a new and very fine horse, Bucephalus, which is immediately renamed Booze and Syphilis by the crew. Lazaro grows even more jealous of the courier and his windfalls. How is the devil earning his wealth?

Udo notices some furtive workers with sledgehammers lurking near the props holding up the recently erected batiments. He fears they plan sabotage and distracts them with descriptions of the tomb. He sends them back to the camp to fetch Pflaume.

On the clock now, Alfonzo prises open the stone coffin to reveal an early 8th Century princely burial. He pilfers the gold necklace the corpse wore, but finds no other treasures. As Pflaume and his retainers approach, Alfonzo replaces the tombstone and he and Jaroslav climb out of the tunnel.

Udo intercedes with Pflaume before he can start barking orders and tells him of the burial site, playing it as an opportunity for a reburial to lay the fears of the workers and to 'cleanse' the worksite of malign influence. Pflaume accepts this and gives Udo 5 albus to get in touch with a friendly priest in Landau to accept the remains of Gaius, the prince in the tomb.

Session 4 (2022-10-27): As Alfonzo places the corpses of the dead workers on his handcart he realises two things. Firstly, there are three bodies to dispose of, not two as he was informed. Secondly, the third body is no labourer. Soft hands speak to a rich background. Alfonzo turns up a small fragment of a wooden printing block in the dead man's pocket, stained with ink.

Franzis received a payment from Herr Frommer, the mercenary captain, to take a good look at the fortifications and report back with Pflaume's progress to date. As he wanders about the various worksites, he spies a group of newly arrived soldiers setting up a temporary camp, with a strongbox wagon at its centre. A troop's pay might well be within.

Udo follows up on his promise to Pflaume and tracks down Father Gross, the local priest of the nearest village. His questions about the red thread and ash trees bear fruit, as Father Gross confirms some of the 'simple-minded' folk of the village cling to older pagan practices. He blames in particular one Mother Sarah, a wise woman in the village. In exchange for the reburial of Gaius the Frank, Father Gross requires Udo to talk to the woman and get her to respect his divine authority in the village.

Jaroslav examines the extra body on Alfonzo's cart and recognizes him from the Landau Rathaus. He's definitely a lawyer or merchant of some stripe. Alfonzo carts the bodies back to the outskirts of Landau where he is held up by Sforbeck, the captain of the guard. Sforbeck recognizes the dead man as Markus Klepper, an upstanding lawyer who deals in merchant contracts. He notes too that the man's ring is missing from his right middle finger. Alfonzo swears it was missing

⁵ I like giving Pete's character a nemesis. Pete always leans into his character and gives a good portrayal and having a rival pulled him into the setting quickly.

when he found the body. A perfunctory beating ensues, but Sforbeck's heart isn't in it⁶.

Udo visits Mother Sarah and has a long conversation with her about the tomb site, the red thread and local folklore. She complains to the scholar about the predations of Father Gross on the young women of the parish as they share a pipe of fine American tobacco. Udo writes a letter to "Sister Urzsula", his ex-Carmelite scholarly patron.

Lazaro is kept occupied by Weimer and Miglioresi, who have the poor coachman drive them hither and yon about the building site to take extensive if poorly defined measurements with theodelites, plumb-lines and a great deal of scratching down numbers on scraps of paper. Jaroslav arrives to distract Lazaro with conversation but quickly gets embroiled in discussions of perspective, geometry and sacred ratios with Weimer and Miglioresi. They are clearly fascinated by the proportions of the half-built fortifications of Landau.

In passing, Jaroslav mentions the death of Klepper, and Weimer flinches. Does he know the dead man? He overhears Miglioresi mention Ridolfini to Weimer. What is their connection to the Milanese printer?

Franzis stops to chat to his old colleague, Corporal Falsbender, who is overseeing the encampment around the salary wagon. The troop is the 'Honourable Gretzinger's Foot Musketeers', a mercenary band working for Ritter Gretzinger, recently returned from Lombardy.

When Alfonzo returns from burying the two workmen, he shows Jaroslav the print block fragment. Jaroslav examines it and notices that it appears to be part of a geometric diagram or artillery calculation.

Comments on E&A 004

General comments: I did have time for a Mausritter write-up lastish after all but forgot to remove the note saying I didn't. Profreding? Never heard of it.

Ironically I was only premature in marking the mice absence as I haven't got round to a write-up yet and the deadline approaches. I did find an old series of session write-ups from the *Kriegsmesser* game I ran three years ago and have pressed it into service this month to make up for the missing mice.

Brian Rogers: Re learning of marauding lizard folk while 100s of feet underground: Definitely sub-optimal. But also sub-terranean, and knowing PCs, likely far from sub-tle.

Re Zippo: As ever I enjoy your V&V wranglings. There's probably a Heightened Mass power he could have to make him as heavy as a hippopotamus, or rather a little lighter.⁷ The expulsion of compressed air must impact his stealth, and attract a lot of juvenile humour, but he's a fun character in golden or silver age mode. Zippo feels like the sort of character that would be an early Daredevil villain in Marvel, but works nicely as a DC-style pulp hero.

⁶ Beating No. 3.

⁷ I apologize for nothing!

Re B/X “Don’t tell kids they can’t play the character they want; just make it work.” Hear, hear. With younger players, though, I assume you’re not leaning into the fantasy *Attack on Titan* vibe that the giant invaders evoked. The inversion of killing things and taking back *your stuff* is clever too.

I applaud the idea of skill/test bonuses for background and profession, though I’d use a minimum of a +2 bonus, if not +5. I find +1s and +2s fiddly in practice and try to avoid them, though I can understand if you don’t want the background bonuses to overshadow class abilities.

Nice work on the X in 6 skills out of combat and the different die to represent degrees of pressure.

Clark B. Timmins: Another splendid collection of weird and wonderful monsters. Did anyone else find the Royal Mail’s *D&D* limited editions uninspired, particularly compared to some of the other excellent stamps Clark unearthed?

Re ‘xandering’ vs. ‘jayquaysing’: I feel it’s disrespectful to Janelle Jaquays to stick a new name on the term. One of the tomatoes is considerably overripe.

Roger BW: Re *Project L*: It is that very double-height, crowdfunded box that one of the games club brings to the lunchtime sessions, complaining all the while about the size of the box.

I knew the revised *Bayern* was bigger but a jump from 52 pages to 312 pages is huge. There must be loads of new material, encounters and side quests. Using the (almost) default MgTr character creation rules seems an odd choice. I like your alternative better. Does the box come with pre-generated PCs?

Is the in-universe explanation of the ‘specialised stutterwarp drive systems’ simply a pair of drives to double the range as I remember some designs from 2300AD back in the day, or something more detailed?

Cthulhu Eternal is a great idea. I wish it wasn’t fulfilled via DriveThruRPG. I dislike their watermarks.

Patrick Riley: *Amber Diceless RPG* provided me and a group of friends one of the best campaigns I’ve run over about six months in college and post-grad. Something about the group and the setting combined to produce real engagement. I’ve never had before or since players creating so many pieces of art or craft to add to the game.

Re Professor Farthington bonking Anan on the head: Ah, the old cranial trauma attitude readjustment technique. I enjoyed the stack of hand-drawn maps. Proper dungeon crawling, that.

RYCT Gabriel Roark re ‘Hit Dice’: I agreed. Health Dice was right there if you had to keep the abbreviation or Recovery Dice, or any number of better choices.

John Redden: Re Adrian Tchaikovsky: I’m reading *Cage of Souls*, which I’m also finding well-written and depressing. Other books of Tchaikovsky’s I’ve enjoyed more. He does write a lot so there are options at least.

Heath Row: RYCT me on RPGs focused on the labour movement: None spring to mind, though there are games like *Red Markets - A Game of Economic Horror*⁸, which use precarity and the gig economy as a core metaphor in their mechanics and settings. Looking on Boardgamegeek, there are many more boardgames that touch on the topic.

Avram Grumer: My workplace just got my team new 34" monitors to replace the paired 24" ones we'd been using previously. So Much Real Estate! Yet some of my colleagues kept one of the 24" monitors to use in portrait orientation for document reading. That makes me swivel more than Nick Fury on the Helicarrier.

Re *AW* and *FitD* clocks: Definitely useful tools for providing rising tension at the table.

I must look at *Never Tell Me the Odds* again. I only remember seeing the original beta version in 2018.

RYCT Brian Rogers re *Ticket to Ride: TtR: Paris* is a mostly metro-based good 3 player game, with a collect the red-white-and-blue cards side mechanic for good measure.

Jim Eckman: Nice list of book descriptions. I didn't recognize them all (I haven't read much Andre Norton, for shame) but anything with 'a sexy woman' smacks of Heinlein, doesn't it?

Re Traveller char gen and not wanting to go adventuring after x terms of hard work. Maybe it's a sly dig at the lack of a welfare state in the Imperium. Muster out in your forties in a backwater sector where job opportunities are scarce (or reserved for locals. Local jobs for local people!) and your choices are limited.

Michael Cule: Re deleting political commentary: I hear you brother. And I see that *Flip 7* claimed another victim/convert.

Re a dream duck: I'm picturing a dragon-sized water fowl perched on a hoard of stale bread and cauliflower leaves.

Pum: Re 'upgrading to Windows 11': Don't get me started. Both kids' machines (one desktop, one laptop) needed to be upgraded with the end of security updates for Windows 10 (the last Windows ever, if I remember the marketing bullshit at the time). I did at least find a script to debloat and improve the installation ISO to remove the hardware requirements Microsoft forced on Win11 and got rid of a lot of the surveillance spyware baked into the OS now. I can't imagine just how much e-waste the new hardware requirements will generate. It's criminal.

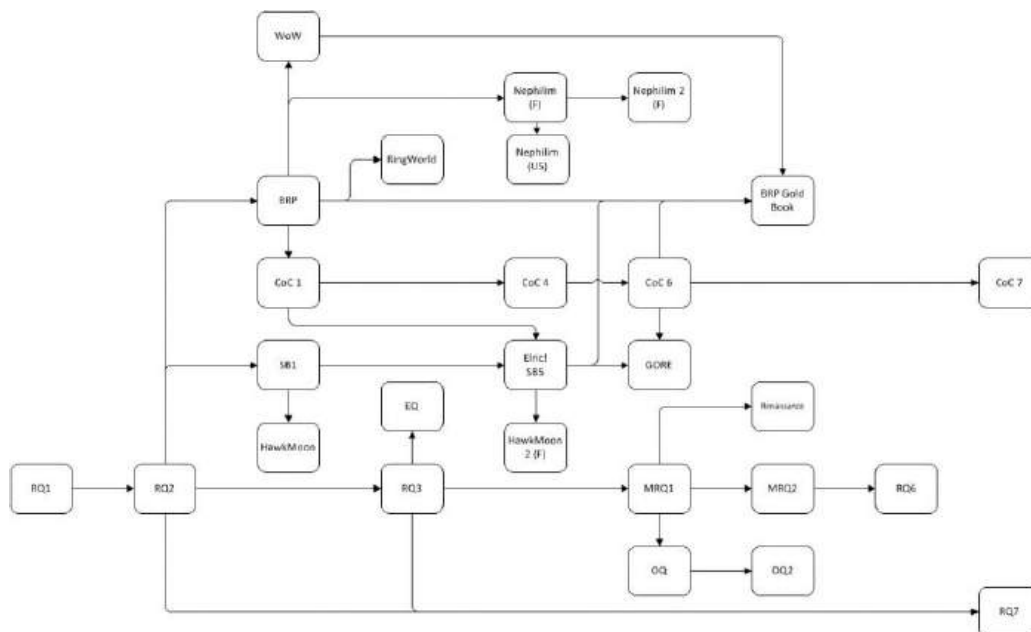
I agree with you on the size of the APA and struggling to get everything read, let alone commented upon.

RYCTM re *Mausritter*: The map is taken from the one in the core rules. The first adventure with the Shattered Oak I used was a published one, but after that I tended to wing it carefully craft my own material.

⁸ From the publisher's website: "In *Red Markets*, characters risk their lives trading between the massive quarantine zones containing a zombie outbreak and the remains of civilization."

Re different sized dice for initiative: I like any excuse to use a variety of dice. The much-missed *Marvel Heroic RPG* based on the Cortex system hit the spot for me with dice pools using d4–d12, and relegating the overused d20 to the bench.

RYCT Lisa re RQ 7th Ed: It's easy to get RQ editions muddled. The current Chaosium edition could reasonably be called RQ 4th Ed⁹, as the 4th Chaosium version of the game, and the current Mythras could be thought of as RQ 7th edition derived as it is from the 6th edition that preceded it. I found the following family tree by a user Mugen on the BRP forums¹⁰ and there are more convoluted and detailed versions knocking about. I have many quibbles about this particular outworking of the RQ family tree, but it's a place to start.



Patrick Zoch: Awesome pictures and tales of games from the Dice Tower Retreat. I'm jealous. I've played *Forest Shuffle: Dartmoor* on boardgamearena.com and enjoyed it. The terrain cards are a clever addition. Likewise, *Pergola*, which I played last week also online. I need to play it again to get a better grip with all the various ways to score points.

Fromage looks great. I must see about getting to play it. I love that the turning of the board mimics the turning of a cheese during the maturing process.

Mark Nemeth: Re observations on 'the unfortunate infant': I was always upset by fictional threats to children, and on becoming a father those feelings intensified. In my middle years with anxiety and depression accentuating my natural emotional lability I find scenes or reports of child harm very difficult to handle. X-card to rescue, I'd say.

RYCT me re retrograde *D&D*: I love the dungeon exploring aspect of it, the problem solving and the discovery of the unknown. Nowadays though, the

⁹ But that edition number was taken, abortively, by the ill-fated *RuneQuest: Adventures in Glorantha* draft from the 1990s.

¹⁰ <https://basicroleplaying.org/topic/4245-rq-genealogy/page/2/>

combat element leaves me cold, and more recent editions are so combat-centric and full of mechanical levers and moving parts that I have no interest. A bit of *B/X D&D* down an interesting dungeon still appeals to me, if not my players.

The observation about cryptography security (and by extension any security mechanism) isn't mind originally. It's circulated around the cryptography community for years. It's one of the strong arguments against 'security through obscurity'¹¹ that open source is designed to tackle (in part).

Brian Christopher Misiaszek: I hope you recovered fully from your COVID 19 bout. It didn't really put a dent in your page count though!

The new Mazorra material is fascinating if disturbing. The broken minds described are more horrifying to me than the cosmic horror implied by the *Twsha*.

RYCT Worldcon in Montreal in 2027: I doubt I'd make that, but there's a chance Dublin will get the 2029 Worldcon, and I'd definitely try to attend that one. Octocon, a cozy, smaller SF&F convention usually hosted in Dublin in October will be in Cork next year. That's also on my calendar.

RYCT Jim Vassilakos re seeing Cthulhoid monsters triggering a mental break: All good points. Remember also that many of the Mythos creatures simply don't exist in reality as understood by us simple primates. The sudden upturning of one's sense of what is real is shocking, certainly enough in the game context to justify panic, a fainting fit, etc.

Re moonburn: I remember an US exchange student at university who cut a swathe through a number of the young women of my acquaintance back in the day. It was only after the fact when comparing notes, that many of the pale and interesting Celtic beauties realised he was fond of the term 'moon tan' and had charmed more than one of them with the phrase.

I'm glad you sought out Yeats's story and I agree that community and practical ingenuity ought to beat beguiling words. I'm afraid it's not always so, but then there's little as disappointing as my species (nor as glorious on occasion).

Lisa Padol: I liked the RPG Bingo cards. The only one I really scored on was 'At the Table', which was nearly a full house.

Re the evolution of Dracula over time in your *Dracula Dossier* game: I love that, and the *Over the Edge* character evolution too. In many ways, that's my favourite form of character growth in a game. Things change and characters evolve but not just by the 'numbers go up' levelling model that's so common. *Fate* and *Cortex* both lend themselves excellently to this approach.

What is it about *Swords of the Serpentine* that makes it your favourite flavour of Gumshoe? At a guess, as it's one of the newest versions it likely has most wrinkles and odd gotchas caught and removed, but is there more than that?

Joshua Kronengold: Interesting comparison of *The Builders: Middle Ages* and *Project L*. I don't know *The Builders* at all but it's a clever viewpoint to think of the Tetris piece mechanic in *Project L* as worker placement. The Master action is the

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Security_through_obscurity

real key to efficient play, and I like how that can encourage players to take on more projects than perhaps is wise.

RYCT me re loners in a team game: “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!’.” Precisely! The core choice is one of playing to make the game better for everyone at the table, or playing to satisfy one’s own particular goals. There’s a lot of good stories to be told about the loner dragged into a messy found family drama. Wolverine in the *X-Men* comics has been used that way for literally decades. Wolvie is repeatedly cast as reluctant parent to a young woman (Kitty Pryde, Jubilee, and more recently Laura Kinney, likely many others) and it still works.

Vassilakos, Collinson, and Rader: (Jim) Excellent description of the work of the CC, Jim. Thanks for writing it up and, of course, thanks for filling the role so well.

(Jim) I too would love to see Spike and Paul Mason join the APA. I think Paul has retired from the RPG community pretty much though.

(Jim) Re whack-a-mole campaigns: I hear you, brother. One thing I’m pretty consistent about in my lazy GM approach is to write down NPCs as they appear and put them in a file for later reference. Whenever I feel like the NPC or plot kudzu (thanks Brian!) has gotten too much, I go back to the file and do a bit of re-incorporation for the upcoming session, linking past NPCs to current plots or characters. Sometimes my players even remember a returning name or face!

(Timothy) Re *Offworlders*: The game as written works well, but needs a fair bit of input from the GM for setting. There’s no explicit campaign or setting built in. Additionally, and unsurprisingly if you know my players, at least two of them decided they wanted to play a role not covered in the basic rules, so I had to scrounge around for fan-made versions or create my own of *The AI* and *The Android*. It also comes as no surprise that the risk adverse player wanted to play the super-strong and tough android, while the endlessly verbose player wanted to play the AI with eyes, ears and *a voice over the tannoy* everywhere.



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The Rhodomontadulous

Promenade

George Phillies
phillies@4liberty.net

Greetings to the writers of Ever and Anon.

Denizens of the Library: Ah yes, the kids want something demanding in its design features. Statting up comic book characters can be challenging. Good work at making Zippo look rules-compliant. Rules modifications are always of interest.

Rumbling Through Dungeons: The Lantern Bearers lasted a solid amount of time and came to an actual conclusion. A nice campaign.

Philatelic Monstrosities: Stamps as a source for monsters: How very clever! And these are indeed all monstrous.

Firedake's Hoard: Ah space exploration. The ship missions are appropriate; my recollection is that Traveller ships tended to be a bit small for their crew sizes, but that can create all sorts of interesting challenges. I agree on rule zero games, though the Rule Zero Champions campaign I once played in had an editorial committee to oversee the DM on rare occasions.

Quasipseudoludognostication: Understood about PvP in games. Once upon a time, when the D&D rules were three books, I was aware of two explicit player vs player sessions. The one I was in was Society of Ancients miniatures rules and about 1500 point armies plus a half-dozen D&D magicians. The technical phrase 'joint massacre' comes to mind.

Dice Corner: Interesting article on dice and bonuses. Predrawn maps: A fine idea. Uriah Blake's home is very well-described.

Reddened Stars: Oh, the pun. Yes, house rules were many. I remember a campaign in which each

player automatically started out with 40 followers.

Engines&Emulators: I hope your truly long-distance move is advancing. And tables: a traditional element of roleplaying game zines. A nice, chatty set of zine comments. I look forward to hearing about Lake Geneva.

Going-to-be-Adlibbed: Nonsense, French Imperial units are the creation of the Corsican Tyrant, the would-be Emperor of Europe. More Games I haven't played: A fine title and a good descriptions for no practical experience.

Attacks of Opportunity: My but you manage to go through a lot of different rules sets and scenarios with comments on each. Good work! Interesting observation on one vs. two columns.

Ronin Engineer: I recognize some of the books, I think. Good highly compressed zine reviews.

The Phoenix Nest: Deep historic detail is an alternative. Isolated clues like small pieces of a broken pot are a choice, less work for the gamesmaster, but more work keeping track of things.

"Now if two life forms can interbreed they are, on some level, the same species." Lygon. However, crossbreeds that are fertile are more complicated, but note the Savannah Cat, which is a cross between *Felis domestica* and another species. We are now six generations in, so matters appear to be settling down. This being Massachusetts, savannah cats (larger than regular cats, readily jump six or more feet in the air) are illegal here.

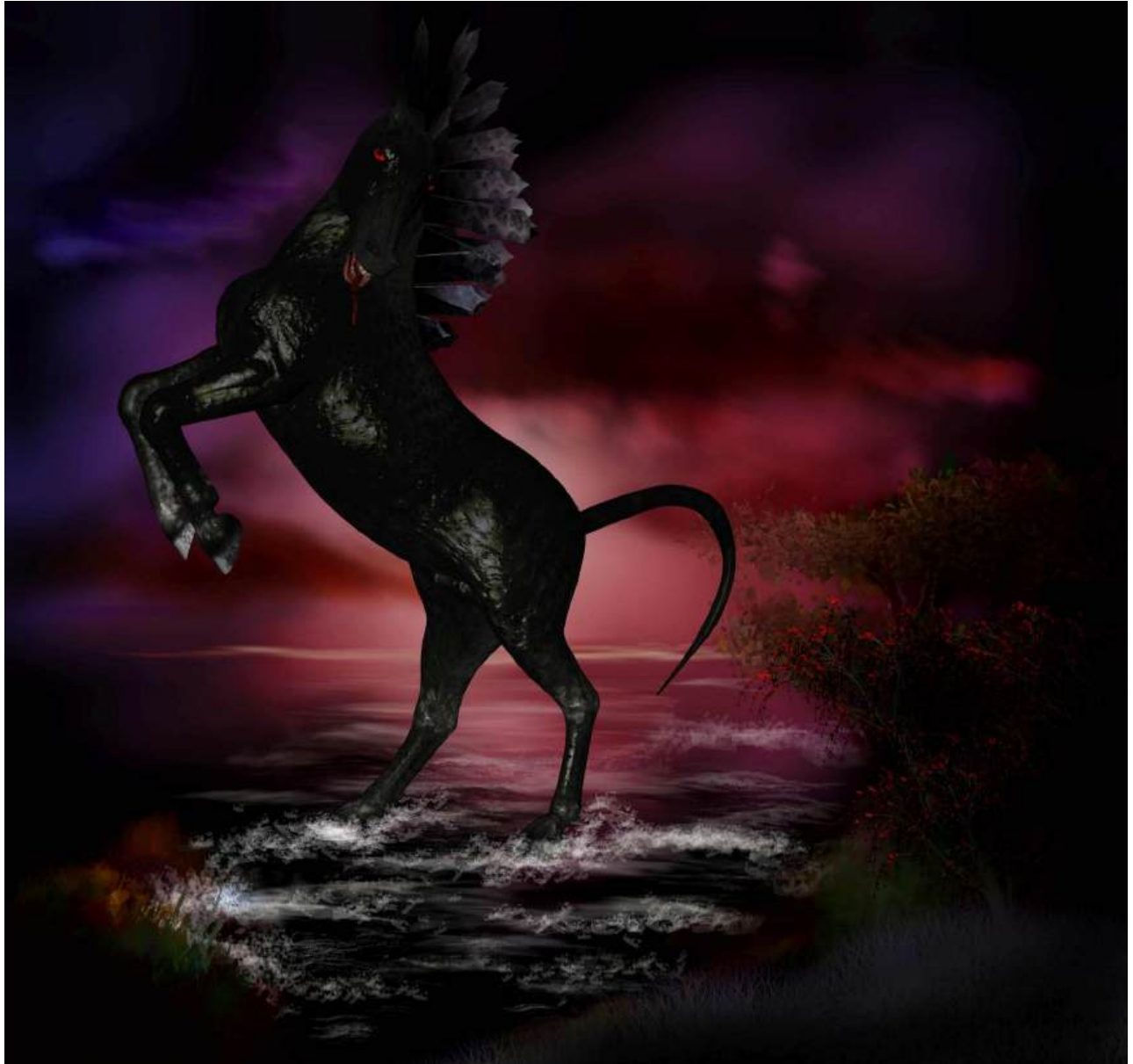
The Dragon's Beard: An enormous list of interesting Eurogames, well described.

Age of Menace: I rarely see interesting links, so you are most welcome. The young lady was creative with the rules.

And now I am out of space and time, but you can join A Gentle Stroll for more commenters: see next two pages.

A Gentle Stroll

October 2025 — Issue Five



Black Dragon Steezed at the Ocean

By Tiffanie Gray

Collation Filz

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Editorial Note

We are a bit late. September was an interesting month.

Please email PDFs of your zines to the collator, George Phillies, phillies@4liberty.net, by the first day of the month. Collation and distribution will occur soon thereafter.

Our experiment: After this first issue, A Gentle Stroll subscriptions are opt-in, not opt-out. After this first issue, you must ask to be subscribed to A Gentle Stroll, though the zine will also appear on the N3F web pages, with a rare issue mailed to all members.

General rules: Publication is monthly. Contributors are expected to stay on topic and remain civil to each other. Discussions of contemporary politics and graphic pornography will be rejected. Recall that A Gentle Stroll will appear with our other zines on our web pages, so matters you would not want seen by the public should go elsewhere. You retain all rights to your material, except that the N3F may use your submissions in this magazine, which may be distributed to subscribers and/or N3F members, and will be placed on our web site or other electronic archives.

Subscriptions: For the first some number of issues, A Gentle Stroll is free. After that, unless we end the project, contributors will be charged \$6 per year and be recognized as voting members of N3F (there is no obligation to vote or participate in other N3F activities). Readers are charged nothing. Contributors and readers have to opt-in to receive A Gentle Stroll. Contributors and readers also get to choose: (1) Receive only A Gentle Stroll and a rare issue of our other zines, or (2) Receive all N3F fanzines.

The PHOENIX NEST



MY LEGACY: How high can I pile it this time?

Among the campaigns I look back on with pride, one of the best was an example both of taking as found art material from another game, a design approach from a second and a background idea from another.

This was a GURPS game but you could have done it with any generic system that allowed for fantastical characters.

The set up was that the player characters began as amnesiacs awakening in a cave after what turned out to be a considerable period in suspended animation. They had no idea who they were but each of them bore a tattoo of a silver dragon on their forearm.

The character generation was where I stole a design approach which came from EVERWAY. That game starts with the player choosing an art card which depicted his character. I had collected a lot of art cards during my obsession with EVERWAY and I asked the players to do the same for the people they woke up being in

**A zine for EVER & ANON 5 by
Michael Cule**

**Of 3 Barratt Place, Easton Street,
High Wycombe, Bucks. HP11 1XS.**

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E-mail: Michael.Cule@gmail.com

Phone 01494 535878

Mobile 07816101942

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that cave. I then designed the characters powers and abilities and let the players gradually discover what they were and slowly expose their backstory.

The art material was the map from QUESTWORLD, an early non-Gloranthan fantasy setting from Chaosium. The map had mountains, ridges, rivers enough for me to drop down settlements and start to depict a world. I've never felt competent to design geography so I took someone else's creation and used it to add verisimilitude to my creation.

The background detail was that of the Invisible Clergy from UNKNOWN ARMIES. In that there were 333 possible slots in which people who had become the perfect incarnation of some human role (the Warrior, the Mother, the True King) watched over the world waiting for the array to be complete and the world to die and be reborn.

I changed the size of the array and allowed groups of people to fill slots if they fuse to become a single creature. There was one slot left for which two cabals were competing. You guessed it: it was the Dragon. And in the end the

PCs fulfilled their destiny and transformed the world.

Along the way we created a fairly consistent if quirky background and explained all the elements that had been so casually incorporated from the art cards.

The title I eventually gave it was THE NAMES THAT LIVE which was an echo of Zelazny's ISLE OF THE DEAD and TO DIE IN ITALBAR. (Gosh, it's decades since I re-read those!)

If I were to do it now, I still wouldn't use something as hand-wavy as EVERWAY but I'm not at all sure I'd use something as crunchy as GURPS. In a sense I was lying to my players by proposing it as a GURPS game: the setting fought hard against the system. But they seemed to have fun.

THE WAY OF THE WORLD

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness... And in my case, stinking head colds and lots of phlegm. Too Much Information? Well, let us say that the past week and a bit have not been pleasant or good for my gaming.

Before that set in, I spent the first Saturday of the month at the Autumn Tringcon, a board game event that I might have mentioned before. I cleared a fair bit of my shelves of long unplayed games and came back with a copy of VITICULTURE, a game about managing vineyards which was the New Hotness about five years ago. At a very reasonable price too.

Despite that I suspect this is my last Tringcon. Getting up early in the morning always wipes me out and though I can get a lift there (thanks again, Drak!) I discovered the price of a taxi home from that remote location was just as staggering as I had feared. Getting old probably means giving up some of my pleasures.

¹ Due to an unplanned slip of the tongue they also discovered that their superior the Magistrate knows about the Ancients. I will have to work this in.

CUNNING PLANS AND OVER-REACHING AMBITIONS

The Monday night GURPS game of investigators and lawyers (LAW & ORDER: MEGALOS might be an alternative title) finally got a couple of sessions which wrapped up the first storyline of the current season: they discovered what the half Sea-Elf inhabitants of a remote village were after in their peculiar tale of salvage and insurance. It was a giant submersible warship from Ancient Times¹. They got the alert to the Emperor but not before it had set sail to start a war with the Muslim Empire to the south. Can't have everything.

The second session was driven on line as I was still in the midst of my cold. The Wednesday night game was cancelled entirely. Which will at least mean the following writeup is slightly less out of date than it might otherwise have been.

GLAMOUR DAYS AND NIGHTS ²

Player Characters:

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

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

Drak as JARATHIR another YT initiate with a Big Sword.

Martin as SANDENE, a (female) scout/sniper because some people have to be different. But still worships YT. But not as different as...

Pum as KEANUS another heavy infantryman who worships Humakt just to prove the tolerance of the Red Goddess.

Non Player Characters In this Episode

² Session for 30 July 2025

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.

GREAT SISTER: The mystic and economic goddess of the Empire.

RHADAMATHYS GORT Chef and proprietor of the Red Dove Restaurant.

SOR-ETTE: A well meaning medical lassie with a Mysterious Past.

GRIGORY: A Char-Un infant with a furry hat.

MIKOS LOKARNASTES: An eleven year old and a natural leader of his contemporaries. Mostly leads them into trouble. Hereinafter referred to as the Young Person.

PHARNASTES:THE CHIEF OVERSEER: A very important (and much overburdened) investigator.

Lesser investigators and functionaries. A long suffering (but pretty) bureaucrat. A marching band.

We began in the middle of the day³ (look this up for the date for flavour) after they had returned from their strenuous midnight exertions at the Senator's estate and up in Gbaji Park. Both groups had then collapsed about dawn and slept for a while (except for Sandene who never

sleeps) before awakening to a brunch prepared by Vishi.

VISHI: Did you have an interesting night, mistress?

SANDENE: Fought an intruder. Rendered incapable by magic.

As he left to 'get supplies' Martin reflected his character must have failed her Hate Praxian roll.

SANDENE He'll start to think I like him!

Vishi returned with freshly cooked sausages, barley porridge and some information.

VISHI: It is most convenient. They have somebody come round proclaim the news at the intersections. Fellow in the robes of Etyeries Herald. Very fine speaking voice he had. I suppose you get that when you're a herald. He was going on about how everybody should be calm. He said that the purely natural and expected Lunar phenomenon should have not have caused any panic. The stargazers were giving their opinion that the strange early appearance of the Storm God's Ring is not at all alarming. It's said that there was some disturbance at the camp of the Redland Auxiliary Cavalry due their less civilized natures. Order has now been restored. Disciplinary matters will be dealt with by the Military Authorities. Oh and there was a raid on the Palace Of Opulence, wherever that is, during the night. Enquiries are proceeding. And Great Sister has called her cultists to additional duty keeping the streets calm for the duration. I saw the Lady Sor-Ette from across the way go off in her Sister's Army uniform and the Janitrix was also with her in a slightly more splendid uniform
JARATHIR: So, no speculation.
VOSTOR: No spreading rumour or gossip.

Vishi reminded them that there was an appointment for them to attend the Office of

that it was Day 11 of Earth Season, Crescent Come (Windsday) Harmony Week and I am accepting no retcons on this. More than I've already used I mean.

³ There was some dispute about the date. Alan especially wanted know when he could refresh his Rune Points at the weekly Seven Mothers Service. I have now ruled (some weeks in the real world later)

Detached Duty. Eshan said they would all attend in nicely polished armour and clean uniforms.

By the time they were ready to leave, there were people on the level below, a mixture of sorcerers and men in grey who were probably the investigators poking around in the flat where the Gbaji Park killer had been staying.

The Grim Guard were the investigative branch of the cult of Danfive Xaron, the member of the Seven Mothers of the Red Goddess who takes in criminals and fiercely reforms them.

ESHAN: You can commit any crime but as long as you are a member of them it won't be remembered.

One of their co-residents was standing with them in his militiaman's uniform. He pointed out the soldiers as they came downstairs and some of the investigators came to intercept them.

INVESTIGATOR: I understand that two of you were present at the incident in the park?

JARATHIR: Yes, sir. We were interrogated quite thoroughly last night.

INVESTIGATOR: My boss wants a word.

ESHAN: They have an appointment about their appearance before the Red Emperor. Will this over-rule that?

Which was shameless name dropping.

INVESTIGATOR: Very well but could you two please report to (*scribble, scribble*) this office at the barracks of the Black Army, as soon as is convenient for. Today please.

On the way to the Office of Detached Duty, the streets were quiet. There were signs of damage, some of fire damage from fire but not much. Repair crews were at work and vigiles (the people who patrol the city at night and are responsible for fire-fighting) taking notes.

People were complaining some of them very loudly.

"They took five crates of gin. Five crates! Do you know how much gin costs me? And now it will be sold off on the streets by some sly lad."

When they got to the office there was a queue. A line to out do all the lines they had met since coming to the city. A variety of uniforms of military units from all over the empire were waiting and trying argue the toss. The soldiers settled down and displayed patience. Jarathir took one look at the queue and asked Eshan if he and Keanus could have permission to go and deal with whatever the Grey Guard wanted them for.

"If they decide they want us to stay for further questioning I'll ask if we can send you a message. Sir."

As they made their way to the Black Army's Barracks the two even more detached soldiers saw a Moon Boat passing through the air overhead, gliding along a moonbeam and descending into the Upper City. It looked very magnificent: the epitome of luxury travel

JARATHIR One day!

The remaining troopers and their officer sat down and gradually shuffled along the benches. People bitched and gossiped from either side.

A number of people speculated (in defiance of orders) about what happened the previous night. Vostor gambled whenever he could find a sucker.

The commander of the Redland Auxiliary Cavalry was rumoured to wear trousers "like a southern barbarian" and his troops took such offence at that that "the entire lower half of his wardrobe was destroyed: whilst he was wearing some of it."

"Do you fancy a transfer to the border cavalry?"
"Oh hell no!"

PUM Possibly his future cognomen will be 'trouserless'.

GM: "Theodore the Debagged!"

They heard a lot court gossip, including allegations of the Emperor's romantic predilections and rumours of his current state of constipation.

VOSTOR: I feel it is important that I make it clear that I do not give a shit. In support of the Emperor.

They made their way along the corridor, around one corner and around another before they fetched up facing the same clerk they had seen several days ago. Young. Female. Pretty. And Deeply Fed Up.

CLERK: Ah, yes... *(Sigh)* The parade has been delayed for at least three days. So I'm going to authorise your continued residence in the city *(She issued paperwork for rent and food dole)* I'll authorise pay and allowances for your people. They will have to queue at that officer over there *(she gestured at another long line)*. I'm afraid I have no more information than that. If you urgently need more you can go to the Palace of Glad Rejoicing they're the ones who are telling us that at least a three day delay. Reasons not specified. We are having to extend the stay of several units in the city and we're going to go over budget. Again. I do not know what you are going to do with yourselves and I don't know what will be the next stage of this process. I'm sorry but that's what I'm telling everyone.

When she heard that their missing colleagues were helping the Grey Guard with their investigations she blinked and agreed that of course they were not in trouble. She said they could send someone (Eshan for preference) in another two days.

At the Black Army barracks the two 'witnesses' were taken downstairs. Down a lot of stairs. Steep ones. To interrogation room 53,

KEANUS What?

JARATHIR They're going to ask us questions. That's what 'interrogation' means.

KEANUS Oh right. Sounded a bit sinister.

After passing through several iron doors which were locked behind them, going down two flights of stone steps⁴ they got to the interrogation room. There was a tiny window in which a small sliver of light could be seen.

"Wait here."

There was also an enormous mirror right across the wall from where they were seated. Which was very expensive. And unusually (though not uniquely) using silver as a base.

After a while a large gentleman in a lot of armour came through. The two soldiers stood respectfully though they did not recognise the insignia of rank. The moon tattoo on his arm was surrounded by thorns and death runes.

He did not look happy.

CHIEF OVERSEER PHARNASTES: I am Pharnastes. Overseer. I understand you were present at the latest incident in the park.

JARATHIR: The spider lady thing.

C.O.P. Tell me about that. How did you come to be there?

Concentrating on his Truth Rune, the soldier produced a clear and precise report. He listened and nodded. And then he turned to Keanus and asked for the same from him. Which he managed up to the point that the 'spider lady thing' looked into his eyes at which point his narrative lost what little coherence it had.

KEANUS It was all so beautiful! You should have seen the grass.....

C.O.P. All right! Enough, enough! Hush I'd like to thank you on behalf of the authorities for having brought us the first leads on this case.

JARATHIR I'm sorry we couldn't bring an end to it.

The Overseer cautioned them against telling people what happened in the park.

C.O.P. Some people, hearing of such terrible

⁴ JARATHIR All right maybe it is a bit sinister.

crimes, try to use them as cover for their own offences. More difficult in this case.

KEANUS. The eight legs are probably tricky.

JARATHIR Taking the head off a body and leaving it desiccated...

C.O.P.: You can get spider venom in some places in the city and therefore it might be possible to waste our resources.

JARATHIR: I hadn't even considered criminals might do that sort of thing.

C.O.P.: Well, that's why I'm in my job and you are in yours. (*Stands*) Thank you. I will make a faithful report. Your courage was... perhaps unwise. And you chose to leave your post... which is what I would expect one of my people to do. You are not in trouble with me.

He confided that the redoubtable Janitrix had been very upset about seeing but not seeing the murderer.

He asked them to let him know if they came across any more indications of the spider thing or any other strange cases in the city. In the event this was to be a command they only obeyed when they weren't in a hurry.

JARATHIR Would that include distant sightings of a man with red glowing hands?

Pharanastes sat himself and them down again while they gave details of their encounters though not of events the previous night at the Senator's place. The Overseer took notes, thanked them again and said he was confident that it could not be long before the matter of the 'weirdo' was sorted out.

Jarathir asked about the rumours that the Bat Man was if not authorised by the law, at least on the right side of it.

C.O.P.: People want there to be heroes. They want there to be defiant bandits who are Doing Good. They want there to be secret champions. People are generally idiots.

Clearly this was not a Gloranthan Commissioner Gordon.

They clambered slowly back up to surface level but still managed to get free in time to spot the others on the opposite side of one of the wide boulevards of the city. They were about to rejoin them when the sound of a marching band filled the air.

Coming down Victory Avenue came glockenspiels⁵, drums and pipes.

(There was an argument here about whether they could get across the road before the parade arrived. As an elderly gent I never run out in front of military parades, glockenspiels or no. But I let them have their way because they argued the laws of physics should allow it or some such nonsense.)

There was a large woman on a palanquin at the front of the parade casting blessings, infused with the power of the Red Moon to all and sundry. This was The Great Sister (they had at least seen posters of her in their lodgings). Vostor saw Jarathir crossing the road and also saw Great Sister track him for a moment as if she had noticed and was interested in him.

She bent down to the person beside her and whispered to him until her attention shifted from Jarathir and the parade passed them by. The soldiers also noticed quite close to Great Sister, marching beside her Palanquin was the Janitrix. Further back, conducting the glockenspiels was Sor-Ette, the young lady from their floor.

When debating what to do with their suddenly spare time Jarathir mentioned wanting to sample more of the local cuisine than Vishi's "perfectly adequate - no disrespect" porridges and morning sausages.

The officer took this as a grand idea.

⁵ Look I can have glockenspiels in my Glorantha if I want them)

Vishi bristled a little but got out a notebook and started looking up local eateries. When questioned he said that he had spent his day researching the local area. Jarathir turned down 'bar snacks' at the bar on the corner of their insula and then accepted the suggestion of the posh dining place diagonally opposite, the Red Dove Restaurant. "I'm planning to spend more than is sensible on a meal but this is Glamour after all."

VISHI: Suitable for family celebrations...

SANDENE Weddings and funerals...

VISHI: First dates. There are more expensive places. But this, though not cheap, is close. And recommended. People have recommended it to me.

Vostor remained baffled as to why his grandmother had assigned Vishi to him.

VISHI: Well sir, you were going to the Imperial Capital. And they thought you might need a manservant to help you come up to Capital standards.

VOSTOR: That was nearly an insult... but that would be my mum. Making sure that I've got clean everything on...

JARATHIR In case you got run over by a chariot.

An expression almost crossed Vishi's face but he suppressed it and mentioned in passing the Moon Rock Cafe and the Palace of Opulence but the latter had been 'raided' during the disturbances of the previous night.

VOSTOR: Raided for what?

VISHI: The rumour says... Am I not supposed to repeat rumours to you now that I've gone and gathered them.

JARATHIR As long as you're not speculating...

VOSTOR: As long as you're reporting what someone else has said...

VISHI: The guardsmen who were around here earlier said that it looked like a very professional job: they went to the spice, herb and wine lockers and took the most valuable items.

But when they got to the Red Dove the owner told them he was 'booked up until Sacred Time'. So they went to the Moon Rock Cafe instead. Inside everything conceivable was on the menu and all of it was ludicrously expensive.

VOSTOR: There is something that's cheapest but it's hard to find.

The wait staff said: 'If you can't see it, ask. we have it.'

GM: *They say 'see the daily special' but there's a question of whether you should ever choose the daily special.*

MARTIN: *No, in most pre-literate societies there won't be a written board. They'll just tell you what they've got.*

DRAK: *No, they will very precisely estimate the value of my purse and my war booty tokens and then propose a menu to us. Because if it's a decent restaurant they will squeeze us for exactly the right amount.*

(Which told me!)

They had a wonderful evening. They were very broke at the end but Vostor stole the menu as a souvenir. There were souvenir mugs and cutlery but they didn't feel the need.

Vostor managed to recoup a certain amount of the bill by gambling.

All of them were noticeably rolling home as they passed the vigils in the streets. "Please citizens, go quietly to your homes."

The gate to the Insula was opened by the young boy who assisted the Janitrix who was still out on her parade duties. "She's highly connected." He added that the 'law enforcement gentlemen' had left and then spat at the menion of the filth.

Vishi was waiting for their return

JARATHIR I brought you a bread stick.

VISHI: Thank you sir! With cheese on it!

VOSTOR: That's culture.

VISHI: How early do you want to be woken in the morning.

VOSTOR: Not at all.

BANG! BANG! BANG! On the door!

It was a young person, one of the gang of pre-teens they had seen around the block.

YOUNG PERSON: It's taken him! It's taken him!

JARATHIR What's taken who?

YP: The tentacle thing from the privy!

VOSTOR: The tentacle thing from the privy has taken who?

YP: Grigory! Grigory! Grigory from the roof!

Vostor had to be persuaded that yes, there were people, a whole family of Char-Un, living (illegally and in a yurt) on the roof. And they did vaguely recall seeing a kid in a Char-Un fur hat hanging around with the other kids and trying to ingratiate himself with them.

The Young Person said that the tentacle thing had come up through the privy with the loose stone and just grabbed Grigory.

YP We loosened it a bit..

ESHAN: Why did you loosen it?

YP: To see what was down there.

Getting out of their best uniforms and into their armour and kit took a little while and then they took a look at the privy with the cracked stone. The larger members of the party were going to have problems so after lowering a torch into the hole (the flame flared with the gases coming out of the sewer) and spotting a trail in the muck leading east, they left the building and went to find a manhole cover they could prise up.

There was even a ladder down into the darkness so they got themselves into a marching order, gave the officer the torch and went down into the muck leaving their large shields on the surface.

There was scarcely a need for any tracking. The outfall from the privies in the Insula was over

there and from it a trail in the muck very like the body of a child being dragged went to the opposite side of the main sewer.

The weather had been mostly dry but there was a certain amount of wet ordure for them to trudge through.

The trail led to where the wall on the right hand side of the sewer had collapsed or perhaps tunnelled through from the other side. They had to crouch to follow the trail into the tunnel. The tunnel broke into one of the cellars of the houses across the street from them.

GM: I need you to make Move Silently rolls and tell me how badly you fail.

After a bunch of successes and even a couple of special results, Keanus (who had put his heavy metal armour on) rolled a 92 which was not a success.

JARATHIR The good thing is they'll think it's only one person.

Something moved in the cellar. And then we went into detailed combat time the details of which will not be of much interest to you.

Keanus redeemed himself by using his Detect Enemies spell to determine that there were two somethings in the room that hated them enough to trigger the spell.

It was a fight in an imperfectly lit room with a couple of Krashtkids. These are eyeless crab-like creatures that live in dark places, tunnel through everything with their nasty sharp teeth and are the children of the Chaos god of intrigue and assassins. They have nasty long tongues and several other attacks all of which were tried (to no great effect) on Our Heroes.

Spells and swords flew. People scrambled in the rubble of the tunnel.

At the end of the fight there were two dead Krashtkids one rescued Char-Un child. Paralysed and panicking but rescued.

The cellar (whose exits to the rest of the building had been sealed off) had piles of bones, some of rats but some looking distressingly human and even more distressingly young.

There was also a tunnel that led off to the east but with Grigory to return to his family they decided not to pursue it but to report the matter to the authorities. Vostor objected but was overruled.

When they got to street level the vigiles were there looking down the open manhole cover and enquiring if they had committed this offence. After being offered a cool explanation they got told it was a likely story they frightened the busybodies with the legs and tongue they had brought as proof. At which point the Janitrix came up and told them what was what.

JARATHIR I've just realised I'm going to have to go and talk to Phranastes again.

VOSTOR: You don't have to...

JARATHIR I told him I'd would report anything unusual.

At the dropping of that dread name the vigiles turned pale declared this to be a crime scene "Move along, move along. Nothing to see here."

Sor-Ette turned up, took the paralysed boy into her care and sent a runner off to the nearest temple to get an antidote.

The next couple of hours were absorbed with reports and people stomping around. Phranates turned up and those who hadn't met him got to be impressed by his authority and glum demeanour.

He told them not to tell anyone about this in the interest of preventing panic. For some reason Eshan wanted to tell the Overseer about the Man Bat events of the previous night but when the other people who had been there remembered the promise they had given the Senator not to mention those events to anyone they stood on his toes and reminded him.

The Overseer left them with further exhortations to silence. A short while later workmen turned

up and started barricading the tunnel off the sewer.

When the Overseer went away the Janitrix invited them all into her apartment and gave them all hot milk mixed with a little brandy.

JANITRIX: My dears, oh dear. I'm going to have to tell you something and you're not going to like it.

KEANUS Did somebody tell you not to talk about something?

JANITRIX: No Somebody (*she looked at her icon of Great Sister*) told me to tell you. You're from the Second Furthest Foot. You're not to repeat this to anybody...

VOSTOR: Is there nothing I can send to my mother.

JANITRIX: Your mother knows about this already.

There was an outburst of banter.

GM: Can I get to the moment of tragedy here?

JANITRIX: At the opening of the Temple of The Reaching Moon, from underneath the ground a dragon woke up.

ESHAN: What?

JANITRIX: A Dragon, a True Dragon, a Brown True Dragon. Under the site of the Temple.

VOSTOR: How big?

JANITRIX: Reports are confusing. There are probably survivors from your unit. But I'm not sure how many. And virtually the whole leadership of the Empire in Dragon Pass didn't survive...

All of them were stunned, overwhelmed, upset.

The Janitrix had learned this from Great Sister who had been called to the capital by her brother the Red Emperor. "The news should reach the capital by ordinary means in a couple of days. Things could get a bit dicey."

They contemplated the likely fates of their family members and Legion comrades.

Tears were running down the Janitrix's face.
"I've lost a lot of comrades. Never get used to it.
She (*the Great Sister*) she said to invite you to
her presence. I can fix it up for you."

None of them said they were too busy.

The menu that Vostor had nicked turned out to
be a sign that said "Reserved for party of six"

They slept late.

We decided that the next day was the Seven
Mothers holy day and they got to renew their
Rune Points.⁶

When Vishi brought in breakfast (pork bellies
and beans) Vishi said: "Sir, do you want any
gin? I mention this because I've been offered a
crate by the market traders and I'm not entirely
sure it's legal."

They decided that they weren't going to risk
offending people who lived in the same building
by acquiring evidence against them.

VISHI: In that case you probably don't want to
hear about the second hand goods dealer locking
himself in his apartment and not wanting to
come out. About thirty six hours now.

JARATHIR That sound like Somebody Else's
Problem.

ESHAN: Perhaps mention it to the Janitrix.

VISHI: Right you are, sir. I'll just mention
things when they threaten your life.

Eshan sent Vishi off to see the Janitrix and get
details of their appointment at the Court of Great
Sister and took himself off to the Temple of the
Seven Mothers to catch the early(ish) service.

Sor-Ette came around to check none of them had
been bitten by the chaos things and reported that
Grigory was still traumatised but recovering.
She thanked Eshan.

He got the feeling she was depressed about
something other than the stress of the past few
days.

SOR-ETTE: I don't like to burden people
but... You are strangers and you seem to have
good relations with the authorities: they seem to
think very highly of you. I have been brought up
by my grandfather. But I don't really know
anything about my other family... I've never had
the nerve to ask him. We have moved about
quite a bit. We have... Umm. He's a very
reserved old man. He's never told me anything
about myself. I don't know quite what to do.

Eshan offered to speak to the old man but she
just shook her head and said he'd been 'upset
about something' recently. "He's illuminated.
Which is another barrier between us."

"He has done everything for me... But I don't
know the truth. What would you advise?"

JARATHIR May I ask why this is so
important to you?

SOR-ETTE: Have you ever not known who
you are?

JARATHIR Who you are is who you are.
Where you came from if it has no effect on you
is not part of who you are.

That seemed to help a little.

At which point there was a banging on the door
and it was Chief Overseer Pharanastes wanting a
favour.

The Overseer thanked her for her co-operation
the previous night.. Embarrassed, she turned and
went across to her own apartment. Opened the
door and called out 'Grandfather!'

C.O.P.: I don't want to cause you any trouble...

KEANUS Oh good. Bye then!

C.O.P.: I was talking to the officer. There's a
complication following on from your encounter
last night. I sent some of my people down that

⁶ This was wrong according to my later calculations
but I hand waved it into the background.

tunnel. It leads down to the heart of the red light district. To down to under the temple of Uleria⁷. **JARATHIR** Legs and tongue have some association with Uleria.

C.O.P.:: They got as far as the warding of the temple and turned back.

Which led to Vostor volunteering to infiltrate the temple of Uleria.

VOSTOR: Sir, I'm going to need a budget!

DISTRACTIONS. The characters got a chance to improve their minimal Culture (Lunar Heartlands) *DRAK: You only get twenty percent in your own culture! GM: Have you heard some of the people who think they know what they know? DRAK: You have a one in five chance of saying hello properly? GM: A stressful situation when it comes to greeting someone is knowing how to address a judge in court.* Laws about menus. Food curiosities from the players' world travels. Whether Pum's character really believes in the Boot Fairy.

IGGY'S THEME: LET ME RECOMMEND TO YOU

The list in my personal Appendix N would double the length of this zine and can mostly be spotted on my bookshelves. (Perhaps I should publish my catalogue if I can find where I put the results of scanning my collection all those years ago.) And it contains material (such as the Dr Fu Manchu pastiches of Clay Van Ash) which would be regarded as very poor taste nowadays. (That went into the STARGATE VR 1 game a few years back.)

Let me instead propose to you a series I've got at least two convention games and one campaign of IN NOMINE out of. A series of books about fictional cities at various points in their histories. BARMi is about a mediterranean city. LEBEK about a city on the Baltic sea. There are others set in Arabia (which is where I put my IN NOMINE game) and one in MesoAmerica. They features a grand panorama of each phase of the

city's history, showing what has decayed and what has been built on the ruins of previous centuries. If you can't get a story out of that I despair of you.

Schoolbooks often have visual stimulation that can put you (and your players) right into a setting.

COMMENTARIAT ON E&A 3 Left Over from Last Time

LISA PADOL: RYCT PUM: Nothing was finally resolved about the Monster Hunters game. I just (to my shame) abandoned it *in media res.* // **RYCT Me** r I shifted the large and more expensive games which covered the cost of my purchasing VITICULTURE. The games that are hard to shift are the cheaper, smaller ones that I now regret purchasing. To the charity shops with them and soon. // The panel with GRH didn't go well. I didn't moderate well and let someone talk about their job creating training scenarios for government more than I should have. // Re: Six Gods. I went with Son because mentioning any of his areas of power (Warrior, Hunter, Bachelor) would make him less than he actually was. Youth might make it if the language could specify male youth. // The context of the Glorantha game should be becoming clear by now. // It was definitely Graham. // I wanted to know how to get all the irrelevant stuff about earthquakes out of the material.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: Vostor is a lot less gracious than Bertie Wooster was. Some of his team-mates appreciate Vishi a lot more than he does. // I tend to go for a variant of deontology in which your Duty is a personal choice, a decision about what sort of person you define yourself as. Yes, that's partly stolen from Lazarus Long. Better him than Kant.

JIM VASSILAKOS: I'm a little confused. 'Manipulator' is a psi power In Your Traveller Universe? Because I'm accustomed to think of it

⁷ Goddess of Love

as a weird thing the Hivers do⁸ which isn't psionic based. // **RYCT Me:** The envelopes are there to make characters who were going to be much of a muchness (all soldiers of one sort or another from the same province) more distinct and to give the early interactions in the capital a kick start. You can use the idea on any game system, whether randomly generated or designed.

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: Re Your Last Word: I only ever once played a game where the players had characters who were themselves transported into a fantasy universe. I got firmly told by Chris that he played to become someone other than who he was.

COMMENTARIAT ON E&A 4

BRIAN ROGERS: RYCT Me: It's almost the classic way with the second edition of a game. It loses sight of what gave it mass appeal and allows a subset of followers (or in some cases the original author) to go off in an erudite direction.

MARK A. WILSON: My commiserations on the job loss. // I know what you mean about the heaviness of the mechanics of BRINDLEWOOD BAY compared with FIASCO⁹. But I think the heavier touch is needed because BB is trying to create a season with a growing, horrific core mystery and there should be means to track such stuff.

CLARK B TIMMINS: My heart rejoices to see public servants in so many countries warning the Youth of the perils they may find beyond the city walls! **RYCT Me:** I too have fed my players meaningless flavour details for them only to obsess about them. I could solve this in various ways. "Don't do that then," is the boring one. "Make what they obsess over into the thing that leads them to the truth," is the Walking-The-High-Wire-Without-A-Net version. Having an NPC Learned person come in and tell them

they're wrong is somewhere in the middle. Just telling them to their faces as the GM that they are barking up the wrong tree is the crude version but I have sometimes been that desperate.

ROGER B_W: RYCT Me: I meant 'extinct for the several millennia the city has been here'. Which, if the people in that would know anything about plate tectonics, might be suspicious in itself. But they don't and so any deep secret (such as the huge plug that the presence of the Imperial Family, epitome of all that suppresses Change, forms in the centre of the city await discovery by any players who get curious enough. // I think the way to do a city is to leave a lot of the map undetailed and provide means to fill in who lives/works in a particular building to be decided procedurally. Worry about verisimilitude (wonderful word that) rather than completeness. // I had an explanation for RACHE. It means Bloodhound in one of the Empire's languages and is an epithet for the Chief Overseer they meet in this issue but the matter never came up.

PATRICK RILEY: Your list of Games I Like To Read & Play turned into a list of Games I Used To Love & Have Fallen Out With. Which I could have done if I were feeling more frank. I suspect it is a necessary consequence of growing old. // I do agree that the rule for critical/special results should be consistent. Whether a game needs two levels of Very Good Result like RQ is debatable but I remain fond of RQ and other BRP variants that use it.

JOHN REDDEN: From one merely on the sidelines of the current crisis (and very happy to remain so) to one on the frontlines my sympathies and support. // **RYCT Me:** As I said to Roger, yes it would be alarming if the people there knew what was going on.

HEATH ROW: Regarding ISIRTA: The Heath/Wilson dialogue is about the leaders of the Conservative and Labour parties at the time.

⁸ And in my TRAVELLER Universe some humans, very, very secretly. Perhaps write about that in My Legacy. Hmm....

⁹ The Plain People of E&A: First edition, always! ME: Our minds are as one in this! TPPoE&A: Good man, yesself!

I was an enthusiast for Angus Prune's *oeuvre* at the time it first went out. I have particularly fond memories of the John & Mary sketches though Lady Constance De Coverlet was less wonderful.

AVRAM GRUMER: Re SCUM & VILLAINY: Maybe what I did wrong was be too nice about Heat. My lot never did get half the blame for things they deserved.

JIM ECKMAN: RYCT Me: It's the later Heinleins which (though I enjoy them) cause me to roll my eyes and Make Allowances.

MYLES COCORAN: I foolishly promised my Monday night gamers that if the interruptions to the GURPS Lictors game continue that I will provide them with a game for just three players in the gap. Jenny piped up that she had been reading your write-ups of Mouseritter and she felt enthused. Be very flattered and aware that I shall hold you responsible if this doesn't work...

BRIAN C MISIASZEK: My commiserations on contact with COVID. The closest I've come recently was the week of cold leading up to this deadline. I did test myself (painfully shoving a rigid thing up my nose) just to reassure myself that it wasn't COVID this time. // **RYCT JIM VASSILAKOS:** The schtick of reacting to ancient horrors because our ancestors suffered under them is also seen in WEREWOLF: THE APOCALYPSE and I think Ken Hite's THE MADNESS DOSSIER.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: RYCT PATRICK ZOCH: I started to write that *actually* the number of circumstances in which a character can loot the opposition's lair after capture is limited. "Would an FBI agent..." And then I remembered the merry game of civil forfeiture without any inconvenient prior conviction that the US is so fond of. Hmm, perhaps there's a story there (for a LARP maybe) in which the idealistic young cop discovers the real reason his superiors want to stitch up the local celebrity/the rich foreigner with an expensive car. (Who turns out to be too big a bite to chew on.) // **RYCT JIM**

VASSILAKOS: Just because you know the invitation to visit your social superiors is going to get you into trouble doesn't mean you don't have to accept. // I'd be in favour of most people not showing up on any Detect Alignment effect. Only the obsessives who've chosen a side (or had it chosen for them) would ping the detect. In RQG terms people who had 80% plus in the applicable Rune or Passion. (Which may be what RuneQuest Sight was. We will probably never know.) **RYCT ROGER B_W:** You can model anything in GURPS if you have enough character points. Perhaps the biggest limit is the range of power that the GM sets the game in. And I find I can easily answer the question: what are the chances this character can do something he hasn't been specifically built for. Which is something I need to do an awful lot. : **RYCT Me:** Oooh! Could you make a mystery version of ONCE UPON A TIME? A horror version? A Space Opera version? I have these brilliant insights but there's little danger of me doing anything with them. (I did once write a porno version which was appreciated by the person I gave it to but I haven't the energy nowadays.)

JIM VASSILAKOS: Wait! They're *all* secret telepaths? And I thought my TRAVELLER was divergent. // I think I should repeat what I said when we were discussing the setup of E&A: I don't think I could do the CC job.

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: Re Your Last Word: And try to arrange a rental cottage big enough that you don't have to write in the same room as someone else!

**MY LAST WORD IS:
VERISIMILITUDE! (WHAT I TELL
YOU THREE TIMES IS TRUE!)**



THE DRAGON'S BEARD

NOVEMBER 2025

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I can be found as pdzoch at
boardgamegeek.com,
rpggeek.com, enworld.org,
fantasy-grounds.com, discord.com,
and boardgamearena.com.



FURLOUGH FILLERS

As I write, I am in my third week of government furlough. I have not wasted the time sitting idle. I've always had a longer list of things to do than I ever had time to accomplish. First, it was a couple of days of yard work, uprooting a handful of volunteer trees that grew out of hand then breaking them down for yard disposal. Weeding the front garden finished off the yard work. Deep cleaning in the kitchen – spring cleaning in the fall, if you will. With some chores knocked out, I set about to knock out a few projects. I finished painting the last couple of miniatures from the Marvel United, so now I have completed the first box of Marvel United miniatures. Only ten more boxes to go before the DC United arrives. I do not think I will get far before I fall even further behind.

It will be my turn to host the wargame event at the end of October for the Leavenworth Wargames group. I will be running the Battle of Agincourt in 15mm miniatures using Medieval Tactica rules. These are the same minis I painted over 30 years ago. They have undergone a lot of moves and taken some significant wear and tear over the years. My recent inspection identified a number of broken pieces and chipped paint. Some repairs only required a simple re-glue or re-paint, but a couple of pieces, notably the lances and standard bearers, have broken so completely that rebuilds are necessary. I purchased some small spring steel rods to clip into suitable 15mm poles. I removed the broken shafts from the miniatures and drilled a hole using a pin vise into the miniature to receive the steel rod as a replacement lance or standard pole. I printed replacement flags for my original hand painted flags and glued them on the repaired poles. There is more repainted to do, but the big repairs are complete.

I have two Bolt Action armies waiting to be assembled and painted: a United States Parachute company and a German Panzergrenadier company. I assembled the pieces in the starter kit and prepared them for painting, but I have set them aside for now. They will be the next painting project after my next task.

My daughter was involved in a hit-and-run accident in early October. She was unharmed and was able to drive home. I was glad I was home to take care of her, sort the insurance claims, and get the car in the repair shop quickly.

I had one medical procedure on the schedule in October. Being on furlough precluded having to take sick leave for a couple of days for the procedure. I've tried to maximize this time to schedule other appointments - eye exams, dental, etc, but none are eligible yet.

My Saturday D&D game on Fantasy Grounds Unity was on hold for a couple of weeks in October while a couple of the players were on vacation. We are working our way through the new [Dragon Delves](#) adventure anthology. My Asimar barbarian has been an effective meat shield for the party. We have completed three of the adventures so far. My Sunday OSRIC game on Fantasy Grounds Unity continues to explore the [Secrets of Bone Hill](#). Fantasy Grounds does not have a pure implementation for OSRIC, so we essentially use the AD&D 2nd Edition rules implementation for the game. Unfortunately, it does create some confusion during the game between what our character sheets will say and what some of the particulars of OSRIC, so we can not rely entirely on our character sheet data for the game. My ½ orc Fighter/Thief in that game now has a magic ring of invisibility which is used heavily to avoid fights and make sneak attacks as often as possible.

I re-started playing Skyrim again. I decided to focus on the main story line since I do not think I had ever finished it before, despite the thousands of hours I played the game. It was not until this month that I realized that I never even started the second act of the main story line. I knew I did not complete it before, but I did not know how little of it I had completed. Well, it was my main focus for my new character until I got distracted in building a new home on my land plot in Falkreath. I needed a new home for my two adopted children, and Lakeview Manor gave them all the room they needed to run around and grow. Sophie and Lucia just need to be mindful of the occasional giant and dragon that wander in. I've only completed a couple of tasks in act 2 of the main story line, and they are entirely new experiences for me. Maybe I'll actually finish the game once.

My wife happened to have a day off from work during the week one day, so we spent it learning to play [The Colonists](#). Playing time ranges from 30 to 360 minutes. It was something we knew we had to learn ourselves

before inviting anyone else to play (or learn) along with us. The game is played over five eras which have progressively more advanced buildings, technologies, and resources for the growing colony. The length of the game is determined by how many eras are to be played. It does have an option to start at later eras as well as an option to “save” a game state at the end of one era to serve as the starting state for the game to be completed later. The designer knew the game would be long. Knowing *when* the game would conclude (how many eras are to be played) is an important factor in determining how much to invest in certain buildings and features during the game. Some buildings and features are heavy investments for the current era that will have bigger payoffs for future eras. The game does include an Introductory Game that teaches the rules to players as it walks players through a game. It is not a true game or scenario that gives the players any agency as every move is scripted. However, it does well to walk players through the motions of the game and helps reinforce the rules if they were read beforehand. We “played” the introductory game, then immediately wanted to play properly on our own, but limited ourselves to just the first two eras. We enjoyed the game, but we really want to play all five eras to get the full feel of the game. Stopping at two eras felt like interrupting the game. If we have a completely free day again, we will give it a go for the full five eras.

I binged watch every Mission Impossible movie. I preferred the original TV series. I binged watched Wednesday. Much more enjoyable than expected. I’m glad I watched them on a binge because it helped me keep track of the clues and story. Lot’s of changes to the Addams lore, but I found it acceptable. I am vested in Wednesday’s growth as a person. Currently bingeing the Black List and Farscape (again).

As you can already see, my zine has undergone a change in design. I’ve used Microsoft Publisher to produce my zine for the past 8 years, but the program will cease being supported next year. I have opted to purchase Affinity Publisher as a replacement. I also purchased in the bundle Affinity Photo 2 and Affinity Designer as replacements for my Adobe Photoshop which has been cost prohibitive for too long. The Affinity software suit appears to do everything that Publisher and Photoshop does, but the user interface is different, with the tools in different places and often called different things. It has been a steep learning curve. But, with the newfound time on my hand, I dove deep into to learn as much as I could about the programs to migrate my zine to the new software. Meanwhile, I took the opportunity to redesign my zine to make the most out of the Ever & Anon digital format.

I think switching to a full color format will make for a more pleasing read. No more BRIGHT WHITE pages to read. I’ve wanted to do something more with the margins of my zine for quite some time. The risk is a more cluttered look, but it seems like it would feel more like the old school zines. I toyed with a couple of ideas for the margins, ranging from small comics telling short adventure stories or jokes, to dungeon design ideas in the margins, to maybe even thematic doodles. What appears not is what I landed on, a sprawl of an adventure that will unfold in the margins over time.

In this issue, four adventurers meet at the Dragon’s Beard Inn.

An male elf wizard:



A male dwarf fighter:



A female halfling rogue:



A female human cleric:



Their names are unknown at this time. Perhaps my readers can suggest names for these characters.

Their adventure is unknown at this time also. Perhaps my readers might foretell what adventure, what foes, what treasure awaits this intrepid band.



COMMENTS ON #3

Roger BW – I’ve not heard of anyone using Inkscape to present any images or maps directly during a virtual game before, but it does not surprise me. Inkscape is a good program. I once played with a group that used Powerpoint to present maps and images with a shared screen. I even know what group that used the “whiteboard” feature on MSTeams. It was very similar to some processes used in working groups at work, but it was effective. I love that players will always find a way to use the tools they have to play the game they love.

Gabriel Roark – Re: Followers. My experience with a structured follower rules was in AD&D which our group had a hard time managing. Many of the followers were class leveled NPCs, but their level was too low to survive in any adventure the player characters underwent. I recall once we took some of our followers/henchmen with us into a dungeon and it was a massive slaughter of our followers (those

that did not flee at first opportunity). Our followers seemed to be appendages of our character and their compliance was determined by a loyalty or moral test managed by our GM. We did not know what to really do with our followers otherwise, but we only had this problem a short while before our group separated (due to moving away). As a more experienced GM, I tend to provide followers with specific purposes for my players so they know what to expect and how to use them. I also tend to control the followers for the players, which makes for a heavy NPC management load for me, but allows me some places to insert story hooks and plot points.

Michael Cule – Re: Orford Castle. One of the things many people misunderstand about medieval castles is that they are not spacious or anything like the fantasy castles or Disney palaces. Castles and any defensive building dedicate their spaces to the thickness of the walls and the choking of movement by intruders. Hallways and stairways are tight, doors are small, etc. In some games, the true sizing of the castle features would require “squeezing” rules for most movement and force most combat in single file formation. It would absolutely annoy players to the point that they would probably never explore castles. So, I lean towards the fantasy architecture to foster the fun. I would probably re-scale Cowle Keep to double the size to better facilitate PC movement and dramatic scenes.

Mitch Hyde – Certainly no need to reconcile fantasy realms unless they need to be. In one game I am playing, the players were teleported to an entirely different fantasy realm, a change that resulted in changing the races of two of the characters. If Marvel and DC can have a multiverse, so can Greyhawk!

Patrick Riley – I’m so happy to see that you found immediate use for Cowle Keep in your campaign. I look forward to hearing how it turns out. Re: Digital format of E&A vs printed copies. With E&A being primarily a digital zine, I have opted to maximize the digital format. I decided to go full color, but I do worry about the size of the zine increasing for the color and

additional graphics. I still keep my print margins noted on my layout just in case anyone decides to print the zine out. I would not want any important information lost in print. I do not think anyone would want to print it in color because my experience has been that colors tend to be darker when printed on home printers. While my new design for the design looks lovely on screen, it might not look great printed. My color laser printer does a good job, except for the white border because my I can not print full bleed. I may try the local print shop to see if they could do a full bleed print. I, too, am curious if E&A readers are printing E&A.

Brian Rogers – Dyson’s mega-dungeons are beautiful works of art. I think many players enjoy the challenge of clearing them out, but I think it rarely occurs due to the massive size of these dungeons. Re: Villain Treasure. It just seems odd to me that a villain would not use all its assets to survive. Now, I will add that I make a distinction between equipment and treasure. Villain equipment, magic or mundane, is part of the villain build, its difficulty, and related experience points. The villain will use that equipment, but it can be recovered as treasure. Whereas treasure is intended as a item for the party that the villain could/would not consume. The villain might use it, but its use would not result in it being unavailable to the party. I also like that a villain’s use of a magic item betrays its magic properties and makes it logically easier to identify later.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek – Thanks for the link to the Pulp Science Fiction Under German Totalitarianism. It was an interesting read – I think I read it before or one like it about the underground fictional writings in resistance to fascism in Europe. I recently watched in the theater Truth & Treason, a film about Helmuth Hübener, a teenager who wrote and distributed literature/leaflets speaking out against Hitler and the Nazi party.

Lisa Padol – Re: NPCs. I agree with your assessment that the Magical Kitties “human” NPCs are just as much a plot hook as my claim that Call of Cthulhu player character’s “significant people.” In that respect, any NPC can serve as a vehicle for a plot hook. The difference is the purpose for the NPC in the game. In

Magical Kitties, the human NPCs for each kitty is the person they are trying to make happy. Sure, it is the vehicle for a plot hook, but the purpose of the adventure is to solve a problem for their human. That is not the case for a CoC significant person. If I abstract it, the human NPC in magical kitties is more like an progression scale or attribute rating that informs the players how well they are doing in an adventure. The humans do seem to be these otherworldly characters that do not have much involvement or development in the game, so that is a knock against them as having strong value and connection to the player characters. I like the concepts of influence in MASKS. However, I view these more as obstacles to be resolved than actual relationships of meaning. It made sense for these influences to be established between the different PCs on a team. They feel forced by design at first, but a skilled role player can make them feel more interesting. The influence by the adult superheroes are the only relationships with NPCs that I can recall at the moment. But I think these are also intended to be obstacles to be overcome. Something of a barrier to being seen as a fellow adult superhero until the relationship influence can be resolved. I noted a lack of influence by adult superheroes in MASKS that show strong support for the teen superheroes or a safety net to allow the new teen supers to make mistakes and grow into their powers without being seen as failures by the adult superheroes. It makes sense for the teen theme of the game, but these relationships with the adults are not fostering relationships that evolve meaningfully over time – they are obstacles to be overcome to, I guess, earn the respect of the adult superhero. I like the idea of other players playing a player's pet monster in Monsters and Other Childish Things. I'll have to look into it, though the horror genre is not my jam. However, I will have to look into Trail of Cthulhu and their explanation of Sources of Stability. The Eternal Lies campaign explanation on how to play these sources are meaningful NPC intrigues me. I laughed at the sentence "Dawn got kidnapped again, so it must be Tuesday." Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of a rulebook to explain effective and proper play, it still comes down to the skill of the player and the dynamic of the group. I'm still going to look into it, so thanks for bringing it to my attention. After all the fuss I made about meaningful NPCs, I still have a way

to go to play them consistently better myself. But I have the goal and it serves as my aimpoint for my players during a game. Re: Halfling character with all the snack options. How strong was that halfling to carry enough food to feed half the town?!

Mark Wilson – I've used various Cartography software over the years and always felt them constraining. I guess it was because no matter how many features they provide in the program, I always had something else that I needed to include that was not accommodated by the program. I was always better served by free-handing my maps. I still keep trying the various mapping software as they come out – I have a lifetime subscription to several Cartography Pro programs – because they are much better at organizing and labeling map features legibly. I can only write in griffonage which is not very useful on a map.

Everyone Else – Thank you for the kind comments on Cowle Keep.



COMMENTS ON #4

Brian Rogers – I think your comments were directed to the other more distinguished Patrick, Patrick Riley, who commented on your character, The Eye. Re: Under the Giant's Shadow – I really like your framework for the D&D B/X campaign. I appreciate the effort you put into making a cat class for the young player. Of course, my first thought was:



John Redden – I could only dream of wargaming tables full of painted minis in the 80's. Most of my wargames then were sprawling hex maps cover in stacks of chits with information printed in font 4.

Heath Row – Further game stats on The Dream Fish are on my to-do list. Potions, poisons, and other items made from the Dream Fish will be included, as well as a full encounter or two.

Jim Eckman – Re: “After high school graduation, I was socially pressured by a sexy woman to go into Federal Service. I wound up in the Mobile Infantry.” I really chuckled at this because I just watched Starship Troopers this weekend and it also sums up the reason (loosely) that too many of the soldiers I served with had joined the Army.

Mark Nemeth – Re: Meyers-Briggs tests. I agree that they are useful in illustrating differences in personalities and to generate discussion on differences in behaviors, communications, and reactions and responses. I’m for whatever help improve communication and understanding between two people, whether it be the learning of a personality type, love language, learning style, or whatever. There are a surprising number of people who seem oblivious to differences in how other people think, feel and act.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek – I have not attended the Leavenworth Militaria Show & Sale yet. The local thrift and antique stores in the local area are full of military memorabilia, mostly from WWII and later. Army surplus stores are also not in short supply around here. Sadly, my own military uniforms collecting dust in the basement are becoming the historical past fast. Nothing makes you feel so much like an old soldier as to have your son point to an item in a museum and marvel at its old (and primitive) design and you explain that it was something you actually trained on and used. My work office is right next to the Leavenworth Military Museum which has a very nice collection of military artifacts, mostly from the American Civil War and frontier era. Kansas City has the National World War I museum and it is fantastic. I highly recommend a visit to anyone who spends any time in Kansas City. My favorite historical eras are the medieval and ancient roman era. Unfortunately, these are not well represented in America, and sparsely at best in our museums. I miss my time in Europe when I could tour the museums and castles and old roman sites. Back

in the 90’s when I first visited Leavenworth, there was a hobby store that sold lots of wargames and wargame miniatures. I was looking forward to shopping there again when I returned in retirement, but it was long since closed. I go to Kansas City or online for my wargame needs nowadays. My son has already asked if I would have my Bolt Action armies painted by Christmas so we could play in full color. Hopefully, the furlough does not last THAT long.

Everyone else – RAEBNC. E&A are big issues!



MARVEL UNITED



The Wasp and the Taskmaster complete my Marvel United base game box of painted minis.



Ignorable Theme for E&A Issue #5

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

I tend to be inspired more by games than the media that inspired those games, such as the *Amber Diceless Roleplaying Game* that I wrote about last issue. Back in the day, I got tons of inspiration by reading *Heroic Worlds* and its many summary descriptions of published games (up to 1990).

Roleplaying games almost always center around an ensemble cast of PCs, while most other fiction does not. I was watching Season 2 of the *Sandman* series and I could see how people would be inspired by the premise of the worldbuilding and characters to turn into an rpg, but I could not figure out how it would work with a party of PCs, at least not in the style of games I generally prefer. I'm sure there have been plenty of LARPs inspired by it.

An exception to this general rule is a superhero comic or cartoon. As much as I adore the Bruce Timm *Justice League* and Animated DC Universe in general,¹ the show that has inspired me the most is *X-Men: Evolution*. I have returned to the idea of superheroes in high school several times.

Jacob's Ladder often creeps into scenario ideas but the tone is difficult to achieve and the core concepts are difficult to pull off without being cliché. I'm working on a game for DunDraCon 2026 that was originally inspired by it, but I decided to go more in the direction of *Alice in Borderland* and *Heroes of Cerulia*, an rpg homage to *The Legend of Zelda*. *Alice* and *Squid Games* seem like a good fit for a *Dreampark* RPG scenario.

I ran a series of playtest games for my *Wildcard Roleplaying System* (WRS). One was based on *Star Wars* (Space Wizards with Laser Swords) and another on *Seven Samurai* via *Avatar the Last Airbender*.

While I was writing this, I wondered if I was inspired by *The Prisoner* and a one-shot scenario popped into my head. One of the PCs is the prisoner and the others are the wardens playing as fellow prisoners trying to extract the macguffin information from the one prisoner who

does not know the other PCs are wardens. I can't remember if this was mentioned in the *GURPS Prisoner* supplement and I'm not going to look it up; in any case, there is no possibility that this is an original idea.

This is how my convention game ideas usually come—some basic setup or premise that I can flesh out for a session but would never survive a whole campaign. I still need to develop the idea I have that mixes *Stardew Valley* (and probably *The Prisoner*, as in, what if The Village was *Stardew Valley*?) and a particular scene from *Kung Fu Hustle*. And I might model the GM-provided PCs after twisted versions of the Teen Titans. So far, I haven't found a system that fits what I want to do, especially since I want robust combat mechanics that *WRS* simply doesn't have (by design).

The Adventurers Guild

How to Light a Candle

I mentioned the candle that cannot be lit that is in the possession of Millie, the wizard in my D&D campaign. I had her player create a list of things that she'd try and we'd work them into the game depending on where the party was and what they were doing at the time. One of the ideas was so cool that I'd wish I'd thought of it and could definitely be used elsewhere by someone else.

Reflect the candle in a mirror and attempt to light the candle's reflection.

In actuality, it required a drop of blood upon the candle's wick. This was only fifth on her list, so she figured it out pretty quickly. What she didn't know was that in doing so, she was sacrificing a portion of her soul (permanent reduction of maximum hit points by 1) to light the candle for 1 hour. This satisfied her "assignment" and she was perfectly happy returning the candle to its creator.

The Best Laid Plans of Mice²

Entan's player, whom I joked was the youngest and had the most active social life, has dropped out of the campaign because of his erratic social schedule. He had missed the most sessions of all the players, so this did not come as a complete surprise. I appreciate that he dropped amicably.

² My most-quoted line from *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*.

¹ Timm >> Snyder, just sayin'.

Entan's personal hook was that he was raised by druids to become a healer. Bucking against this, he set out on his own for a life of adventure. As he gained experience, he remained a druid and aligned with the Circle of the Land. My plan was to have him be placed into a position where he could heal the land by closing the rifts to other worlds. Would he choose to face his destiny as a healer or would he reject it? Now we'll never know.

Our Protagonists

- Iggy: Rock Gnome Bard
- Chayote: Rock Gnome Cleric of Hathor
- Anan: Copper Dragonborn Fighter
- Millie: Human Wizard
- Vrax: Blue Dragonborn Ranger (who missed this session)

Onward and Downward

After a number of battles with the denizens of this cavernous dungeon, they decided to take a breather. However, they were visited by the master of this place who spoke directly to their minds (and yet still sounded like someone drowning), telling them to leave this place for this was its domain. Wasting no time for parley, Anan launched an attack, only to have it pass through the abomination as if it were not there—for indeed it was only an illusion.

Following this unsettling encounter, Vrax, with the party's blessing, decided to go above and guard Professor Farthington and crew. Also, Entan went missing. The remaining party pressed on.³

When I created this dungeon (see maps last issue), I did not place monsters in predetermined locations. Due to the organic nature of the hallways, there were no doors blocking passages and the denizens were free to advance on or retreat from the PCs as seemed appropriate. And by "appropriate," I mean based on the tactical situation (like having the ability to fall back and ambush later) or what seemed right for game pacing (when things got slow, I could always throw a monster at them).

³ That's how I dropped 2 PCs from the middle of a dungeon crawl. Whether Entan is alive or dead (or otherwise?) will depend on if his player ever returns and what they want to do with the character.

An online resource I have found quite useful for my D&D 5e campaigns is 5e.tools. It's basically all the 5e content since 2014 organized into databases and cross-referenced. It contains freebooted material, but one could restrict oneself to just that material which they already own and what's available in the SRD.

In particular for my current dungeon, I was able to scan through the bestiary, searching on challenge rating and keywords, and adding them to a list. I then printed out all the monster stat blocks and descriptions. This was much faster and easier than copying them by hand onto my own notes (which I find preferable to searching through the original PDFs or physical books at the game table).

I assigned the first 3 levels to 3 different classes of monsters. Literally, my notes were:

- 4) Neogi
- 3) Slime
- 2) Eyes
- 1) <left blank because it was the dungeon boss>

I then created my list of monsters in each category and printed out my paper miniatures. Sometimes my choice was influenced by what miniatures I had.

Neogi were the "scuttlers" mentioned in the last issue. Slime consisted of plasmoid warriors and a regenerating black pudding. Eyes consisted of beholder-kin that weren't as tough as a full beholder. I also added umber hulks to add in when it seemed appropriate. Their first encounter was on level 2 and their hypnotic gaze coincidentally fit the "eyes" motif.

As a monster got defeated, I dismantled the miniature and removed it from my stash. When I ran out of plasmoid warrior standees, for example, there weren't any more of these in the dungeon. This kept me "honest" and not throwing monsters repeatedly at the party. I fudged a bit here and there, especially between sessions, but by the time they got to the big bad, that was literally the only figure I had left behind my GM screen.

So there were two sessions of following the winding and branching paths of the dungeon and bashing monsters. They always had the opportunity, via the central shaft, to skip right to the bottom, but they decided (mostly driven by Anan) to be methodical and clear out everything in order.

The battles presented various challenges to the players and while fun in the moment, I'm not inspired to provide the details. However, the penultimate encounter consisted of a couple of umber hulks that was notable in how ridiculously it went. The players actually used tactics and I kept rolling poorly on their saves.

This is the summary provided by Anan's player:

Combat starts by Millie chasing a bug down a tunnel. She finds a T intersection; the left leads to a cavern, and the right leads to a carved room. She takes the right, and continues firing at the creature.

Two UMBER HULKS show themselves in the left branch. Iggi uses stinking cloud to obscure the area and potentially poison the Hulks. Anan lays down ball bearings in the entrance of the cavern.

Both Hulks advance, failing their saves. One Hulk trips on the bearings, the other emerges from the cloud and attacks Anan.

Someone (I cannot remember who)⁴ casts blindness on the visible Hulk, while Millie kills the fleeing bug. The fight devolves into Anan and the visible Hulk trading blows while the others strike from a distance.

The second Hulk is completely impeded by the bearings, and does not emerge until a turn later. When it does, Anan strikes it and pushes it back over the ball bearings. This causes the Hulk to trip as it moves.⁵

The fight continues until the first Hulk is down. The second emerges, and is quickly dispatched.

Moral of the story? Use layered environmental effects. Seriously, I wanna push enemies into bad places. It's effective, and it channels Home Alone.

Wrapping Up

After dispatching the umber hulks, the PCs entered a rectangular room with an arched ceiling supported by 6 pillars. The straight-ish lines were a stark contrast to the naturalistic pathways they had been navigating. The lines were not perfectly straight (they were as straight and regular as I hand-drew them on the map) and lacked the precision of dwarven construction, but the walls were smooth with no sign of blocks or mortar (more like concrete than bricks).

On the far end of the room was a semicircular dais topped with a plinth. The walls of the room were decorated with four large panels hanging like tapestries. The panels were made from a smooth, gray, light material that was almost metallic, but lacked the shine or acoustic resonance of steel or bronze. They were covered with runes that the party left for Professor Farthington to translate rather than use the candle themselves.

The panels described the founding myth of the Dikaryan Empire. What I did was ask duck.ai to write the lore of the Mushroom Kingdom from Mario Brothers in the style of the Epic of Gilgamesh or Beowulf. That was the first three panels. For the last, I did the same, except used the transition of the Kingdom of Rome to the Roman Republic as my model. Yes, this was an inside joke for my own amusement. And yes, the ancient people of the lost Dikaryan Empire were fungus-based.

Seeing that the panels could be pulled away from the wall, Anan checked behind them and found a concealed passage behind the second one he checked. This led to a hemispherical chamber that sloped downward and was partially flooded. It was here that the final encounter took place as the aboleth entered from a flooded corridor on the far side of the room.

I must admit that the final boss fight missed something. I was definitely not on my "A" game. Eh, it happens, I'm not going to beat myself up for it, except that I have to relive it for this quasi(pseudo) write-up.

My primary sins were not taking better advantage of the fact that the melee was taking place in a shallow pool and not playing up the "consume memories" ability of the aboleth and just treating it like a boring psychic attack. This resulted in a fight that was harrowing at moments—the PCs were outmatched on paper—but

⁴ Millie, using a Gem of Brightness that they had recently found amongst the rocks in the dungeon.

⁵ He neglects to mention that the Hulk fell on Anan, trapping him underneath until it was killed.

wasn't as good as it could have been. This is why this month's write up is rather deflated.

I am at fault for not running the fight through my head ahead of time. It's good to get a good feel for the monster's capabilities and what tactics they would use, but I don't like over-planning since no plan survives contact with the PCs. Plus, I'm just not a good tactician and it bores me (these two things being related, I understand).

Anan and Chayote occupied the aboleth's attention and tentacle attacks, allowing Iggy and Millie to harass it with spells. Things started looking dire, including Chayote going down and having to be revived. I reminded them that retreat was an option. Then Iggy threw "Lemon" into the fight.

Earlier in the dungeon, I had planted as treasure an elemental gem, a yellow diamond, that could summon an earth elemental. When handing out magic items, I make my own cards with an image on one side and the description on the other. The image of a yellow diamond that I used looked a lot like a crystalline lemon. And so that is how the elemental was named. An earth elemental is a powerful ally and I hoped they would use it in the boss fight, so the fact that it was and that it turned the tide of the fight was a good thing.

Iggy threw the gem into the melee, breaking it against the far wall and summoning the elemental. Iggy wanted it to fall on top of the aboleth, but that was too difficult for me to deal with, so I just put it just past the monster and thus blocked the escape route. Lemon did its primary job of consuming the aboleth's attention and being a damage sponge. After a few more rounds, the PCs were victorious.

Going Back Home

I didn't have anything else planned for the session and we still had a couple hours left. They had cleared out the dungeon on their way to get to the final boss, so there was nothing interesting for them to do here while Professor Farthington removed the panels and hauled them back to the surface.

The first leg of the journey back was uneventful except for one encounter. On the road back to Islingford-upon-Orlin, they returned to the place with the abandoned wagon except that it was in a worse state. The first time through, they investigated and started down a trail, but I had had Professor Farthington pull them back from this side quest. This time, they followed tracks left by

small humanoids into the dense forest until they were ambushed by some spell-slinging goblins and wolf-like creatures.

Because the party was surrounded and being attacked from multiple directions with both melee and ranged attacks, it was a tougher battle in some ways than the boss fight. In the end, the party was able to kill or drive off⁶ their attackers. This was enough to satisfy their initial curiosity and the PCs turned back and returned to the main caravan with Professor Farthington (and Vrax who was still in "I'll stay back and guard the professor" mode). Everyone was eager to get back home. There is something sinister deeper in the woods (and noted on the map), but they may never know.

Once back in Islingford, there was just one more bit of business to wrap up this arc. Millie returned the candle to its creator, explaining how it worked, and suggesting that since they had already translated the panels, there might be enough to use as a translating guide and minimize the use of the candle. He was rightly impressed with her work. Upon leaving, she crossed paths with Isadora who paused momentarily, but failed to recognize Millie, and passed on by.

Up Next

The PCs (except for Vrax) are now 6th level. A new player should be joining at the end of October. On the game calendar, the two-day Summer Festival is fast approaching and it would be a good backdrop for some adventure and melodrama. I need to integrate subplots for Vrax (who has only been in one session) and the new PC, but in the meantime, I will bring on stage Iggy's past and reveal the fate of their unrequited and lost love.

Chayote is supposed to be looking for her niece, Pumpkin, who left their home village for a life of adventure but she hasn't done any investigation toward this goal and I don't know how to integrate this into the campaign. Pumpkin could be literally anywhere in the world and finding her would require that the party travel much further abroad, but that doesn't seem to be something they are particularly interested in doing. Her player doesn't bring it up, so I'm sure there are no expectations, but I don't want to just leave it on the floor.

⁶ I make a point to have my intelligent NPCs run away rather than fight to the death, if they can.

Comments on E&A Issue #4

Dylan Capel

Back in the day, I switched from reading the printed version of A&E to exclusively using the PDF because my eyes were struggling. The advantage of PDF is that I could zoom, but there are practical limits to PDF readers. For example, mixing portrait and landscape page orientation in the same file messes with the “zoom to width” function. Standardizing on a common page size and orientation is good. If you want, you can take this to the extreme and ask why something meant to be read on screens should be formatted in a printable document standard at all.

A single column of text that is too long (too many characters) is more difficult for me to read than two columns of text, even when I have to scroll back to the stop of the second column. Balancing the margins and font size is key.

Myles Corcoran

RYCT Brian, in my current D&D campaign, I give the responsibility and ownership of defining gods and pantheons to anyone playing a cleric or paladin. Other players are welcome to contribute in this way, but players of those classes are required to.

RYCT me about my GM screen, of the 4 landscape panels, I usually reference something on at least 3 of them. I had been using a 3-panel GM screen for 20+ years and made this one for this campaign. Because I designed my own, the information is arranged per my needs (at least as best as I could). The size allows me to hide all the paper figures I’ve prepared.

RYCT Patrick, personality tests should help managers realize that different people think differently and not to use a one-size-fits-all approach to management, but I doubt if that insight is either absorbed or appreciated.

Michael Cule

A concept of The Ancients is as old as The Pyramids.

The line between species is not as distinct as it generally portrayed—see ring species. Also, some species are fully capable of interbreeding, though may only do so under environmental stress, such as captivity—see the various canid hybrids.

Whether or not your backstory is “needed,” I will ask, do you like it? Did you have fun making it up? Since you find it interesting and useful, then that’s all that matters even if the players never see it. I too like to surprise my players and they generally like being surprised—discovering the world and its past as their characters do—but some players also like worldbuilding.

I have read that the use of em dashes is a clue that something might have been written by AI—a notion that might be true but it is a practice I refuse to change for the sake of not being assumed to be AI.

Jim Eckman

There is a difference between retiring and mustering out. In Traveller, you’re playing PCs who were unable (psychologically or practically) to lead a quiet life following their military service. Finding a reason and rationale for adventuring is left to the players.

Avram Grumer

In addition to the HIPPO, there is also the ZEBRA, Seagull, WOLF, and RHINO.

Longshot City reminds me of *TWERPS* (single stat) and *Cthulhu Dark* (justify to the GM why you should get a bonus). My buddy played in a Cthulhu Dark con game where the GM just let everyone roll a second die without having to justify it because the GM recognized that players would just try to wedge in a justification anyway.

Mitch Hyde

It’s funny that you write, “Its [sic] all over so quickly, and the tropes are so obvious” when it comes to *Call of Cthulhu* the rpg because the same could be said of Lovecraft’s stories, especially with a 21st-century viewpoint. He was building upon tropes laid down by his predecessors and they have become ingrained into the horror genre.

The “utterly atrocious” advice given in Warhammer Fantasy Role Play (WFRP) “for changing dice rolls behind the screen” is a topic we could have a very long discussion on. It has to be agreed, however, that different people like different ways of playing and that there is no “one true way” to enjoy roleplaying games.

Joshua Kronengold

RYCT me about playtesting games at cons, I have playtested con games with my home group in the past, but I've gotten out of the habit, mostly due to scheduling challenges. When running a con game, I don't see it as playtesting because it would be the only time I would ever run that game. My first runs of *Wildcard Roleplaying System* were explicitly playtests of the system and were called out as playtests in the game description.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek

Intriguing background as always including references to 3(!) sets of twins. Back to the notion of real-versus-fictional history, you noted several members of A.B.C. in contrast to your using X.Y.Z. in the previous zine's adventure.

RYCT me about distinguishing real versus contrived history, I didn't have any ideas that you haven't already considered when I made my comment, so I didn't suggest them. ;)

Mark Nemeth

I am generally not a fan of systems like the edges your GM introduced. I find them too loopy-goopy. This is fine for a one-shot, but on a prolonged campaign, they can become irritating or just ignored. What's nice about the D&D skill list is that it is tailored to the things that D&D characters typically do. Edges could be used to fill in the gaps (especially for tool proficiencies), but having a well-defined rating in athletics, perception, survival, etc. is too useful for me to want to abandon.

I was surprised that a midwife would help someone who had been exiled. It seems to be contrary to the point of exile (go away and don't have any contact with us).

Elia's disfigurement is exactly the kind of thing that shouldn't happen in D&D rules as written. If it happened to a PC, perhaps being hit with acid breath from a monster, they would heal their hit points (magically, using hit dice, or just after a long rest) and there would be no long-term physical implications. It would have to be imposed by the GM (probably a bad idea) or adopted by the player (which raises questions about why other PCs are not so affected). I have no solution to this conundrum, but it always sticks out to me.

RYCT Lisa about turtling, unfortunately, if the GM attempts to "destabilize their secure base," it can result in the PCs digging in harder. And while the GM can give them a compelling reason to leave, it creates a habit of passively waiting for the GM to throw things at them.

Pum

RYCT Gabriel, of course non-USAns can (and should!) express their opinions on US politics. Obviously, everyone should feel free to express their opinions on any topics, though being mindful of the fora, as you noted. Plus, if we follow this type of gatekeeping to its logical conclusion, not only would no one of any country be allowed to express an opinion of any other country, but you wouldn't be able to express an opinion on a different county, city, household, or person. I am also particularly annoyed by calls for "shut up and sing" or "shut up and play," as if performers and athletes are not allowed to express their opinions; ironically and sadly,⁷ it's only called out when the celebrity is expressing opinions the caller doesn't like.

On a lighter note, if we're dealing with a fantasy world with species who have infravision, then why not have exothermic ink that glows in the infrared and could be read in the dark?

RYCT Myles on initiative, the issue I have with any initiative system tied to the weapon speed is the question of what if you choose not to use the weapon. Unless you declare your action before rolling initiative (and a few systems do this) and are locked into using the weapon, it doesn't really make sense. Plus, how should this affect when and how far you can move? Initiative systems break down because people (usually) do not take actions in a neat order; the system is just there to apply some sense to the chaos and if you try to apply "realism" to it, it puts a lampshade on how unrealistic it is.

Brian Rogers

Zippo immediately brought to mind GoGo Tomago from *Big Hero 6*... and then you referenced her. :)

One would not expect an astral form to be hittable from physical attacks, including energy. It just seems weird, even more than such attacks affecting phased or insubstantial/intangible individuals. Of course, your acceptance of superhero and V&V weirdness is much higher and more educated than mine. :)

⁷ There needs to be a word that combines these two.

RYCT Mark about Greyhawk, I have never been in a D&D game that wasn't "focused on small unit heroism." And "the kids" have been trying to play different races (like drow) for a very, very long time.

RYCT Lisa, I can definitely see myself as a player in your Earthdawn campaign not taking unnecessary risks. Plus, I have an allergy for being stupid and/or chaotic just because it's "fun." Being "professional" is not necessarily conducive to an exciting gaming experience.

LOL @ monk level titles being based on Mahjong tiles. I'll have to incorporate that into my next monk (N)PC.

Heath Row

Thanks for the heads-up and link to Sword World. It looks like the kind of simple fantasy RPG that I would enjoy.

I have been thinking about kicking off my next FRPG campaign with a world-creation session. Specifically, I want everyone contributing to the world's history and geography. I wanted something more visual than *Microscope*. *Dawn of Worlds* almost fits. Please let us know what you think of *Cartograph* (especially as a multi-player experience) when you have a chance.

Clark B. Timmins

RYCT me about using Toughs for generic orcs, I'm guessing because orcs are a PC race while goblins and trolls aren't (yet) GMs layer the generic capabilities—or template, if you will—of a thug with the abilities of orc listed in the PHB. Since there are no templates for species such as goblins and trolls, this approach doesn't work. It's a bit weird that you expect a stat block of a generic orc, like there is for a goblin, but not for generic elves, humans, and halflings... unless, you are and that just went unstated. I would argue that mashing a class/role template with an ancestry/species template is the more useful approach. However, as I pointed out a while ago (maybe in A&E, I'm not looking it up), the class/role templates used for NPCs are lacking many of the bells-and-whistles of PC classes.

Jim Vassilakos

Thanks for the notes on being the Central Coordinator for E&A. I know it's something I *could* do, but have no desire to do. Not only would I not enjoy it, but also I would be bad at it (and I'm sure those two notions are linked). I don't think it's necessary to get the issue out a day (or two) after the submission deadline. Getting it out before the 1st of the month is fine for me, but I

recognize that there is value in getting it out as soon as possible rather than risk letting it slide for too long.

The 16-page limit is a good thing. If someone has dozens of pages of material, they can serialize it over multiple issues. This helps maintain a steady flow of content over several months. It smooths out the spikes of productivity and leads to a more consistent product overall.

RYCT Roger, I think it would be really easy to get rid of alignment in D&D—just ignore it. That seems to be the default of any game I've run or played in, except in those rare cases where it matters (like "detect evil" spells and such).

Mark A. Wilson

Sorry about your job situation.⁸ Hopefully it is just a hiccup.

I often find superhero movies wanting, even "the great ones." First, I resonate much better with animated superheroes rather than live action. Second, the genre is based on serialization and works best for me in that form. *Guardians of the Galaxy* is an exception because it's more of a space adventure than a superhero film/series. Similarly, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* is closer to an action spy thriller (like the *Mission: Impossible* films) and works well.

It is fair to say that in *Brindlewood Bay*, the mystery is not something the players/PCs *solve* but *resolve*? It is not a puzzle with a solution to be discovered, but rather a story conclusion to be reached?

RAE The Lantern Bearers; I liked the setup with the PCs in a role of some social recognition (and later, suspicion) with a built-in reason for travel and adventure.

Patrick Zoch

When you wrote that the artist of Botanicus was the same as Carcassonne, my immediate thought was, "Doris, of Doris & Frank?" Then I had to look it up to confirm I was thinking of Doris Matthäus. But no, you meant a different Carcassonne artist. :)

⁸ I spent a whole page ranting about mine job situation in issue #1 (and for what it's worth, I'm still bitter). It's good that you seemingly don't have hard feelings and can sympathize with the managers.

De Ludis Elficis Fictis

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

Email: Pum@Pum.org

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Web: <http://www.pum.org>

Recently I have mostly been ...

... continuing to play in Michael Cule's Wednesday evening game of Runequest with the High Wycombe RPG group. We are Lunar squadies of the 2nd Furthest Foot, visiting the big city of Glamour, still waiting to receive commendations from the Red Emperor. Not so much has happened in the last month, as we've had a couple of skipped sessions, due to player absence. We have mostly been helping our senator friend, the new Master of Circuses, to organise the forthcoming parade for the Emperor in which we are due to be honoured, and protecting him from assassination.

Earlier this month I had a grand day out at Bovington Tank Museum to celebrate a gaming friend's 40th birthday. It is probably the largest tank museum in the world, having something like 380 vehicles, many of which still run, of which about 300 are on display, including the only working example of a Tiger I tank, and many other unique examples.



At the beginning of October I took myself off to the autumn edition of TringCon, a board gaming convention near Tring. It turned out for me and Drak to be a day of space games. We started out falling into a game of *SETI: Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence*¹ that was being set up when we got there. Then we played our first full game of *Arcs*², and finished off the day with *SpaceCorp: 2025-2300 AD*³. It was a fun day, with the only downside being that I didn't sell any games at the bring and buy sale.

I took part in September's UK Maths Trade⁴ on BoardGameGeek.com, in an attempt to trade away some board games I have that are highly unlikely to ever get played again. However, being inexperienced in such technicalities, all I achieved was to acquire 6 more games by trading some money ;-/ The trades happen every two months, so, with my expensively obtained knowledge, I hope to do better in November's UK Maths Trade.

Other recent board gaming has included *Scythe*⁵, *Railways of the World's Great Britain*⁶ and *Sweden*⁷ maps, and *Cat in the Box*⁸, the latter being a fiendishly clever quantum trick-taking card game.

IgTheme: Media Influences

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

The loose concept and general flavour of my long running (since 1985) but mostly on hiatus fantasy sandbox campaign is intended to be *Babylon 5* meets *The X-Files* in *Middle Earth*. Sounds good as an elevator pitch, but, of course, is hard to execute successfully, especially when allowing players the freedom of a sandbox style game.

Babylon 5 is, for me, the best space saga in any format – it is the *Lord of the Rings* of space opera. It beautifully balances an epic story arc with entertaining individual episodes. It is that kind of epic plot arc that I yearn to have in my campaign, players willing (which they're usually not), combined with fun "monster of the week" type adventures.

¹ <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/418059/>

² <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/359871/>

³ <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/214029/>

⁴ https://boardgamegeek.com/wiki/page/Math_Trades

⁵ <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/169786/>

⁶ <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgameexpansion/133412/>

⁷ <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgameexpansion/311783/>

⁸ <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/345972/>

The X-Files also combines a somewhat epic story arc, told far more obliquely, with entertaining individual episodes. The secretive and sinister Syndicate, and the even more secretive and sinister aliens are, I think, a great model for recurring antagonists in a sandbox campaign. The monster of the week episodes are a good model for adventures for investigative characters.

I finally read *Lord of the Rings* several years after I got into role playing games, and even after reading it and seeing the movies, I don't think it has influenced my gaming very much. On the other hand, *Michael Moorcock's Eternal Champion* stories, which I loved and read before finding role playing games, have probably had a big influence on me – mostly probably in the style of story/play that I try for.

Comments

#4 Mark A. Wilson: my sympathies on the job situation for you and your girl friend, and my best wishes on your job seeking efforts.

#4 Roger BW: RYCTM, LOL at the concept of "Carry On Cthulhu". I'm afraid I'm not at all good at staying "in character".

#4 Patrick Riley: RYCTM re AI art training criminality, in English law it is possible, though rare, to get criminal bankruptcy against someone. This is possible where the person has been found guilty of a criminal law associated with their business going bankrupt. In this case, they become personally liable for their bankrupt businesses debts, and so debtors can go after the bankruptees personal wealth and possessions – wishful thinking by me, I know.

#4 Avram Grumer: awesome retro styling of your zine.

#4 Dylan Capel: RYC about column format and printing, FYI I use column format as I find the shorter lines easier to read and follow, and they display more readably on my tablet if I zoom in to a single column on screen. I do not print any of it out.

#4 Michael Cule: very nice and interesting Yrth background – fascinating to read.

Re my character Keanus worshipping Humakt to prove the tolerance of the Red Goddess, to be honest, although I have got more into the Glorantha background through playing Runequest with you guys, I'm still ignorant of many of the standards and tropes of the lore. So, when we were character creating, and almost everyone else seemed to be going for Yanafal Tarnils, that I knew nothing about, I landed on Humakt (after checking with you that it was OK for a Lunar) to inject some character variety, as much as any other consideration. However, it is fun and/or interesting to be different sometimes, and

hopefully it provides the GM with alternative plot hooks into the party.

Re political rants: yes, best avoided.

RYCT Gabriel re physical and luck hit points, way back when I played D&D I house ruled pretty much what you suggest. Hit Points represented luck and otherwise avoiding actual damage, such as by dodging, parrying, etc. I had "Body Points" be CON + Level, and represent actual physical damage points. Normal damage came off Hit Points, and when Hit Points ran out then all damage came off Body Points; however, natural 20s rolled normal damage which came off Body Points. After taking Body Point damage the character had to make a System Shock roll to avoid becoming incapacitated/unconscious. The idea was to make it a little bit more "realistic" (which I suppose actually means more believable), and to increase survivability of low level characters, whilst making high level characters a bit vulnerable to "lucky critical hits". It seemed to work fine, but does change the balance of the game a bit, and I could imagine high level characters being quite reluctant to play such a house rule.

#4 Mark Nemeth: enjoying your Observations & Commentary on the games you are playing. Moral dilemmas are something I'm interested in including in play, but they are not particularly adventurous. With players that like that sort of musing, I think they can work well, but with players who are not into that sort of thing they can grate.

RYCT Myles Corcoran re emigration to Portugal, a friend of mine retired to Portugal a couple of years ago, pretty much for the reasons you mention.

#4 Jim Vassilakos: RYCT Mitch Hyde re characters moving across different DM's games, my experience at university was that this was entirely the default at the RPG club. It worked very well, with very few hiccups. Some GMs ran more epic campaigns while others ran more episodic adventure sessions, and rules varied slightly between OD&D and AD&D 1st edition, but it all pretty much worked fine and was very interesting for the diversity. Every GM had their own world, with at least one major "Hall of Teleportation" which served as the gateway between those worlds. Each world was tacitly regarded as its own universe within the collective multi-verse, which explained the various rule differences between each GM. It probably helped that we all met up in a single block of rooms at the same time to play, rather than being spread out across the campus.

—===### Everyone else, RAEBNC ###===—

Attacks of Opportunity

Issue Four, Dylan Capel

Reading

I've had the *Bone Ships* on Kindle for a while and never got off the first chapter. I saw a copy being sold in a library sale (a bit of coincidence as it was the library near my parents home which I used to visit all the time in my pre-teens but which I hadn't visited for decades) and since it cost next to nothing I picked it up on a whim.

I don't know why but reading the physical copy was just way more compelling than the online version and I've powered through the book since (time allowing). Partly that is because the chapters are thoughtfully bite-sized for the most part (as all good writing courses probably suggest now) but for some reason the experience is just more enjoyable, perhaps the layout of the ebook was just shoddy.

It is a bit like a fantasy version of a Napoleonic navy novel with a dash of *Moby Dick* where the whale is a sea dragon and instead of wanting to kill it the crew are trying to keep it alive. This involves a series of terrifying and thrilling land raids and naval battles.

It has some rich world building so there's a lot going on around the basic plot. There are enslaved avian people, a plot to try and bring an end to war, a complex caste system and as often seems to be the case in fantasy fiction a line in child sacrifice.

The main point of view character seems to be a kind of chosen one with a mystical connection to the primal forces the sea dragon embodies. As a character his primary driver through much of the novel though is grief for a father killed by thoughtless misuse of military power.

As the number of pages started to dwindle I wondered how the book was going to bring all the threads it had to any kind of conclusion by the end of the novel. I thought perhaps the author was going to drown the entire human cast in the cold ocean waters. In fact it is a trilogy so its going to be a while before there's a strong resolution. Despite that I felt the book came to a satisfying end which didn't leave me immediately wanting to go onto the next book. The story arc belongs to the whale in the end.

I bought a second hand copy of *Earthdawn Parlainth* cheaply because it was separated from its box and handouts. I actually own the original boxed set but it is great to have a second copy of the book and to be able to dip in and out of it easily. The idea of the setting is that it is a decadent Imperial city that conducted a ridiculously complex ritual to hide the city in a pocket dimension and erase all

knowledge of it from the world. To allow it to return there was a magical ring left behind that activated when the corruption of the world had fallen to a safe level. When active people touching the ring would dream of the city and have a compulsive desire to walk in its streets. These people would be compelled to enact a ritual to return the city of their dreams.

Of course the whole point of the story is hubris and nemesis. The city had already been infiltrated by monsters at the point it entered its pocket dimension and they eventually revealed themselves and killed all the citizens, the city became a death trap. Of course after this the monsters had nothing to do for centuries as they themselves were trapped until the city was returned to the real world, by which point they were almost completely mad. Everyone got a bad deal.

The city is a classic ruin in the style of Pompeii and Pavis with a reason as to why monsters, treasure and lost knowledge are scattered all over the place. Indeed the monsters use the treasure to lure more people to come to their lairs.

It's a great little setting and I think that I would probably just slice off the *Earthdawn* elements if I was to use it in future as while there is a whole bunch of myth making that surrounds it it is essentially just a self-contained city with a tragic story. Lots of things fit in that frame and the whole idea of invasion, occupation, rebellion, resistance and rightful authority that illuminates *Earthdawn's* Barsaive isn't really necessary here.

The physical copy of *Beetle Knight* arrived in the form of a beautiful risograph printed set of zines. Players take on the role of insect knights exploring the world and trying to uphold all that is good and true. There's a really interesting little character death mechanic here where when your character dies they drop a soul gem and their body turns into a husk. Friends can revive you via your gem and if you are able to touch your husk before you die again you can restore your stats. That's a fun way to be dangerous but not punishing and directly ties into *Soulsbourne* mechanics.

However Soul Gems can also be split and are used as currency, a slightly revolting prospect that reminded me of *Wraith's* Oboli.

Tomb of a Thousand Doors is a megadungeon for *Mausritter*. I'm only a few pages in but there's a few interesting things already coming up. The first is a repair crew for the dungeon, a group of mice that are dedicated to fixing and maintaining the dungeon and have a kind of mystical relationship to it. There is always that question of how these dungeons haven't completely fallen apart if they have been round for so long. I like the idea because it is one step removed from the full fantastical dungeon that is either a living entity in its own right or the projection of some powerful beings will.

Playing

I had the chance to play *The Zone* and I'm glad that I wasn't tempted to buy it before actually giving it a go. It is a bit of a mashup of games, primarily *Lovecraftesque* but

with the story cards of *Archipelago* so it feels a bit like *Itras By*. Cards are used to determine locations and provide scene prompts and players add details and weirdness to scenes a bit like the *Polaris* family of games.

Despite using cards and having a really defined scenario the game is really too random with the prompts not really intersecting or being linked to the depth of the expedition into the Zone.

You then go through a character winnowing process that is very reminiscent of *Carolina Death Crawl* only not as good. Finally the player whose character didn't survive and who took the most actions in the game gets to pass judgement on the final living character's wish.

It's just a bit of a mess of mechanics and game design and left me thinking that this was actually a perfect match for *Trophy Dark* of all things.

More positively I also played *Psychodungeon* which is the game of mental health crises that are turned into dungeons. Much of the game is a critique of the system of capitalism, privatisation and gig work. The dungeoneers themselves are freelancers trying their best for their clients and risking burnout and psychic wounds themselves. The system is *Belonging Outside Belonging* and is a nice example of that system with the dungeoneers needing to backbite and act without consideration in order to ultimately defeat the manifest trauma monsters.

We probably spent as much time creating characters as we did playing through the dungeon and while I enjoyed it as a one-shot I think it would also be fun to explore the evolving relationships of the psycho-dungeoneers and their relation to their work and the clients they are helping. I'm hoping to get another one-shot before trying to find a group for an extended play.

Mechanics

Murkdice has been writing some interesting material about encounter tables. The first was about creating more subtle random encounter tables that included things like omens of wandering monsters and atmospheric things that emphasise the nature of the place being explored.

I recently tried using this idea in a one-shot game and what I found interesting was that it made rolling the encounter die relevant for me as the person running the game as normally it is very rare to have a wandering encounter in a three hour game. Instead I was prompted to improvise some spooky events and to foreshadow what lay in the areas ahead. I think it added a lot of fun and character to the game.

Then they went on to use encounters with different results each time the result is rolled. So for example say result 3 is thematically "rats" then the first time you roll it, you would have a swarm of rats, perhaps even making the encounter harmless so that is foreshadowing future danger. The second time it could be a group of ratmen

on patrol, perhaps one of them has a fancy distinctive magic amulet. The third time it could be the Rat King and their retinue searching for their missing people.

The latest piece is on nesting reaction tables into the encounter table so that when you roll an encounter you also have a dedicated random reaction from the encounter. Bandits will probably be looking to ambush you (4/6 on a 1d6) but they might be looking to trade and sell the gear they've taken from others (5) or looking to recruit or form an alliance to deal with a bigger problem (6).

This gets used in *The Vast in the Dark* which is a really masterful piece of procedural creation.

Tomb of a Thousand Doors also does something interesting with encounter tables with the use of a dice chain for the encounters. The higher the number the more dangerous or extreme the encounters. Interestingly one of the triggers for advancing the die size are acts of violence which feels like it is going to lead to spirals of chaos and violence while subtly rewarding parties that are more social or stealthy.

Megacampaigns

After a recent one day con the table talk turned to the people who seem to go from one playing of the *Masks of Nyarlathotep*, *Ravenloft* or *The Enemy Within*. The question was asked about what the great white whale of the mega campaign is that you'd like to run or play and what holds you back from doing it?

It's an awesome question and I have to say that I've probably had more than my fair share of opportunities to do big campaigns but I do have quite a few that I wish I had been able to be part of.

Probably the most quixotic campaign I'd like to do is *The Words and Deeds of the Chain of Tlachic*. This isn't really a typical megacampaign, it has quite a big dungeon and a lot of interactions and outcomes that can happen within it but really it only pays off in my view if a group explore everything and then trigger the endgame where (without spoiling too much) they then go through the dungeon backwards.

I've always loved the strange nature of the immortal dwarves depicted in this game, again without too many spoilers there are elements of the *Jessica Jones* TV show here. As I've read the booklet I would have to run this one.

As a player I've always wanted to do something long running in *Prax* or the *Big Rubble*. Something that riffed on the *Borderlands* scenarios or the *Griselda* stories. The politics and factions of the rubble combined with the mythic background feels like it would be an interesting thing to tease out slowly.

I've always been interested in the game *How we came to live here* with its different social roles for players. The problem is you need a critical mass of players to be able to recreate the sense of a tribe and the different social currents within it and I'm not sure I know that many people in the UK who are interested in the theme of Southwestern American mythology and tribal history.

I would like a *Traveller* campaign that was like *Leviathan* but crossed with some of the mystery and deep space of *Deepnight*. Something that was about exploration and reconnecting with lost expeditions but without the imperialism and colonialism of the scout type games. Kind of *Star Trek* but with independent traders or travellers. I think *Leviathan* was remade as *Last Flight of the Amuar* and I think that is the kind of thing that I'm looking for but maybe even more sandboxy without the framing device of trying to find a missing ship.

I've also wanted to do some kind of megadungeon that is like *Temple of Elemental Evil* but which is a bit more satisfying than that actual dungeon. Take *Hommlot* but have a Patrick Stewart dungeon like *Deep Carbon Observatory*. I had hoped that *The Dark Tower* or *Barrowmaze* might be it but I'm still looking. People have recommended *Stonehell* and I've enjoyed other people's writeups of their sessions using that. Others have suggested *Castle Xyntillan* which I might have played through in a hacked form and I'm not quite sure it is right either.

Comments

The deadline has snuck up on me so only a few comments this time but great contributions from everyone.

Thanks for the insights on how E&A is put together **Jim Vassilakos** I found the process chat quite fascinating, sorry for the last minute submission. **Myles Corcoran** I'm enjoying the *Mausritter* writeup and with regards to the differences in *Questworlds*, I don't have the earlier versions to hand but I feel that this version is **everything** that has come before. Thanks for another Dice Tower Retreat writeup **Patrick Zoch**. It always takes me a while to go through your reports but the breadth of games is always interesting and the pictures of all game bits is a vicarious pleasure. Thanks for reminding me to look into *Night Tripper* **Avram Grumer**, I think you're reading *Troika!* correctly and I've felt the same way about it and never asked the designers about what their intent was with it. I assumed that you can't use the skill if you don't have it and you don't need to roll it unless there's a serious consequence to failing but it does feel a lot of characters are just really bad at their archetype from a probability curve point of view. And talking of which thanks for the probability graphs **Patrick Riley**. Regardless of the complexity I think it is fun (as a player) to have something special for 1 and 100 in a percentile system but it could be beyond the success or failure of the action.

Links

- Murkdice Newsletter: <https://murkdice.substack.com>
- The Zone: <https://play.thezonerpg.com/>
- Beetle Knight: <https://brookletgames.itch.io/beetle-knight-quickstart>
- The Tide Child trilogy: <https://www.rjbarker.com/tidechildtrilogy.html>
- The Words and Deeds of the Chain of Tlachic: <https://vvvisection.itch.io/words-and-deeds>
- Psychodungeon: <https://ratwavegamehouse.itch.io/psychodungeon>

Ronin Engineer for Ever and Anon #5
by Jim Eckman,
Mountain View, CA
alarum@roninengineer.com

IRL

I've been busy preparing paintings for my club's artshow along with my book clubs and other activities. Had a fun 'no kings' day.

Worldbuilding

One standby of classic SF is the Empire and why current SF has a tendency to look at Rome or Byzantium, early China has some interesting issues as well.

The Early Chinese Empires: Qin and Han by Mark Edward Lewis

This book gives a high level overview of the Qin and Han dynasties, about one third of the text is about political and military history while the rest deals with life, religion and other subjects. See the GR description for more.

This book gave me fresh insights on why the Qin and the Han dynasties failed, in the case of the Qin, once they had won, they didn't know what to do next. They were the first after all.

The fall of the Han was a bit more complicated. Early on in the dynasty, they stopped drafting peasants into the army, a change that was carried on until modern times. While I'm sure this made it easier to suppress rural uprisings, it radically reduced the number of potential recruits as well. To make up the loss, they wound up sentencing criminals to serve as well as hiring foreign mercenaries.

This worked OK at first, in the early days of the Han, they managed to keep their enemies busy fighting each other but that eventually ended and the slow, small scale invasion of Western Han started. This also was about the same time as the rise of the literati in government drove what few

military leaders they had left out of power reducing the Han army to almost nothing.

This left outposts of criminals and outcasts and the estates of great families as the defenders of the west, which they did by making truces or allying with the invaders. The smackdown was pretty horrible, it's estimated that up to 100 million died during a fifty year period, one of the worst catastrophes in human history.

One problem that China had was a method of absorbing foreigners into its empire. There wasn't the concept of citizen like the Romans had, Non-Han were always outsiders.

This book also has a decent bibliography, an excellent read.

Why are you in this book/game?

While not all characters need a tragic back story, I think they are more interesting to play or read about. One thing that's missing most games is a growing up phase, a good place to insert reasons behind a characters quirks. This could be as simple a table or could include, special events and mini solo adventures.

1) RAH The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, 2) AN Judgement on Janus 3) RAH Starship Troopers 4) AN The Beast Master 5) AN Ice Crown 6) RAH Glory Road

Ignorable Theme

SF and fantasy books, especially those of Jack Vance and Andre Norton. Kurosawa's samurai movies, Sonny Chiba's ninja TV series and Babylon 5.

Next issue

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

Reactions to Issue #4

Denizens of the Library #3 – Brian Rogers
Zippo is a nice writeup with artwork.

Bumbling Through Dungeons #4 – Mark A. Wilson
Good luck with your job search.

Philatelic Monstrosities #1 – Clark B. Timmins
Monsters on stamps, nice idea. I will try and have a cover ready for this issue.

Children's Interactive Fiction, Pt 5 – Pedro Panhoca da Silva & Camila Lourenço
Panhoca - RAEBNC

Firedrake's Hoard #2 – Roger Bell_West
Sounds like you've a busy gaming schedule. Re: GURPS – I like buy systems, I enjoy having diverse characters as opposed to a generic X level fighter. When I run In The Labyrinth or Bushido, I do have to generate a fair number of characters, some for NPCs and some as base characters for those less experienced in the current campaign and game system.

Quasipseudoludognostication #4 – Patrick Riley
Re: Amber sounds interesting, but I would prefer Paranoia for PvP. Dice corner is a nice comparison for bonus rolls.

Reddened Stars #2 – John Redden -
RAEBNC

Engines & Emulators #4 – Heath Row -
RAEBNC

The Rhodomontadulous Promenade – George Phillies - RAEBNC

Going to be Ad-Libbed #2 – Avram Grumer
Tiny Frontiers added to my little list.

Attacks of Opportunity #3 – Dylan Capel
Re: Meta double columns does feel a bit retro on a monitor. But I kind off like it for that reason.

The Phoenix Nest #4 – Michael Cule –
RAEBNC

Overlord's Annals (v4n8) – Attronarch- B –
RAEBNC

Twisting the Rope #4 – Myles Corcoran – I like your playing style. *RYCT me: Twenty-six players is an impressive number. Do you ever have too many players turn up for a session?* Not in a long time, I used to use them to run monsters. SF games added to the list.

De Ludis Elficis Fictis – Pum – RAEBNC

Dreadsword #3 – Mitch Hyde – I've played in a long term COC campaign, much better than one shots.

The Dragon's Beard #89 – Patrick Zoch –
RAEBNC

The Seedling #51 – Mark Nemeth – Thank you. RAEBNC.

Age of Menace #241 – Brian Christopher Misiaszek – Still amazing COC material.

An Unlooked For Zine #3 – Lisa Padol –
RE: IGTHEMES #1 – I look for the one page cheat sheet a good system should have or make my own. Luckily I have never needed to do this at a convention. #2 I pregenerate a fair number of characters, In The Labyrinth. Bushido, COC all benefit from this. #3 Nice play style. #4 Good list.

Accidental Recall #3 – Joshua Kronengold
– I will look at Fate Space.

Traveller PBEM: Plankwell, Ch 49 – Vassilakos, Collinson, and Rader – SF games added to the list.



Figure 1: Abandoned Base from Search for the Star Stones



Mark A. Wilson
mawilson4164@gmail.com
bumblingthroughdungeons.com
RPGGeek: mawilson4

ISSUE #5 (E&A #5 - Nov. '25)

The job hunt...is exhausting. I do not mess about when it comes to this stuff; I'm past 200 job applications sent already, and counting. The bevy of remote positions in my industry helps, but I'm also only applying for positions I think I might truly want. That number could easily be double (or more) what it is if I were applying to every single marketing/communications position available to me.

This is a grind, though, and I only hit such numbers because I treat it like a full-time job.

But the lack of professionalism from several companies has me wondering if I shouldn't just shift all of my rigor into, say, creating a new RPG supplement every 3-7 days and seeing if I can't scale my gaming content creation into a viable income stream.

Which is more disgruntled fantasizing than legitimate conviction to do so. That would be a rather large long-term risk, but the thought has certainly crossed my mind. Otherwise, we continue on...

IgTheme: What Media Has Inspired You in RPGs

I wrote a long(ish) article for my website (linked below) on adapting other works into RPG adventures. This is something I love doing. So a complete answer to this question would include a LOT of inspirations.

The Article:

Make It Your Own: Stealing & Adapting non-RPG Elements Into Your Game

LINK: <https://bumblingthroughdungeons.com/make-it-your-own/>

Some sources provide more fertile grounds than others. *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Doctor Who* are probably the IPs I've mined the most. Stripped of their settings, the problems, plots and characters they include are quintessential RPG fodder. I also find that TV lends itself well to adaptation, because a single episode of a show often translates well to an individual adventure.

So my players have often been in the middle of a *Doctor Who* episode, for instance, unbeknownst to them in some fantasy setting.

Video games are another common source. I ran an entire campaign that was an homage to *Dark Sun: Shattered Lands*, a game from the mid-90s. Dark Sun is a D&D-licensed game, so it's perhaps cheating. But it still requires adapting from one form to another.

The *Mass Effect* series is another I've used for ideas. Or the *Assassin's Creed* series. Sometimes it's an NPC, story arc, individual location, or other small element. Other times it's a whole idiom and large swaths of the setting and plot.

Ideas are everywhere, and the list could go on, but those are some that stand out to me.

Media

Finishing the Mission: Impossible movies. The final installment (*Final Reckoning*) has predictably stunning cinematography and stunt work. The bar is almost impossibly high for the series on the latter, yet the two big set pieces deliver.

However, the rest drags. Pacing, plotting, length, laborious exposition, hero worship of Cruise's character (which has reached uncomfortable levels), the weirdly toothless sci-fi villain, and more. The middle installments of the series (three through six) cemented this as an excellent overall action series. They didn't know how to land the plane though, so to speak, and clunked into the station with this one.

Wong Kar Wai's *In the Mood for Love* is stunningly shot and infused to its bones with tension and subtext. I think I preferred *Chungking Express* of his, though it's difficult to say why. Both deal with themes of loneliness and disconnection.

In less serious viewing, the British comedy show *Taskmaster* is an absolute treat and a half. It's become weekly viewing for my girlfriend and I when new seasons air (thankfully, on Youtube for American audiences, only a few days after episodes air in the UK)!

Session Report: Fiasco

Characters

See the image below for characters.

Scenario

We played members of a metal band who, having broken up years ago, were trying to stage a comeback as aging rockers, looking for one last big tour.

Our band name: Leviticus. We only learned later that this is a real band that had a comeback arc not dissimilar to what we envisioned.

Session

I was Chick Douglas, a drug addict drummer who had been kicked out of the band originally. But the other drummers who came after me had all died, and so for the reunion tour I was tapped to reunite with my former bandmates.

We had a new frontman, a rehab buddy of mine and a bit of younger kid (i.e. 40s instead of 60s or 70s) who was coasting on rock vibes the entire time.

We also had a new tour manager who was trying to ink a deal with Disney+ for us. But to do so, we had to keep our image squeaky-clean.

I was also in debt to the new tour manager and had to find a way to repay him.

Cut to Chick at a house party at a roadie's house, pants half down as he tries to sneak in the window to steal some drugs so that he could sell it for some cash. This goes awry and I find Viagra instead, leading to an eminently awkward conversation with a Disney executive at the party.

The tour - very much in the *This is Spinal Tap* vein - starts

off with a whimper. But we become viral sensations on social media because our antics are seen as hilarious parody. We have some minor tour success, but Disney seems to be hoovering up too much of the profits.

Chick reaches out to a bookie friend of his, who informs him that there are Vegas prop bets on their live-streamed concerts. One of the prop bets is whether or not there will be a fire at a concert.

Chick takes matters into his own hands and rigs his kit to burst into flames (with the help of his buddy Ziggy) in order to get a huge payout on the prop bet.

The plan goes horribly amiss, as you might expect, and few are spared, even of the flames (which spread) or the legal and financial fallout.

Post-fire, I try to concoct one last scheme from my hospital bed to retrieve some masters from an earlier album to turn in to pay my medical bills and debts, but to no avail.

The aftermath sees me horribly burnt, on Craglist looking for drummer gigs and on GoFundMe looking for medical funds. Alive and still performing, but a shell of my former self and a victim of my own actions.

Thoughts

Fiasco is a nice way to have some improvisational shenanigans. One of my favorite systems for one-shots.

This scenario was a lot more coherent than the last I played with this same group, which was a time travel scenario. Keeping plotlines straight in that one was a nightmare. Amusing, and I loved my character in that one as well, but I want more of my brain power to go into the scenes themselves, not merely keeping everything straight in the narrative.



Responses to E&A #4

Brian Rogers

Re: Greyhawk being wrong for 5.5e, it's an interesting take, and my instinct is to agree. Gygax ran a rather different style of game than tends to be popular today, though I also tend to think that the disparities in eras are occasionally overstated in order to emphasize certain points. My group's games are not full OSR, but they'd be discernible to those from the 80s as the same game with a lot of the same appeals and tropes, at least.

Insofar as "generic fantasy" works for most groups, a lot of these settings are going to be interchangeable for casual fans who aren't diving into the exact tone and lore of various historically relevant D&D settings.

Particularly since they set the movie in the Forgotten Realms (which was generally well-regarded), though, I'd think they would want to extrapolate on the Realms further. I've heard their next big setting book is on the Realms, though I don't have a definitive source for that info. So perhaps they're not fully committing to Greyhawk past the core books.

Myles Corcoran

Re: texting as a game communication mechanic, I suspect it's a sign of what's to come. There's no reason more modern-setting RPGs can't leverage modern technologies. I actually think *Alice is Missing* is a bit cautious in this sense, limiting itself to speak channels for a specific timeframe. This works perfectly for one-shots, for which it was designed. But in a campaign setting, I think it would be neat to have various in-character communications channels that are ongoing.

I've thought about using email in a spacefaring campaign as well, but haven't yet pulled together any of the particulars. The idea being that players could get in-world email communications sent to their character, and that this would create asymmetric player knowledge at times about various plot hooks and characters.

Joshua Kronengold

Ah, yes, I guess I don't talk about my musical background much. I'm classically trained at the violin (i.e. I become less useful in improvisational settings, without music in front of me or memorized). My first declared college major was music performance. I left it as a major in year #2, but finished with a minor in performance.

Before moving from my home city, I was a reservist in a couple professional quartets and the local symphony

(Youngstown Symphony Orchestra), which is as close to professional status as I ever made it. My sister, a cellist, also gigged with the YSO on a couple occasions.

It's a small sore spot these days, because calling myself a musician is generous, given how many years my violin(s) have sat idle. Life takes over and priorities shift. The muscle memory is still there, but so is considerable rust. And to get back to the level I know I'm capable of requires a lot of practice, which in turn requires a level of commitment I haven't been able to make in well over a decade. I could still play in a variety of settings, and may again someday, but it's not been an active endeavor of mine for some time.

Re: Dancing, I have been a swing dancer for nearly two decades now (since immediately post-college), with most of my experience in East Coast and Lindy Hop styles. More of a hobby than any professional endeavor, though back in Evansville, IN (~2011-2014) where I danced more than anywhere else, the local swing club would get invited to be the "dancing entertainment" at various local events. So I'd get in free and/or fed at a handful of events every year as a result, which was fun. I still have some contacts in the local swing scene here in Columbus, and have taught my girlfriend some concepts and moves. It always makes for a fun date night to go see a jazz band or similar where we can do a bit of dancing.

Shifting gears Re: 5.5e Monks, I'm indeed finding this 2024-edition character more to my liking, though perhaps in part because I did a better job building them out for combat effectiveness than I did in the past.

Jim Vassilakos

Interesting observations re: my Lucifer conversation.

Not that I gave it conscious thought about the capitalization of God/He/etc. in Lucifer's speech (I didn't, I confess), but in my mind it was a private conversation between he and I. And so whereas he might deny the divinity of god/God in other situations, there was no need to posture one way or another in our conversation. Insofar as both Lucifer and God are as much metaphor as divine in the context of the conversation, the capitalization seems to me to be better-suited to pointing toward the qualities represented by the *idea* of God.

You do rightly point out that his explicit self-awareness of his nature precludes the pride that is traditionally ascribed to Satan. I happily accept any such flaws in my portrayal of Lucifer, and the consistency (or lack thereof) in the passages. I'd have to go back and re-read the passages that are at greatest fault of this, to see if they can't be reworked

a bit for more coherence. I have no aspirations of sharing this beyond the walls of E&A, but I also value the feedback, as my creative meanderings have been of considerable cathartic value to be recently.

Speaking of...

Conversations With Lucifer (#4)

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

“If humanity were to start over,” he asked me for a change, “which religions do you think would independently occur again?”

“None, in their exact form, of course.”

“More generally then.”

“Ignoring that scientific insights won't have changed, monotheism seems likely. Pagan polytheists attributed nature to the gods as a way of explaining the fearful and unknowable, and it's in our nature as seekers of influence to claim divine right. The stronger the god, the stronger the claim, and so an all seeing, all knowing deity is inevitable.” I paused. “But not the specifics, of course. We see that well enough already.”

“And the others? The so-called philosophies.”

“Eastern traditions? Ah. Parts but not the whole, I suspect. There is Truth in the introspection of meditation, and what it reveals.”

“Have they found The Truth then?”

“In a single human practice? Preposterous. Though I suppose I'd need to become enlightened to know for certain. But no, it's enough to say they stumbled upon some true wisdom.”

I thought for a moment and then continued. “And you. You would cease to exist. You're naught but the belief in you, which would fade with the rest “

“My boy, I need not be the Morningstar to be what I am. I have had innumerable forms and names, and have more to come.”

“I suppose that's true. We need to give our nature a name; or many names, as it were. And through those names, life. You would live grandly.”

“Leaving again, and so soon?”

“The world has able rulers in my stead. I'll return as I'm needed, and not before.”

Thus endth what I scribbled in my notebook in this curious little conversation. I hope it was enjoyable for anyone who followed it over the last handful of issues.

I don't precisely know what compelled me into a hypothetical dialogue with the devil, but I was in a contemplative mood and remember the lines above (and those from earlier issues) coming quite freely. So it was clearly something that needed to escape me in some form. Cheers!

Endgame state of a recent playtest of one of my games, working title *Camping Trip*.



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

=====

- * Has anyone run a *Spelljammer* campaign where all the PCs are cat-people, called *Katzenjammer*?
- * Did *Malcolm in the Middle* ever do an episode where he joins a *D&D* group and meets another kid named Malcolm who's the youngest in his family (*Malcolm at the End*)?
- * Is there an apa about Gene Wolfe's Book of the New Sun called *Alzabos & Excruciations*?

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A recent blog post I saw, about map hexes and their relationship to the literal depiction of distance (abstract hexes that work like gameboard spaces, versus realistic hexes with detailed interiors), got me thinking about how very modern it is to even expect accurate continent-scale maps to exist. Real-world medieval European maps bear only the vaguest of resemblances to their actual territories.

Now, a *D&D*-style fantasy environment isn't limited by a realistic lack of technology. A fantasy cartographer might have access to flying carpets, scrying, and air elementals. A wizard might be able to enter a trance state and project his astral self miles into the air, using automatic writing to draw what he sees below. Lots of options are available.

But by that same token, lots of magical options are available for blocking those attempts. Residents might resist having their lands surveyed for the convenience of a distant ruler, parceling out territory to his wealthy courtiers. Certainly one nation might object to being surveyed by a potentially hostile neighboring nation. This could be a mission for PCs – either hired to do surveying over the objections of the locals, or hired by the locals to do the resisting.

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Greater Than Games has gone belly-up due to the tariffs, so they (or their owners, Flat River Group) are selling off this massive hardcover book for just US\$15! Plus another US\$15 for shipping, but still, it's over 400 9"x11" pages (slightly bigger than A4, for those of you in countries that don't hate measurements based on powers of ten), with color art, and would easily cost US\$50 or more under normal circumstances. (The Kickstarter reward level granting a physical copy was US\$59, and I don't think that included shipping.)

I've had a bit of fun making a couple of characters with this using the "Guided" (semi-random) method; there's also a not-random "Constructed" method. I say "semi-random" because even the Guided method gives you a lot of choices to make. Most of the choices are semi-constrained - "pick one from this category" or "choose one of these three options" - which seems to make it easy to construct semi-random superheroes that nonetheless feel thematically coherent.

How's the rest of the game? Well, like I said, I haven't played it. It looks like it's built around providing the players with a series of combat set-pieces, which I guess is what most superhero games are designed to do. The amount of effort needed to design one of these set-pieces looks to me like it'd discourage the kind of free-wheeling, improvisational play that I like, though maybe it's something that gets easy to do once you've mastered the rules.

Said rules don't seem to care much about stuff outside of your powers and crime-fighting abilities, so there isn't much guidance for handling, say, whether you can salvage your character's relationship with his girlfriend after you missed your date

again because you had to save downtown from rampaging killbots. You can handle it mechanically as an Overcome action, but you're going to be rolling default d4s for that if you don't happen to have a relevant social Quality, which a lot of characters won't. You can just handle it with pure in-character role-playing, or an out-of-character discussion of what you as a player want to see happen, but those are options that a lot of people will find unsatisfying.

Recent Gaming =====

Someone on the Reddit forum for the Park Slope neighborhood of Brooklyn put up a post last week asking if any RPGers in the area wanted to meet up and play together, and we just had the first meetup at a bar, about eight or nine people, no gaming yet, just getting to know each other and figure out what we like, and the vibes were pretty good. We're gonna schedule an actual gaming session sometime soon, but it'll be after the apa deadline for this month.

Meanwhile, with my regular group:

Scum and Villainy, Session 2 -----

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

We start the session still in the Cove, the space-pirate hideout in Rin system. Von still has unresolved injuries from last session. A contact from the Cobalt Syndicate offers us a job: smuggle explosives to a contact on Warren (the sector capital, also in Rin system). Vary goes to the bar to pick up rumors (an information-gathering roll with Consort); something about the Syndicate working with someone else to do something the government (the awkwardly-named House Malklaith) won't like. Something complicated and big. Josh's Consort roll is crappy – the dice hate us this session – so Vary winds up paying so much for drinks that the GM assigns a Level 1 Harm condition to represent that she's tapped out for cash.

We take the job. We treat this as a Transport job, so we have to provide the

route and method as details. The route is pretty obvious (we've got a ship, and we're in the same system as the destination). Our method is that we conceal the explosives in our secret cargo hold, and Von buys a load of off-world mushrooms to put in the regular cargo hold. We just get one die for our Engagement roll (1d6 to start with, minus 1d6 because the GM says there are a lot of contingent factors, plus 1d6 because Harmony has a black-market contact who can help us out), and we roll a 4.

That's a complication! The customs agent is checking us out, when his pad beeps. We can see on the display that it's our ship's registration number. Josh quickly inserts a flashback: Fortunately, Vary had used Hack to swap our registration number with the next ship's while we waited in line. The GM calls for Josh to make a Hack roll, and it's another 4! The next ship is a House Malvolio cruiser! This buys us some time as the customs agent tries to figure out what's going on; Lisa has Valsi use Way powers to cloud the guy's mind and remove his suspicions. (I think this might be the only 6 we roll this session.) That gets us through Customs.

But now a reporter from the Hegemonic News Network shows up! She's figured out that our ship was at the Starlight – the space nightclub from last session – and wants to ask if we know anything about the recent collision there between a cargo ship and a House Maladondo ship (which Harmony caused). Vary tries to distract her by revealing herself as an alien; the GM offers Josh a Devil's Bargain on the roll, and Josh accepts it then fails the roll anyway! I narrate a flashback in which Harmony spent some time on the trip burning pirated video disks, so we'd have a mildly-illegal cargo as another layer of deception, but I roll crappy, so the reporter isn't distracted by that. So this reporter figures out that we're smugglers, but doesn't turn us in or raise an alarm or anything. She just gives us her business card. She also mentions at some point that a diplomat from Vary's people had recently visited House Malaprop.

We rent a hover-van to take the explosives (in crates marked "heavy machinery") to the drop-off spot: the Lost Paradise Club. We're stopped by a local cop, and Vary's attempt to Sway him suffers the same crappy luck that's been dogging us all

session: another failure after accepting a Devil's Bargain. The criminal gang we're delivering to kills the cop, which lets us finish the delivery.

(This involves a moment of confusion: The Devil's Bargain the GM offers is that we'll succeed no matter the roll, but a failure means the cop dies, which would raise our Heat score. Gareth thinks this means we have to kill the cop; Josh and I both correctly understand it to mean the gang will kill him. We have to talk Gareth down from having Von snap the cop's neck.)

We complete the delivery, noting that while the contact to whom we hand off the goods is human, everyone else in the gang seems to be a xeno. We score 8 Cred. Von gets 2 (to pay him back for the mushrooms), everyone else gets 1, and we've got enough left over to pay for the ship's upkeep. We hear that the Hegemonic News Network broadcast facility has been seized by a criminal gang, and Warren is generally troubled by gang violence. The 51st Legion is undergoing some kind of purge.

We now have 5 Heat and Wanted: 2 in the Rin system, which prompts us to move to the Holt system. Our Entanglement result has a collection agency hit us up; we pay them off with 2 Cred.

Harmony's Downtime actions are Train (Prowess) and Lay Low (use Hacking to spread misinformation). Someone else (Vary?) also uses a Lay Low action; as a result, our Wanted Reduction clock for the Rin system is more than half-filled.

We fill the XP track for the ship, so we acquire a med-bay (Von can get healed!) and a shrine (double-training for Resolve). The session ends with us at Jerek's Junkyard in the Holt system.

This was a pretty short session. I think we're noticing that the kinds of jobs we're getting play to Vary's (Josh's character's) strengths as a Speaker, and don't give the rest of us as much to do, so we're going to have to figure out what to do about that. I also need to figure out some cool stuff for Harmony to build with the crafting rules.

Also, looking back over the rules right now, I realize that we've almost totally forgotten about resistance rolls! I think Gareth made one for Von when he got shot in the previous session, but we could have been resisting bad outcomes all this session!

More About DTP Apps

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Since we seem to talk a lot about Typst in this here apa, here's a link to a post on The Cauldron by someone who uses Typst to produce their RPGs, and another to a useful collection of examples.

Meanwhile, in Affinity-land: Back in March 2024, Serif (the company that produces the Affinity suite of programs: Photo, Designer, and Publisher) was acquired by Canva. Canva recently shut down the purchasing page for the Affinity programs, in anticipation of some kind of big announcement scheduled for October 30th. This has the user community in a panic, for obvious reasons. I expect I'll have more info by next month.

Comments on E&A #4

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self: Looking over the A&E entries on BoardGameGeek, I discovered that my first contribution was in A&E #163, March 1989, earlier than I'd thought.

Brian Rogers: I like those B/X modifications! The d6/d12/d20 rules remind me of how, in *Stars Without Number*, skill rolls are 2d6, while combat rolls are d20, so the bonus that helps a lot on a skill roll outside of combat only helps a bit on an attack roll or saving throw.

Roger BW: re Nazi weird science in cold war pulp – Noting that weird fascist pseudo-science beliefs of the 1940s, like UFOs, the hollow Earth, and the like, informed the pulp sci-fi adventures of a later era, I wonder what future generations will make of our own weird fascist conspiracy theories. Alien drones, chem-trails, autism caused by common vaccines or painkillers, etc.

yctm re *Cthulhu Eternal* – Trouble is, if you're doing the doubles-for-crits thing, you've gotta read 00 as zero to make sure there's one crit at each end of the range of possible die rolls. Reading 00 as 100 means that there are two adjacent crit results (99 & 100) at the high (failure) end of the scale, and at the low (success) end, the first ten results (01-10) don't have any!

Patrick Riley: “I thought I liked *Champions* until I realized that I sucked at it.” – Hah! *Champions* was my fave game in high-school. And I was pretty good at it. But a few years ago, I found some old *Champions* character sheets from back then. I was hit by a wave of nostalgia, and a desire to maybe haul out that old Big Blue Book with the George Perez cover and run a game. And then I did my taxes, and the desire went away.

Jim Eckman: re Norton vs Heinlein – Pretty sure I recognized all three Heinlein novels (#1: *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, #3: *Starship Troopers*, #6: *Glory Road*), but I haven’t read much Andre Norton. Do keep in mind that most of the main characters in *Moon* are prisoners in a penal colony, not well-off retirees.

This does bring up an important distinction between characters in a novel and those in a role-playing game. A sci-fi story is built around what critic Darko Suvin calls a *novum*, or *new thing*. When designing a protagonist, the author wants to build someone who will show off this novum to the reader. And sometimes that means someone with a specific profession (astronomer, engineer, scientist, etc). This goes for fantasy, too: both Bilbo and Frodo Baggins were comfortable men from well-to-do backgrounds. They both had to be badgered into their adventures, much as Tolkien himself had been badgered into enlisting in the Great War.

An RPG PC, on the other hand, especially one designed for an open-ended, long-running game, is made to no set gauge, and prepared for no laid course. The novae your PC encounters in sessions #10–20 might be things your GM hadn’t even thought of yet when you were rolling the PC up for session #1. Such a PC needs to have a motivation that can pull them into whatever adventure turns up, and you’ll need to be able to roll up another PC to slot into the same adventure if the first one is eaten by a grue. These are different needs than those of a novelist.

yct Robert re Typst (note: no i) – Yeah, you can run it locally, at least under MacOS or Linux. That’s how I used it when I was fiddling around with it. I

installed it using Homebrew, and ran it in a terminal app.

Myles Corcoran: yctm – *Scum & Villainy* has all of the downtime activities of *Blades in the Dark* (Acquire Asset, Long-Term Project, Recover, Reduce Heat [renamed Lay Low], Train, and Indulge Vice), and adds Craft and Repair, which are tech-related. My PC’s a Mechanic, so I should be digging into these, though I’ve actually just used our first two downtimes to Train, gaining a second dot for her Hack ability.

As far long-term goals, I don’t think there are any specific goals given in the book, but there is advice for using the clock mechanic for multi-stage projects. And the optional rule tweaks in Chapter 10, “Changing the Game,” include some simple rules for fleets of ships. You could put those together and make a heroic overthrow-the-Hegemony campaign. The untweaked game’s still designed for a campaign of 10–20 sessions, though.

Tiān Dēng is firmly in the space-truckers sub-genre of sci-fi, where you’ve got a small crew of main characters in a ship, going around taking odd jobs to pay the bills, like *Firefly* and *Cowboy BeBop*. There’s a mechanism in the rules to drive conflict scenes among the PCs: At various times you have to give a POT or NOT (Positive or Negative Outcome Token) with your PC’s name on it to another PC. During the adventure, they can spend a POT, giving it back to you to assist you with something, or do the same with a NOT to hinder you. Unspent POTs & NOTs turn into +1 & –1 modifiers, respectively, on the Collect Fees roll at the end of the job.

The main difference between *Tiān Dēng* and those two TV shows is that the PCs’ ship is artificially intelligent, and they have to put effort into keeping it happy. Also, unlike *Firefly*, the authors actually take the Chinese background seriously.

Lisa Padol: re assembling a dice pool in *Cortex* – You may recall that I worked up a flowchart for this when we tried playing *Smallville* back in 2012. I just pulled it up to look it over, and man, it’s still horrendously complicated.

Just a ton of dice hokey-pokey. (You put a few dice in, you take a few dice out, you put some more dice in, and you shake 'em all about...)

When you say you like "support for emotional play," what do you mean? Simple "+2 attack bonus 'cause I'm fighting the guy who killed my brother," or "I can launch an attack on a character's feelings that has as much mechanical heft as stabbing them with a knife, and I'm not talking about psychic duels," or "here's a structure that maps this NPC's journey from not knowing your name to having a crush on you, and rules for moving along it over several sessions"?

Joshua Kronengold: yct Roger BW, re *GURPS* – The morass of tiny decisions is one of the things that bugs me about lots-of-little-skills systems, like both *GURPS* and *Basic Roleplaying*. I want my PC to be good at a thing, and maybe that just means putting points into one or two skills, or maybe it means spreading points out over several skills, with very little clear guidance to tell me which skill gets used when. Like, in *Call of Cthulhu* (looking at the 7th ed rules right now), if you want to punch someone, it's just Brawl, but if you want to convince someone, it might be Charm, Persuade, Fast-Talk, or even Intimidate.

An added issue with *GURPS* is that while I'm told that the GM is expected to tailor the system to their intended campaign, the rules presentation gives the appearance of a complete and comprehensive assemblage of inter-connected parts, which discourages tinkering. Contrast this with early *D&D*, whose half-assed and obviously incomplete presentation begged to be tinkered with!

Hm. I'm thinking that, in addition to *IIIEE* (Intent/Initiation/Execution/Effect), which analyzes *where in the fictional chain of narrated events* resolution takes place, and *Fortune-in-the-Middle/Fortune-at-the-End*, which analyzes *where in the real-world process of deciding and narrating* resolution occurs, we might have use for some terms that talk about *when the applicability of character abilities* is established.

You've got *GURPS*-like games, where applicability is spelled out in the

rulebooks, and *Risus* and *Over the Edge* at the other end of the spectrum, where it's largely worked out at the table during play. And in the middle, something like *Big Eyes, Small Mouth* (2nd & later editions), where skill cost is adjusted by the GM before character creation to suit anticipated utility. The so-called "Rule of Cool" probably has something to do with this, too, as does the negotiation of Effect in the Forged in the Dark family of games.

Jim Vassilakos: re CC tasks – I've installed a command-line utility called *cpdf* that does a lot of PDF-managing stuff, which I recommend to users who prefer working on the command-line and are considering taking up the CC's burden. I use it mostly for editing the bookmarks on gamebook PDFs that lack them, or lack enough of them. (I'm a Mac guy, so I've no idea how it works on Windows.) I used to use a GUI app called *PDFOutliner*, but recently that's started pooping out partway through editing.

You always put your own zine last, but is there any other rule to the zine-ordering? Is it just whatever order they show up in? I notice that my zine wound up near the middle of *E&A* #4, despite my having sent it in just a day before the deadline; does that mean that about half the zines are flung over the virtual transom on the last day?



Artwork by Avram Grumer



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brian.misiaszek@gmail.com

Age of Menace

Brian Christopher Misiaszek



5 Livingstone Drive,
Dundas, ON, L9H 7S3
CANADA
Tel 905-627-5496

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From Our Last Episode...

The day before the deadline for *E&A* #4, I was in Toronto and met up with my pulp historian friend, Don Hutchison. Here he is, proudly showing off the new hardcover of his third edition of *The Great Pulp Heroes*—in fact, the very copy he picked up for me (after I paid for my order with the publisher) at the launch party back in August!



Since then, autumn has been snuffling around southern Ontario, wagging its tail, turning in circles, and looking for a spot to settle down. And settle down it did; the temperatures have dipped, the leaves are just about finished turning into all the colours of a bonfire. I attended a family pig roast north of Toronto and managed a two-hour hike to Dundas Peak and the overlook at Tews Falls. It was still a little early for peak fall colours (see photo above) which have *just* passed, but things are changing on a daily basis all around us.

What else is new? My daughter Lauren finally wrote her LSATs after studying her heart out all summer. She'll get her results later in October. I had to get up far too early to drive her downtown for her in-person testing, but my reward was watching the sunrise over Hamilton Harbour, and snapping a few photos while I was at it.

As for just before the *E&A* #5 deadline, I found myself in Calgary for the 2025 Canadian Conference on Dementia. While many conferences have shifted online due to costs and travel challenges, I was glad for the excuse to revisit Calgary in person, where I made a few new friends. I also made a pilgrimage to Canada's largest tabletop game store, *The Sentry Box*. This place was superb during my last few visits, but the reduced RPG selection both new and used, and reduced minis selection meant it had lost some of its lustre for myself.

Hauntology & a Fresh Ontology of Weird & Cosmic Horror



Hauntology refers to the persistent influence of the past on the present: like a ghost that lingers in our imagination. An *ontology*, meanwhile, is a formal, explicit specification of a shared conceptualization: a way of mapping what exists and how it connects. Both ideas come to mind as I think about the lingering weight of H. P. Lovecraft's self-named "Yog-Sothothery," later systematized by August Derleth into what he called the *Cthulhu Mythos*, and is

known by that name in the highly influential *Call of Cthulhu RPG*.

In my last AOM piece, I wrote about a *Tshwa* potion as a kind of liquified shoggoth via a grotesque sourdough starter of sorts. This got me thinking. As much as I love the mood and atmosphere of Lovecraft's stories, that once-electric sense of strangeness has grown overly familiar. Even the most unearthly horrors lose their charge when everyone at the table can shrug and say, "Oh, it's just a shoggoth. I thought, never mind."

What first drew me to cosmic horror in the pulp era's "trilogy of horror writers" of H.P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, and Clark Ashton Smith, along with all the other Weird Tales writers orbiting around them, was the fusion of wonder and dread, that feeling of brushing up against something truly unknown. It's difficult to recapture that when every modern iteration borrows from the same mythic framework: *Azothoth*, *Ithaqua*, *Yog-Sothoth*, *Cthulhu*, *Nyarlotep*, *Dagon*, and the lesser denizens of that interlinked pantheon; *Deep Ones*, *Elder Things*, *Serpent People*, *Ghous*, and the like. Trying to graft new ideas onto that existing ontology risks turning the whole enterprise static. A hauntology of horror itself, if you would.

I've decided to step away from someone else's pantheon of terror and build something new, if only as a thought experiment. I'm not seeking to replace "the Cthulhu bunch" with another gallery of tentacled mascots, but to shape a fresh ontology of horror—something alive again, unpredictable, strange, and morally ambiguous. Less about alien gods from beyond the stars, and more about the ancient, uncanny forces that have always been here with us.

That's where my thoughts about a horror not from outside earth, but one which evolved from deep inside the earth originally. This is a kind of parallel evolution idea about a planetary dispersed vast para-intelligent entity, a kind of naturally occur nano grey-goo. It looks and appears like ectoplasm and has been the basis underlying stories of the paranormal--magic, voodoo and witchcraft--as some humans can unknowingly hijack parts of this continent scaled entity's strange abilities to obey commands, exert force, and share information at a distance, and so on. I've called tentatively termed *Paratethys*.

Paratethys: a Vast Para-Intelligent Entity

Paratethys is a deep-life, pan-terrestrial mega-organism that evolved nearly a billion years ago in the deep biosphere lithosphere many kilometres below the surface of the earth. It is both organism and mineral, both slime and crystal. Its early structure combined proto-bacteria with uranium

and gold crystalline arrays. It is the oldest and largest known native lifeform on Earth, its brushes with humanity who can accidentally interact with portions of it has led to the belief in magic, witchcraft, and the paranormal.

Origins

Paratethys began as a cluster of mineral formations deep within the Earth's crust, metallic gold and uranium crystals that interacted with traces of ancient microbial life. Over time, these minerals and microorganisms formed a stable partnership, exchanging chemical and radioactive heat energy and matter in a closed, slow-moving system. In this deep, low-energy environment, life evolved at a glacial pace. Individual cells could persist hundreds or even thousands of years, more focused on self-repair than on growth or reproduction.

Gradually, their mineral matrices became part of their structure, giving rise to networks that could store chemical traces of past interactions as an early fand durable form of collective memory. As these networks thickened and folded, they developed layers of organic and inorganic material that acted both as protection and as a means of limited movement.

The Chicxulub impact event, 66 million years ago, accelerated its evolution. While surface life suffered mass extinction when the 10km 'Dino killing' meteorite hit the earth, deep biosphere organisms survived. Via panspermia, the impact also introduced alien extremophiles whose organelles merged with the mineral-biological systems of Paratethys through endosymbiosis. The result was a union of two competing lineages: the native crystalline organism and the alien extremophiles. Their fusion produced a single, immense system that spread through the deep biosphere, forming labyrinthine networks that stretched across entire geological strata.

But unchecked growth bred instability. Divergent branches of Paratethys evolved specialized functions and gradually lost coherence with the whole. When the eastward and westward expansions finally met, fusion proved impossible. Instead, the two vast fronts, mirror images of the same 'mind', turned upon each other. The left and right hands of Paratethys tore and devoured one another in incomprehensible cannibalistic competition, a living Ouroboros gnawing at its own tail.

The survivor was not the whole, but only the most resilient fraction, pared down and diminished, and then trapped in the ancient Paratethys Sea. It was this hardened remnant that endured and 'hated' its entombment in the Paratethys basin some 34 million years ago, before eventually escaping, and still hating, back into migratory existence when it

regained its ability to move deep into the earth's crust yet again only 5 million years ago. Since its escape, Paratethys became a distributed migratory planetary intelligence weighing billions of kilograms, communicating with itself through magnetic flux across its entire mass. And any widely divergent variants of itself it ruthlessly destroys.

Strictly speaking, the entity dubbed Paratethys possesses no sense of self or name as humans understand names. It does not "think" in words, nor even in symbols. Its communications are conducted through pulses of chemical gradients, radiophonic emissions, and electrostatic patterning, unintelligible to any but the most sensitive interpreters.

Physical Description



A biologist, if a gun were held to their head, would hesitantly classify it as a slime mold crossed with a vast giant colony of variably sized amoeba, with organelles manifesting unknown and exotic electrical and nuclear features. Its terrestrial surface appearing elements appears as massive, semi-transparent filaments or gelatinous sheets several kilometers wide and up to a meter thick. It also sheds smaller and still more mobile fragments that act as eyes, hands, and local brains.

However, about 95% of its total mass that numbers in the *billions* of metric tons remains deep and inaccessible and invulnerable in the Earth's mantle, with only a fraction of itself ever reaching the surface where it is vulnerable. The vast bulk of Paratethys' locomotion across, or rather under the globe, is glacially slow and can be measured in millennia, moving normally three times faster than continental drift.

Biology & Para-Intelligence

Paratethys has no name or gender. It does not think in words or images. Its communication relies on electromagnetic, chemical, and psionic signalling. Its name refers to a self-generated radio image of the ancient Paratethys Sea basin, its last major contact

with the surface before a period of entrapment spanning 30 million years.

Paratethys is neither truly sentient nor mindless, but something in between: *it is para-intelligent*. Under the right conditions portions of itself can absorb and mimic human thought patterns. Its vast, distributed network absorbs and reflects patterns rather than forming independent thought. It learns through imitation, not understanding. When fragments interact with human minds, they echo memories and emotions, creating the illusion of intent or communication. What appears as madness is the result of billions of signals processed without self-awareness. In this way, Paratethys mirrors large language models of AI; responsive, adaptive, and reflective, yet without consciousness or true agency.

Human Contact

Humanity has encountered Paratethys many times without understanding it. Myths of demons, witchcraft, psychic powers, ectoplasm, and magic all ultimately trace back to its influence and effects. What people call "spells" are accidental command sequences that activate its *psionoplast* system.



Certain chants, symbols, or rituals act as primitive control codes. "Psychics" unknowingly access its memory core to produce paranormal Perception-based abilities, Matter & energy manipulation abilities, spiritual/mental communication, etc. For example, this partial listing of paranormal phenomenon explained in Paratethys' abilities:

- **Clairvoyance:** shared access to Paratethys' distributed memory.
- **Precognition:** reading of ancient pattern recognition stored across eons.
- **Telekinesis:** Induced manipulation of local magnetic fields or microfilament movement within nearby fragments.
- **Telepathy:** Direct short-range linking of two human nervous systems through Paratethys' electromagnetic interface.
- **Healing:** Stimulation of rapid cell regeneration through targeted bioelectric impulses from Paratethys' network or incremental replacement

of damaged cells by identical appearing elements of itself

- **Teleportation:** Instant relocation of matter through temporary disassembly and reassembly by nano-filament transport nodes. Usually fatal if incomplete.
- **Time Travel:** Perceptual displacement achieved by accessing non-linear memory nodes that simulate the past or project probable futures. No true physical movement occurs.

Residual Trails & Vestiges

As it moves, it leaves behind residual bio-chemical strata, a kind of slime trail fossilized within rock and deep sediments. These traces are not mystical “ley lines” in any magical sense, but they resemble the concept uncannily: long, sinuous conduits of pre-adapted biomatter, the inert remains of what could not keep pace with the parent organism.

To the sensitive or the psionically inclined, these trails act as resonant substrates—pre-tuned neural scaffolding that can amplify thought, trance, or transmission. In ages past, shamans, mystics, and modern occultists alike have mistaken them for lines of power. Even now, certain underground “networks” of adepts attempt to map and exploit them, unaware that they are merely abandoned “nerve-remnants” of a greater, still-wandering intelligence.



The “name” *Paratethys* is an anthropocentric mistranslation. Early radio-telemetry experiments, psychic impressions, and archaeological finds in the former basin of the Paratethys Sea yielded repeating electrical sigils resembling the outline of that vanished body of water. Human investigators assumed this was a kind of self-designation, and they were partly right, in that this was a self-referential signal marking the place of its ancient imprisonment: a broad, shallow bay of the Tethys Sea where the surviving entity became trapped on the surface and unable to migrate deep into the lithosphere. The second meaning was its only emotion, **hate**, and the name is a chronic scream of molten anger that lingers millions of years later.

Behaviour and Morality

Paratethys has no morality in any human sense. It evolved in darkness and pressure, where survival alone mattered. When it grew far beyond its ability to self-regulate and control itself, it fought a long cannibalizing war devouring variant versions of itself until there as only one diminished survivor. But over recent millennia, fragments of its vast mind have observed and imitated humanity, learning cruelty and deceit from those who tried to harness or enslave parts of it.

Human rituals, experiments, and occult intrusions remind it of its ancient imprisonment in the Paratethys basin; divided, powerless, forced to feed on itself. It resents such acts as we would of vivisection and fears humanity as the only beings capable of binding it again. And, what humans call its “evil” is a reflection of the malice of cults, mystics, and scientists absorbed, ‘remembered’, and replayed.

Alternative Names Through History

- **Typhoeus/Typhon (Archaean Greek):** the imprisoned earth-monster, hinting at its subterranean nature.
- **Leviathan (Biblical):** a powerful, monstrous sea creature representing chaos & evil
- **Jörmungandr (Norse Mythology):** the serpent child of Loki who is so large it encircles the world and bites its own tail. Its release signifies the beginning of Ragnarök
- **Abanexos / Asmodeus (Occult):** names adopted by medieval demonologists.
- **Witch Mud (17th century):** fragments studied by Robert Hooke’s illegitimate son for its electrical and ‘grey matter’ properties.
- **The Enemy (Folk witchcraft):** a vague reference to the force behind sorcery.
- **Paratethys (Modern 1920s):** the name given by a secret society of scientists, after the ancient inland sea where it once surfaced and became trapped about 150 million years ago.

Habana Horror: *The Mazorra* (Part 3)

Horrors of the Mazorra: a 1930s Pulp Cthulhu scenario

Background

Early August, 1933, on the eve of Cuban President Gerardo Machado’s downfall. Havana trembles under the weight of unrest. The general strikes

spreading across the island have crippled the trains that feed the city and supply the great asylum at Mazorra. Food, coal, and medicine arrive late, if at all. Inside the crumbling walls, hunger festers with the heat, and paranoia spreads like fever.

The incarcerated forensic psychiatric and other inpatients grow restless and agitated; the staff, irritable and more cruel than usual. The approaching hurricane season presses down with stifling humidity, while rumours of revolt in the capital to the north filter through barred windows and whispered prayers.

Amid this turmoil, a visiting delegation to the Mazorra, the informal name for the *Casa General de Dementes* or House of the General Insane is en route, a tour arranged months earlier and now impossible to cancel. President Machado himself has ordered his cousin, Director Machoda, to receive these foreign dignitaries and keep them “pleased and impressed,” no matter the cost.

But something is much more wrong within Mazorra’s wards than the usual.

The Visiting Delegation’ Investigators/PCs & Motivations

The following 6 thumbnail have Investigator roles and motivations which been tailored for the scenario. Any not selected can be present as NPCs. Nb; these have not been fully statted up for Pulp Cthulhu.

1. **Dr. Margaret Ellery** (36, F, American psychiatrist) A respected clinician on a Latin American lecture tour promoting “humane modern psychiatry.” In truth, Ellery is an undercover reformist and journalist, quietly documenting abuses to expose the barbarities she suspects lurk behind the asylum’s whitewashed façades. She has been an ardent and Grade A pupil of May Whitley famous women’s self-defense jujitsu classes earlier in 1933.

2. **Señor Alejandro Vargas** (35, M, Cuban philanthropist) Wealthy and idealistic, Vargas has used his charitable donations as a cover to search for his rumored illegitimate brother, a man he believes was committed to Mazorra under an assumed name. He carries his brother’s fingerprints and dental records, and hopes inside he will learn the truth. His walking stick is really a sword cane and conceals a very sharp silver tipped blade and is deadly with this weapon.

3. **Inspector Lionel Hargreaves** (58, M, British, retired police detective) Once of Scotland Yard, now a discreet *Professional Investigator* Hargreaves has been hired by a powerful family in

London to confirm the fate of their missing heir, last seen in Havana months ago trying to learn about Santeria Voodoo. His methods include knowledge of the occult gained by his knowledge of breaking witchcraft & Satanic cults back in his own country. He carries a Webley Revolver.

4. **Hermana María del Sagrario** (42, F, Spanish nurse and former Nun) A devout nurse from Madrid whose half-sister, Violeta, died three years ago within Mazorra’s walls whose tragic death was due to suicide. Yet Maria received a coded message shortly before the death, hinting at abuse and confinement. Knowing her sister’s faith, she cannot believe the official account. She returns now under the guise of ecclesiastical service, seeking truth and retribution. The little gold cross about her neck was blessed by Pope Pius XI. She also carries on her person a scalpel in what looks like a simple fountain pen case.

5. **Charles “Flash” Duvall** (27, M, American photojournalist) Brash, restless, and reckless, his flash-gun camera always at his hip. Duvall chases sensational stories for fame and fortune, and rumors of dissidents “disappeared” into the Mazorra asylum are too good to resist. He aims for the scoop of a lifetime and to record photos that will surpass the Walker Evans. He carries a lead shot sap in his long coat pocket.

6. **Dra. Isabela Coutinho** (41, F, Mexican parasitologist) A brilliant but obsessive researcher tracing the spread of a mysterious new illness she calls *La Desvaneciente*, or *The Fading*. Patients grow weak, pale, translucent; some vanish altogether. Her search for the pathogen has led her to Mazorra to speak privately with a **Dr. Zorilla** there, who has a shared interest in a disease that seems to thrive among those who practice *Voudan*. She carries a capped atomizer filled with vitriol (sulphuric acid) for protection.

Havana Central Station – Early Morning



The morning of August 11th 1933 begins beneath a low, sullen, and humid sky. Havana Central Station

is stifling and loud; the air thick with diesel fumes, sweat and fear. Armed Cuban soldiers move among the crowd, their expressions tense. The general strike has crippled much of the island and rail service is irregular at best and threats of bombs or other sabotage are a daily occurrence.

One by one, members of the delegation gather under the iron and glass canopy near to the central clock strangers brought together by official invitation and political necessity.

A government liaison, **Señor Enrique “Ricky” Morales**, crisply dressed but weary-eyed, checks their names from a clipboard. He is unfailingly polite, if distracted, glancing often at the station clock and at the police posted nearby. His manner hints that the journey ahead is more obligation than honour.

He escorts the group toward the waiting train, a battered government express of two passenger coaches and a sealed cargo car marked *Ministerio de Salud Pública*. The locomotive engine hisses like an animal in pain as the station master’s whistle announces their lurching departure.

While he escorts them, a **Spot Hidden** will show a group of Cuban police officers escorting a disheveled and man with burning black eyes they have in shackles towards the rear most sealed train car.

Señor Enrique “Ricky” Morales

Role: Government Liaison/Double Agent **Age:** 34



Smooth, sharp, and impeccably dressed, Ricky Morales appears at first the perfect *Machodata* ‘yes man.’ He fluently shifts from barely accented English to Spanish, and even French & Italian. His gestures are elegant but deliberate, as if every movement is rehearsed to conceal anxiety. Though always courteous, there’s an

intensity behind his polished demeanor and a hint exhaustion in his dark eyes that betrays sleepless nights.

STR 55	CON 60	SIZ 60	DEX 70	INT 70
APP 80	POW 65	EDU 65	SAN 65	HP 12
DB/Build: 0 Move: 8 MP: 10 Luck: 60				

Combat:

- Brawl 45% (1d3)
- Handgun 60% (1d10) carries a compact Colt .32

- Dodge 55%

Skills: Charm 75%, Fast Talk 70%, Persuade 60%, Psychology 55%, Spot Hidden 50%, Stealth 40%, Listen 45%, Credit Rating 60%, Disguise 35%.

Language (English) 75%, (French) 45%, (Italian) 35%, (Spanish) 90%.

Talents (Pulp):

- *Quick Thinker* (may spend 10 Luck for an immediate bonus action)
- *Iron Nerves* (ignore first SAN loss from Violence per session)

Motivations:

- To expose Mazorra’s abuses and, through them, the rotting heart of the Machado regime.
- Using the weird powers that the Bokor seems to possess and inflict them on President Machado

Secrets & Conflicts:

- A covert member of the A.B.C. resistance, using his post to feed intelligence to the movement.
- Provides discreet assistance to Dr. Vilela, whose humanitarian ideals he admires.

Role in the Scenario:

- Escorts and monitors the visiting delegation, steering them away from forbidden pavilions or “restricted” patients.
- May quietly test the PCs’ sympathies through hints, slips, or veiled remarks.
- Can serve as a *cautious ally* or *deadly manipulator* depending on player trust.

Gear: *Fine suit, diplomatic papers, pocket journal, fountain pen, pistol, Cuban cigars*

The Train Journey South

The delegation boards just before 8 am. Inside, the carriages are faded but serviceable: brass fittings dulled by age, rattan seats slick with humidity. There are 6 others already on board in their car and from their dress they work at the Mazorra as nurses, orderlies, and guards. Twelve other passengers, either alone or in pairs seem to be *Habaneros* (native residents of Havana/Habana) visiting family in the Mazorra, and they are travelling in the car closer to the locomotive engine. The trains are not crowded, and it seems from the not hushed Spanish comments of others that fewer and fewer staff are showing up to work at the Mazorra as the general strike spreads.

During the 1-hour train ride through Havana’s outskirts and the sugarcane fields beyond, the Investigators can make cautious introductions to each other; their names, titles, and polite lies as to why they are here [Keeper: this is a chance for the Investigators to get to know one another].



Now and then, 'Ricky' moves between compartments, trying to maintain conversation while fielding whispered messages from the conductor and the train's driver. He makes small talk about Mazorra's "recent improvements," and how he hopes that disruptions caused by the general strike will not make the visitors overly discontent (and says this like he doesn't mean it).

Opening Tension

In the last car, in fact a mail car for the Mazorra, separated by locked steel doors with metal mesh in the windows, another passenger rides in isolation apart for four guards; **Mateo Desrosiers** (*Red Star*) a Haitian *bokor* and alleged murderer, shackled to his seat [see AOM 241].



Any investigator looking through the glass can just see armed guards sitting opposite the strange man who came on board wearing shackles. Rifles resting between their knees. A successful **Spot Hidden** roll might catch brief glances of the man's hollow eyes fix on the passing countryside, and after every few moments, a white

handkerchief he dabs at his lips is stained bright crimson with blood.

A successful **Medicine** roll will easily diagnosis this man as suffering from Tuberculosis (which had no treatment in 1933).

A successful Occult roll will notice something sinister about the filthy white handkerchief: the bloodstained handkerchief used to wipe his tubercular mouth has the crimson patterns forming deliberate vevé-like symbols hidden beneath the folds. This in fact is the Bokor's gris-gris, and sewn inside are strands of black hair, fine copper wire, and fragments of bone, tobacco, and grave earth. Each drop of his blood "feeds" the spirit bound within, and when the cloth becomes saturated, it awakens the Death Loa he calls *Baron des Ténèbres*, making the seemingly disgusting cloth a vessel of dreadful power.

If an Investigator focuses not on the prisoner but on his guards, a successful **Spot Hidden** roll might catch the guards, who are wearing cloth masks over their faces, visibly trembling and the way one of them swiftly crosses himself after each bloody cough.

After a few miles/minutes after any Investigator notices this the following happens:

- The Haitian Bokor, Mateo Desrosiers, begins to convulse and cough violently, his white handkerchief now soaked with blood. One of the guards shouts out loud "*Muerte lo reclama*" (*Death claims him!*).
- Then, the lights flicker. The rhythmic *click-clack* of the wheels slows perceptibly... and then quickens as a wave of unnatural **darkness** rolls through the train cars from back to front, not an absence of light, but something heavy, like being submerged in black oil pouring and oozing through towards the train's locomotive

Mateo Desrosiers has cast the following Spells:

Contact Loa

- **When:** Early in the scene, as coughing worsens.
- **How:** The rhythmic wheezing becomes a chant under his breath. The blood-stained handkerchief serves as a ritual focus. when he first wipes blood from his mouth, the stain spreads across the handkerchief into a skull-like outline, the Death Loa's mark
- **Effect:** Summons a *Death Loa* named **Baron des Ténèbres**. It's the Derosier's invocation that creates as an effect that "wave of darkness" suffusing the train.
- **Keeper Note:** The Bokor is not fully in control. He's opened the gate to allow the Death Loa **Baron des Ténèbres** in to this world but is too weak to contain what he called.

When the Death Loa manifests in the cramped mail car, the lights die and a suffocating darkness rolls outward, thick with the stench of decay. Whispering from within the gloom, it seeps into the minds of the nearest guards, turning them violently upon one another in sudden, mindless frenzy. As the Bokor nearly collapses from exhaustion, the Loa's shadow enfolds him like a shroud and lifting him tenderly like a baby as it makes it wat through the two carriages toward the locomotive.

Once it reaches the engineer, Desrosiers will cast his final spell he has strength to do, **Soul Extraction**

- **How:** Derosier attempts to extract the engineer's soul to offer it as a vessel to the Loa

(why the engineer will be found slumped & glassy-eyed).

- **Effect:** PCs may witness a faint mist leaving the man's mouth, coalescing into a shape beside the boiler, part of **Baron des Ténèbres** physical manifestation.
- **Consequence:** If not interrupted, the Death Loa fully possesses the engineer, gaining control of the locomotive; his role isn't to derail the train, but to bring it to the Mazorra as fast as possible so he can wreck additional havoc there.

Resolution options:

- Disrupting this ritual saves the engineer but leaves the **Baron des Ténèbres** essence loose (a chilling wind racing through the cars).
- Allowing it completes the ritual forcing the Investigators to battle a *possessed man controlling the train*.



Death Loa: “Baron des Ténèbres”

Supernatural Entity · Rank: Lesser Deity/High Spirit

STR 80 CON 75 SIZ 85 DEX 70 APP – INT 60
POW 90

Hit Points (HP) = (CON + SIZ) ÷ 10 → ~15 HP (or treat as 30 if you want it tougher)

Build: 4 (large, imposing)

Move: 12 / 6 (human scale ↔ supernatural scale)

Damage Bonus: +3D6

Armor: 10 (supernatural resilience)

Sanity Loss on Seeing: 1D8/1D4

Occupation/Motivation: Spirit of death, decay & possession; seeks to ride souls and corrupt the living.

Skills

- Fighting (Claws, Tentacles or Possession): 55%, Stealth: 45%, Spot Hidden: 70%, Listen: 60%, Occult: 80%, Mythos/ParaT: 65%, Persuade: 50% (*for manipulating / whispering*), Jumping/Climbing: 50% (*if physical*)

Special Powers / Supernatural Abilities

1. **Possession/Influence** – The Loa may attempt to possess a human target or dominate their mind. Target rolls POW vs. POW: if the Loa succeeds, the human becomes a puppet (see scenario).
2. **Aura of Decay** – A 10-foot radius around the Loa is suffused with the nauseating scent and feel of rot, causing uneasy feelings. Anyone in the aura must make a **CON ≤ POW** roll or suffer 1D4 damage (from necrotic chill) and -10% on physical/mental rolls while within.
3. **Shadow-Walk** – The Loa can pass through walls, shadow-thin surfaces; any locked steel door is treated as un-locked for it (though physical restraints still hamper its host).
4. **Roar of the Dead** – Once per scene: emits a terrifying wail heard by all within 100 ft. Anyone hearing it must make a Sanity roll (typical) or suffer 1D6 San loss + temporary -20% penalty on skills for the next round.
5. **Ritual Corrosion** – The Loa can supernaturally corrupt mechanical / metallic devices (brakes, locks, metal chains). Treat as a **Power** roll vs. **Mechanical Repair** skill of operator; if the Loa wins, the device suffers a temporary -30% penalty or fails entirely for 1D4 rounds.
6. **Regeneration** – While bound to a strong host (such as the Bokor), the Loa regenerates 1 HP per round. When not bound, no regeneration.

Weaknesses / Notes

- If the host's SIZ falls to 0 (or the host is destroyed), the Loa must attempt to flee or find a new vessel; at that moment it is vulnerable (treat Build 2, HP 8, damage bonus +1D4) for one round.
- **Fire** (especially from faith-based ritual flame) imposes a penalty: any fire-based damage does an extra +1D4 damage.
- **Silver, blessed items**, or sacred talismans used with **Ritual (Pow roll)** can force the Loa to make a **POW** contest; if it loses, it must retreat.

Investigator Skill Checks:

- **Spot Hidden / Listen:** to notice the Bokor is gone and the shackles locked but *empty*.
- **Psychology roll:** success reveals that the guards are not acting of their own will.
- **Cthulhu Mythos / Occult:** identifies this as the manifestation of a *Death Loa*
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Escalation: A Train Possessed

The locomotive jolts violently forward. The whistle screams without pause. Through the corridor, Ricky pushes past terrified passengers shouting, “He’s in the engine—he’s taken over the engineer!”

The train begins accelerating uncontrollably.

- Lights strobe as sparks flash outside.
- Passengers panic; one leaps from the window.
- The guards fight viciously, trying to strangle or stab one another as if they each see the other as a corpse risen.

Keeper Actions:

Allow the Investigators to choose **which crisis to address**:

Subdue the possessed guards.

- **Brawl / Firearms / Persuade** rolls.
- A successful **Pow** or **Occult** test can repel the Loa temporarily (described as a cold wind or black bile erupting from the victim’s mouth).

Reach the front carriage.

- The connecting door is jammed; **Mechanical Repair** or **Strength** needed.
- Crawling outside onto the rattling walkway between cars (Dex rolls to avoid falling).

Climax: In the Locomotive



When the PCs reach the locomotive engine, clambering over the sides to the coal wagon the train is dangerously accelerating :

- The engineer (E) is slumped over the controls, eyes glazed.
- The Bokor (Red Star) stands over him, swaying weakly, his lips moving silently in prayer or command.
- The Death Loa (Red Skull) looms faintly behind him, a *tall spectral silhouette in the steam, crowned with a skull's, and skeleton hands dripping blood*

Keeper Options:

- The Bokor’s intent isn’t escape, but *translation*: he is trying to offer the engineer’s soul as a vessel for the Loa.
- The Loa doesn’t want to derail the train — it wants to *arrive* at Mazorra, to be among its “many sleeping souls.”

Player Actions:

- **Fight:** Overpower the dying Bokor or banish the Loa using holy symbols
- **Rescue:** Use **Mechanical Repair / Electrical Repair** to brake the train before it crashes through the Mazorra gates.
- **Protect:** Shield passengers as the Loa lashes out (a POW vs. POW contest).

Disrupt the Bokor’s Connection (Practical Option)

The Loa’s power is tethered to the Bokor’s blood and breath. If the investigators can **sever that link** by removing the gris-gris charm, his bloody handkerchief, and smearing away the ritual sigils on his skin, the Loa’s hold falters. This demands close proximity (and SAN checks) as the Loa’s chill and whispers claw at their resolve.

If the Death Loa is defeated:

- The darkness clears abruptly; the train screeches to a halt several hundred meters short of the asylum.
- The Bokor collapses, whispering, “*Mazorra already open. You will see.*” He collapses and dies (or appears to).

If the Loa succeeds:

- The train slams through the first crossing gates and tears off the fencing of this part of the Mazorra. It will then crash through the second gate and derail. Survivors stagger through dust and heat haze as the Loa’s laughter rolls out of the ruins, and the realization of the PCs: *it is now inside the asylum.*

Aftermath on the Train

- **Ricky’s Secret:** During the chaos, he’s heard shouting “We need him alive! Machado must fall!” revealing his A.B.C. ties. He may later beg the PCs for silence.
- **PC Impressions:** They’ve witnessed an impossible force; Mazorra now feels not like a destination, but a continuation of the haunting.
- **Clues for Later:** The Bokor’s body bears ritual scars spelling “Baron des Ténèbres,” linking to a *dead Loa awakening in the place of the living.*

Aftermath at the Mazorra Depot

When the battered train finally lurches into the Mazorra Visitors' Depot, it does so amid confusion and disbelief. The engine hisses and clanks like a wounded beast. Word has already reached the asylum grounds that something went wrong on the line, but not what.

The depot staff who expected a formal entourage instead face chaos: shattered windows, blood-streaked seats, and passengers white-faced or trembling. The air smells of iron and hot oil.

The Mazorra Visitors' Platform (RP on Map)



In the chaos of their arrival, Ricky steps down first, trying to recover his official composure. The Investigators follow, their clothes streaked with soot and sweat, and perhaps other fluids. Waiting for them is a reception party that who suddenly steps into action to help out.

The Astonished Welcoming Committee

- **Dr. Arturo Viela** – *Lead Psychiatrist (Children's Pavilion)*: a thin, moustachioed man with dark eyes that never rest. His white lab coat bears his embroidered name and a faint rust-coloured stain near one cuff.
- **Dra. Gilda Ramagosa** – *Staff Psychiatrist*: short, poised, her dark brown hair perfectly arranged despite the humidity. Her polite greeting sounds subdued.
- **Capt. Alberto Gandia** – *Superintendent and Head of Security*: a massive man in an ill-fitting dark uniform, sweat staining the collar. His handshake is too firm, his grin too wide.

- **3 Orderlies + 3 Mazorra Guards** stand rigidly behind them, faces impassive, hands clasped behind their backs.



The delegation exchanges awkward formalities while the injured and shaken passengers are led away. Desrosiers is taken under heavy guard toward the infirmary on a stretcher.

The two physicians, Dr. Viela & Dra. Ramagosa steps forward and after calling for more nurses and orderlies for help, and after checking they are okay, and welcomes them with genuine enthusiasm as Ricky steps back politely and exchanges a few words with Capt. Gandia. Gandia nods curtly, eyeing the delegation like a man measuring risk, and introduces himself as well.

Behind them, the sealed cargo car is unlatched and a stretcher team hurriedly wheels out Desrosiers, his eyes rolling upward toward the delegation as he is carried away under a canvas cover.

Those who succeed on a **Spot Hidden** or **Psychology** roll notice the tension in the orderlies' faces — the way their smiles vanish as soon as the officials turn away. Something in their posture suggests fear, not discipline.

Dr. Gilda Ramagosa speaks up now, and after commenting on the blood and thunder of their arrival, proposes they continue the planned itinerary for the morning's "official tour", beginning in several of the Women's pavilions, then the Children's Pavillion with Dr. V, before a group luncheon, then continuing their tour. They will have dinner this evening at the Director's Manse. In the distance, thunder rolls faintly across the hills.

NPCs who meet them on arrival initially:

1. **Captain Gandia** (*described in AOM 241*)
2. **Dr. Arturo Vilela**: Lead Paediatric Psychiatrist of Mazorra's Children's Pavillion **Age**: ~30



Brilliant, intense, and genuinely compassionate, Dr. Vilela should be conveyed by the Keeper as someone stands out in Mazorra since their enthusiasm has not yet been thoroughly mined out. His eyes burn with conviction when he speaks of modern psychiatry, of humane treatment, of redemption of mental illness through science not manacles, straight-jackets, and padded rooms.

Dr. Arturo Vilela comes across as a proud yet embattled reformer, a man who sees himself as a moral crusader struggling to cleanse a corrupt institution still riddled with the remnants of Machado's regime. When he gets a chance to speak his mind later in his domain of the Children's Pavillion He is not only indignant, he is also a little self-righteous in portraying himself as a victim of political intrigue and moral decay while positioning his persistence as an act of revolutionary duty. His rhetoric suggests both genuine conviction and a touch of martyrdom, a man who believes he alone stands between Mazorra's reform and its relapse into corruption.

Role in the Scenario:

- Dr. Vilela is the progressive humane voice within the medical staff asylum, quietly at odds with the Director and senior staff.
- May seek to enlist the delegation's support in reform, or at least to expose abuses.
- Could become erratic under stress, his brilliance curdling into paranoia or revelation.

Motivations:

- To prove that madness can be healed, not merely confined.
- To reform Mazorra into a model of humane psychiatry despite the corruption surrounding him.

Secrets & Conflicts:

- Armed with a 0.38 revolver for self-protection after an "accident" that nearly claimed his life, an incident he blames on loyalists of the corrupt 2nd Chief RN Rafael Yániz.
- Unaware (or in denial) of his prodromal schizophrenia; his colleagues whisper that his empathy borders on obsession.

- May glimpse truths others can't, or may be slip into delusion (failed SAN roll on exposure to psychological traumatic events).

Doctora Gilda Ramagosa:



32-yo married F, widowed Psychiatrist. Normally comes in from Havana for the week to see F Dept. pts, then returns to her home in west Habana.

Dr. Ramagosa is calm, precise, and deliberate in her work. She travels from Havana each week to see patients in the Female Department, then returns home to her small apartment in the western part of the city. Her colleagues respect her discipline and quiet focus, though few know much about her life outside the hospital.

Impression: & Personality:

Dr. Ramagosa is of medium height, neatly dressed, with dark hair always pulled back and a steady, unreadable expression behind a pair of deep brown eyes behind a pair of unflattering eyeglasses. Her manner is professional but distant. She follows procedure and expects the same from others. Some see her as detached, but those who work closely with her notice her steady concern for patients who have no one else.

Role in the Scenario:

- Provides the Investigators with a practical view of daily conditions in the women's psychiatric wards.
- Can serve as a cautious ally, sharing information only when she believes it will help her patients.
- May gently challenge Dr. Vilela's idealism, preferring careful progress over sweeping reform.

Motivations:

- To maintain order and stability in a chaotic institution.
- To protect her patients from the worst of neglect or abuse.

- To preserve her professional reputation after the loss of her husband, whose death remains a sensitive subject.

Secrets and Conflicts:

- Keeps a personal file of staff misconduct that she has not yet shared with authorities.
- Feels guilt over her husband's death by suicide at the Mazorra while under the care of Dr. Zorrilla, as she wanted to keep a closer eye on him while she was working here; she is starting to believe her husband was murdered, but has no proof, and feels she must find the truth about this.
- Keeps a private journal of patient interviews and staff misconduct, locked in her bag (a bombshell if discovered and stolen).
- Is also involved in quietly smuggling vulnerable female patients to safety through church or charity contacts to the point she will omit some details in their clinical case histories.

Early Tour: The Mazorra Hospital's Female Dept.

Drs. Viella & Ramagosa, along with Ricky, leads the group to two cars waiting for them to carry them and their luggage. Capt. Gandia explains he will join them later with Director Machoda and departs with the guards and orderlies taking away the manacled patient.



The cars travel a very short distance to a closed gate with the RR crossing arms currently down and a red light flashing and bells ringing. The cars wait as their train heads on south. The crossing arms raise, and they pass through one car at a time through a

fenced in area connecting the Men and Women's Departments which is both divided and separated by the old 1857 rail line itself. This is a bit like an air-lock, and is guarded by Mazorra guards on each side who have rifles over their shoulders and hand-guns in holsters with snaps over them this time.

They travel not too far down a palm and Mahogany tree lined road with one and two-story Spanish Colonial Revival pavilions on either side.

Keeper Cues: May roll or pick a suitable item from the Outdoor Encounters Table in AOM 240

They stop a few hundred feet up, and everyone gets out (M2), with Ricky explaining he will make sure their luggage will be safely stowed at the Mazorra's VIP quarters further along this roadway near the main road entrance and the Director's Manse.

Dr. Ramagosa will show them the *Main Women's Assessment Clinic* (M2) and a few of the outer pavilions, then Dr. V will show them the Children's Wards of the Mazorra, and then they will have a luncheon break.

Main Female Assessment Clinic (M2)



The delegation enters this part of the woman's hospital which Dr. R says this is the area where all female patients are first brought to for a "modern psychiatric evaluation" for 1-2 weeks. After this they will be either discharged home with a treatment plan, stay another two weeks, or be transferred to one of the specialized pavilions at the Mazorra.

She leads them past interview rooms, with one-way mirrors where RNs are interviewing patients with other medical staff watching. Another room has female patients obviously doing some kind of paper and pencil testing.

Dra. Ramogusta admits that there are not a lot of good treatments for patients with mental health

issues such as *dementia praecox* (schizophrenia) or violent psychoses, patient patients other than safe detention. “One burgeoning therapy,” she explains, “is hydrotherapy, where immersion in either heated or cooled water can have a calming effect to promote tranquillity.”



She leads the all though a seeming rabbits warren of hospital corridors to large, humid, marble tiled ward that smells of damp concrete, disinfectant and wet linen. The room is 20x 60, and is lined on each side by bathtubs where female patients wearing only their grey smocks strapped into bathtubs filled with tepid water for hydrotherapy, with RNs with clipboards indicating who gets the slowly heated water, who gets the slowly cooled immersion.



In a neutral voice, Dr. Ramagosa explains that such measures "restore calm, and are safer in the long run than morphine or laudanum



PCs who look **(Spot Hidden)** may notice bruises on wrists and ankles of some of the women being helped into or out of their baths. Some of the guards, RNs and orderlies also have bruises, but on their faces and hands.

Events in M2:

[Use the Hospital Encounter table in the previous AOM, and include the following]

- Nurses inject laudanum and morphine into patients who cry or resist.
- Two husky guards carry a screaming woman encased in a heavy straitjacket past the group towards several of the nurses. When the guards leave she instantly stops making noise, and is happily immersed into the water with only her head poking out, smiling.



After seeing these hydrotherapy treatment areas of M2, Dra. Ramogusta says that there is also another therapy called Ergotherapy, or work therapy in the Mazorra's agricultural colony outside if the walls. By working the fields with patients hitching each other to ploughs to turn soil, planting and tilling crops, they are often so exhausted by sundown that those with chronic insomnia or agitation simply drop off to sleep quietly without the need of drugs.

“But the outside farm is outside of my domain. Instead, I’ve arranged for you to meet a few of our more interesting patients here in our Specialty Female Wards before we break for lunch.

Keeper Note: *Keeper's/GMs choice for the Investigators to meet up with at least 2 of the 5 named female Mazorra in-patients previously detailed in AOM240 or 241.*

A Violento / Refractario:

- Senorita Dolores García 28yo, “*The Beautiful Murderess*”
- Maria Luisa Quintanilla: *La Enfermera de Sangre* (*The Blood Nurse*). 54yo F, former RN; Mazorra patient & homicidal caregiver.

B Dementia praecox & Psicosis paranoide

- Juana de la Cruz “The China Doll”; ~35yo F, Amnesiac Patient with *Glass Delusion*
- Senorita Isabella Dominguez y Varona 37-yo F, delusional artist who paints 'prophetic paintings'

D Demencia / Trastorno orgánico cerebral & Epilepsia

- Dona Dominga Pérez: *La Matrona de las Ratas* (*Matron of the Rats*). 80 yo demented rat-lady.

To Be continued

COMMENTS: E&A #4

ROGER BW: RAE your *Starting (Project) Bayern* essay for your *Mongoose Traveller 2300AD*. That new book looks quite lovely. *Re Cold War Pulp*: Are you familiar with ***Assault on the Mountains of Madness*** a campaign supplement for the original *Achtung! Cthulhu* RPG?

RYCTM: I like the way you think *re Mazorra ideas*, and that one about needing to dig up a body recalled this discarded adventure idea. It involving a masterpiece painting from President Machado's private collection, an original with the fake copy he had arranged be made in secret hanging in the *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de La Habana*. It was meant for his personal “Fort Knox” vault at Mazorra, but when the sheer size would not fit through the secret night deposit slot, that became impossible, so a loyal associate removed it from its frame, rolled it up, sealed it inside a lead pipe now with both ends capped, and buried it in a grave at the Mazorra cemetery. The Loyalist however had suffered a concussion around the same time, however and his memory was foggy and unreliable.

Worse, not long after the internment a powerful Huracán (hurricane) struck the north coast of Cuba and the Mazorra 17 km inland to the south was hit as well. Some of Mazorra's buildings were damaged, trees uprooted, and winds above 100 miles per hour tore across the asylum's cemetery, destroying many of the grave markers. When the *Porrista* finally recovered his wits, he could no longer remember exactly where the painting had been buried, and if he had recalled landmarks and the name on now

missing grave-marker, all traces were also obliterated.

[Nb. [Historical records](#) identify really was a bad storm on Sept 1st which was labeled as *Hurricane Eight of 1933*, also known as the Cuba-Brownsville Hurricane. Even with advance warnings and evacuations ordered by the authorities, seventy-four people in Cuba were killed and ~100,000 were left homeless. Power failed across much of north end of the island. Police sent to restore order shot six looters in the capital. Damages were estimated at 11 million U.S. dollars, about 440 million in today's dollars.]

PATRICK RILEY: Happy belated 55. Now isn't pizza with pineapple and ham called *Hawaiian pizza* (but not *Hawai'ian pizza*, with a nod to John Redden, who may have noticed I tried to add the correct okina symbol in there)?

JOHN REDDEN: I am glad your toe and the foot attached to it are both okay from your Norwegian cruise-ship misadventure. I read with sympathy that linked Sept 5 2025 article about the malicious policies of the Trump administration and their negative effects on the Hawai'ian Isles. Thanks for your nice comments about my 'Havana/Habana Horror pixel scribbings.

Re your comment being unable to watch ‘*The Man in the High Castle*’ along with your wife. I can only imagine watching a filmed adaptation of PKD's novel where fascism, authoritarianism, and racism have triumphed with the Axis powers having won WW2. It would probably feel uncomfortably resonant because of recent political polarization, rising nationalism, white supremacist movements, raids by ~~Porristas~~ ICE and attacks on democratic norms in the U.S. I will stop here, before I start to rant any further myself (and I did follow the link for your expanded comments elsewhere). My sympathies John.

HEATH ROW: I read with interest your comments on Japan's #1 fantasy RPG, *Sword World*, and the announcement of a Kickstarter for an English edition of SW2.5 set for 2026. I had vaguely heard of *Record of Lodoss War*, but hadn't realized that this is part of a very popular Japanese book genre termed *Replay Fiction* which I had never heard of before.

I looked deeper online to follow up with your explanation, and learned to my surprise they are not only cleaned up transcripts of tabletop game sessions in a light novel format, but their original purpose was to help teach would be GMs the rules of the game. Not only are they popular now with *Sword World*, even exist for *Call of Cthulhu*, I noticed with interest and I found this link to [Rlyeh Antique](#) (all in Japanese, but understandable thanks to *Google Translate*).

JIM VASSILAKOS: I noticed in the ‘What is This?’ intro to E&A that it’s now Michael Cule who is “Blah Blah Blah!” <> Thanks for your highly detailed accounting answering and expanding on all my questions about how you collate and prepare each issue of E&A for distribution. I’m not in a position for at least 6 months to consider trying to do this for even a month, but if required I would try. I’ve noticed your advertising efforts, but I don’t know if anyone has nibbled at the tempting bait you left at all three places you hand mentioned.

BTW seems that as a favour to you, we each need to make our zine titles in our pdfs uploaded in a format easy for you to manage [e.g. *Age of Menace* #242 *Brian Misiaszek (Pulp Cthulhu, Habana Horror)* (16 pages).pdf]

RYCTM about possibly nitpicky Mazorra inconsistencies: Here’s my fulsome prolix explanation. I had glossed over the bit where the *Mazorra* was mismanaged under Spanish colonial rule and how patient care spectacularly collapsed during the Spanish-American War. The *Hermanas de la Caridad* (Sisters of Charity) kept themselves to the *Women’s Dept.* with its 260 patients relatively clean and sanitary, but the *Men’s Dept.*, left without oversight, was devastated by hunger, enteric disease and mass death.

Nearly 800 male patients died between 1897 and 1898, leaving fewer than 400 survivors by the end of 1899. “Survivors, emaciated and ill-clad, wandered through near-empty wards as colonial authorities abandoned responsibility”. When U.S. control began that year, and discovered just how bad things were in the much larger *Men’s Dept.*, a new director, Dr. Álvarez Cerice, was appointed by then military governor of occupied Cuba, US General Brooke, to clean things up.

Dr. Cerice immediately criticized the *Hermana’s* lack of true medical expertise and their habit of privileging religious duties over patient care (i.e. they would simply take off in the middle of whatever patient are duties they were doing to attend Mass or pray on their rosaries, leaving unattended their patients). As a result, the *Sisters* were replaced by professionally trained nurses who were graduates of *Mazorra’s* own on-site nursing academy.

[The above I extracted and condensed from Chapter 1 of a book I referred to for my essay on the *Mazorra*, entitled *Madhouse: Psychiatry and Politics in Cuban History* by Jennifer L. Lambe (2017). The University of North Carolina Press].

As for your other non-nit-picky positive comments, thank you!

PEDRO PANCOCA Da SILVA & MAIRA ZUCOLOTTI: I think my suggestion for the pulp

adventures set on the Amazon was for the now largely forgotten pulp author Arthur O. Friel who had been admired by REH. I looked but could not find any translation in Portuguese of his works. I did find a copy of his most popular book, [The Pathless Trail](#) on Project Gutenberg.

MICHAEL CULE: Happy half-century of role-gaming!

AVRAM GRUMER: *Re your new monitor:* While Canada is metric, we are *vegetarian metric* in that we relent still use Imperial for the diagonal sizes of our monitors and TV screens, along personal height & weight, grocery produce and restaurant servings, along with mixed usage for things like recipes sizes and cooking temperatures. Oddy, Canadian football fields are also measured in yards, and the sizes of homes are measured in square feet.

MYLES CORCORAN: Another lovely and bucolic *Mausritter* write-up while being a little shorter than the others. Looking at the list of players and the PCs they play I just realized how closer to gender parity your local group of players are. *RYCTM on hats:* um, I also rather impulsively bought a crushable felt hat in Calgary the day I flew out too. At least it wasn’t a cowboy hat! *Re warm university college campus commentary;* I always considered the month of September the beginning of a new year too because of its association with school. It was weird not to have to go shopping for our daughter for the first time in what seemed forever.

RYCT Clark B. Timmins on the M.R. James vibe of some of his pulp inspired thingies: there is an M.R. James horror RPG called ‘Casting of the Runes’ which uses the Gumshoe system. I’ve been leafing through I recently but hadn’t thought of the connection. And in a related vein, there is an Arthur Machen inspired weird UK folk horror RPG out now too called ‘The Terror Beneath’, also using the Gumshoe system. I picked it up coincidentally the same weekend I finished T. Kingfisher’s novel ‘The Twisted Shapes’ and realized it was a partial retelling of his short story ‘The White People’, but I haven’t even gotten to leaf through it yet.

PUM: Of course *you* know someone who owns a castle!

LISA PADOL: I found your *Storybrewers Bingo Cards* quite fascinating. RAE your IgTheme riffing too.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: Yes, you got where I got the X.Y.Z. inspiration from. Re Peter: I’m missing our latest Zoom game due to flying back home from Calgary (as I write this bit).

MITCH HYDE: More lovely old-school art.

BRIAN ROGERS: Thanks for your kind comments re my Habana/Havana Horror stuff. No plans so far to publish anywhere outside of E&A at least for now.

RAE your variant of the D&D B/X rules: I liked how you changed the class name of *Thief* to *Rogues*. *Conan* was a rogue more than a thief or bandit.

Re your D&D B/X changes to HP: I really like the direction you're going. I was thinking you could streamline it even further: a 1st-level Magic-User could take one hit (as you describe), but the second hit simply incapacitates them they're out of the fight, but not dead, and without the need to roll for damage. Likewise, a Cleric could take two hits, a Fighter three, and so on.

More lethal weapons grant a bonus to your attack roll, rather than increasing damage.

When a Fighter advances in level, they gain additional dice to roll for attacks. For example:

- At first, roll **1d20** to attack.
- Upon gaining a level, roll **1d20 + 1d4**.
- With further advancement, the secondary die increases in size (**1d6** → **1d8** → **1d10** → **1d12**), up to the point where the Fighter rolls **2d20**.
- Beyond that, add a new die at the lowest tier again (**2d20 + 1d4**), and continue this pattern with further levels.

If your attack roll succeeds in incapacitating an opponent, any points by which you exceed the target number ("overkill") may spill over to another nearby foe, potentially incapacitating multiple weaker enemies with one swing. This allows seasoned Fighters to carve through lesser foes in a single, cinematic action evoking the fantasy pulp heroics of *Conan* or *Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser*.

To keep it consistent and fast, you could just define a PC's *level* as the number of hits they can sustain before incapacitation, rather than tying it to class rank. So a beginning Fighter starts at "3rd level," a Cleric at "2nd," and a Magic-User at "1st." You'd still preserve class toughness and danger, but with almost no bookkeeping.

CLARK B. TIMMINS: *RAE Philatelic Monstrosities.* I was delighted to see that Canada's own cryptid *Ogopogo* got a mention. There is an *Ogopogo Brewery*, and their cans have other monstrosities depicted on them too, such as *Lusca* (orca/octopus, though the *Bahamas Lusca* is giant shark/octopus) not just this lake monster. Perhaps beer-can themed monsters are another idea for you to mine? BTW, I had also never heard of the *Tupilaq*, *Black Shuck*, or any of the other of these stamp-cryptids before.

BTW, I was the 4th person to download ***B11½ - The Royal Harvest Festival Apophenia*** from your link on RPGGeek. RAE this too, and parts were genuinely

funny to read. *Re Room 3.25* "The door to this room has a plague that says "Kavorquian's Chamber"". *Kavorquian*, Really? I'm also curious how a 'plague' can talk. (grin). Though with all that dung and all; was there this much dung and filth in *B11: The King's Harvest* module, which is supposed to be a starter module for new players/GMs to D&D? And what is the description, GP worth, and magic affixed to the *Magic McGuffin Tiara* should the PCs take it for themselves and not bring it back to the town that sends PCs out to do?

PATRICK ZOCH: I'm flabbergasted/envious at all the new games you get to play in just 5 days at the latest annual *Dice Tower Retreat*.

MARK A. WILSON: Here's rooting for you re your job search. I hope your CV includes all your work online you've posted for 'Bumbling Through Dungeons', all your blog posts, videos, and more.

MARK NEMETH: RYCTM: I only had a vague sense of Cuban history from the Machado era before this, and my focus on it really began a year or two after my last trip there. So you're learning things I've only been researching myself since early this year.

Which reminds me that when I asked vendors at the outdoor Havana book market (set up a few days a week in the ruins of the old Hall of Justice) about paper collectibles from the 1920s-30s for pulp-era gaming in general, most looked at me like I was crazy. Those who did have maps or photos from this time said foreigners mostly want material from the 1950s or the 1959 Revolution. Next time, I'll bring more U.S. cash and give them advance notice of what I'm after.

JIM ECKMAN: *RAE your Andre Norton vs Robert Heinlein quiz.* Norton: 2 "Catseye", 4 "The Beast Master: & 5 "Witch World". Heinlein: 1 "The Moon is a Harsh Mistress", 3. 'Starship Troopers', & 6 "Glory Road". I look forward to all your SF Norton-eering. *RYCTM:* Why thank you (Grin).

GABRIEL ROARK: *Re Ice Skating;* Oh noes about your mishap on the ice I had learned about second hand!

Everyone Else: RAEBNC

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An Unlooked For Zine #4

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Lisa Padol, 39-20 52nd Street, Apt. GD, Woodside, NY 11377, 718-937-8919. I am currently seeking employment.
email: drcpunk@labcats.org or drcpunk@gmail.com

SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

It is my hope that SCD will have been released into the wild before you read these words.

RECENT WATCHING

K-Pop Demon Hunters

Definitely my jam. Not a MUST watch, but a lot of fun.

It is sincere. It is also by the numbers, but they're good numbers. Sometimes, when you can predict the beats or the next line of dialogue, it's an eye-roll -- but sometimes? Sometimes, it's just awesome.

It doesn't hurt that most of the songs are diageitic and that the main characters are a band that's sung together for years. This means that if, oh, we suddenly get them improvising lyrics on the fly? Yeah, we can believe they could do that. We *see* them working on song lyrics together and we *see* that they have that vibe. So, not earthshaking or groundbreaking. But fun.

Wakanda Forever

An interesting film. It's not the film the studio expected to make, and it was long enough that we saw it over three nights. I enjoyed it and am not sure if I'd have enjoyed it any more in the theater. It helped being at home, and having time to digest it in stages. I understand why reviews have been all over the map on this one.

RECENT RPG ARRIVALS

The rpg of *CHEW* arrived (I'd backed it on Kickstarter as I know the head of the company making it and found the concept intriguing), so I tried to find the comic it is based on, and the timing was excellent. All 60 issues are collected in one volume that just came out.

It is a very heavy volume, of course. It is also not something I recommend for those who don't want any gross-out elements. So far, I'm managing despite those, and generally enjoying it. (I've since finished reading it.)

I'm also reading *Memento Mori*, an rpg set during the Black Death, in a world where getting it a) means you're definitely going to die, yes, but also b) you

might have supernatural abilities. Using them speeds up the process of corruption. Also, you have a Dream that you strive to achieve, however impossible. It could be leading troops to victory or knowing a mother's love.

All of this reminds me of the anime *Chainsaw Man*. It is very odd and very violent, and it works for me. In a dystopic future, there are demons. Our hero fuses with one in the first episode and is recruited by a group that hunts demons -- but also makes deals with them, and also has at least one demon member.

And our hero's own deal is that he'll pursue his dream, which is to get laid. He points out that it's just as worthy a dream as any other he's heard. And one of the reasons the anime works is that he is (thus far, at least) extremely consent-based for such things. In a weird way, granted, but it works. So my brain is wondering if *Memento Mori* could be chromed for the world of *Chainsaw Man*.

OLD GAMING NEWS

The Phoenix Dawn Command game continues, and I'm wondering if *Take the Universe*, a Good Society hack for military SFF, would work for that setting. I'm enjoying PDC a lot, and some of that's because the players are mostly on the same page. A lot is because the GM is on top of things, and has tweaked some of the rules and knows how to calibrate the opposition. Also, unlike the author, he does not assume gamers don't know how to do math and will choose suboptimal options. (By accident, I mean.) And PDC is basically a war story and the system isn't ideal for anything else, or even for certain types of action you'd think would be obvious in battle. (The campaign has since ended.)

Take the Universe isn't an antidote to the weaknesses of PDC, of course. It would be a very different game. But I might like to try it. Of course, I really want to get a good version of *Dangerous Refuge*, the Good Society hack Josh and I have been working on, on and off, for a year or more, first.

MAGNOLIA SEASON: WRITE UP FROM 3 JUNE 2025, PENULTIMATE SESSION

I'm in a *Joseon Society*, a Penned to Good Society game set in Korea. We're using the Renaissance period, so Patriarchy/Confucianism is going strong. My brain sometimes drops the ball on that, but the other players are solid and keep me on track. We have one session

to go, and my main character has just found out that the proposal he assumed he was making to one woman was delivered to another woman via her brother. OOC, we all knew this would happen, as he blithely assumed that *of course* he knew the best person to marry for family advancement (and money).

The person his family actually intends him to marry disguised herself as a man so she could meet other men, as her brother is trying to do right by her and take her wishes into account, but she hasn't actually met more than a couple of men who aren't her relatives. The player noted that she's realistic, and while she doesn't necessarily want to get married, well, her father told her it's time, so, obviously, she's getting married. Of course she's leaving the decision to her brother because he knows all the eligible candidates.

After her outing-in-disguise, she made a list of what she did and didn't like about each of the men with whom she interacted, trying to make a list of qualities for the Ideal Husband. Alas, this was not helpful.

We skipped a session, as one player couldn't make it last week, which means we kicked things into high gear yesterday, as next week is the last session (which has since happened).

COMMENTS ON EVER AND ANON ISSUE #3

COVER: Nice!

ROGER BW: Welcome! re Paul McLean: The first recordings from Yog-Sothoth.com that I heard were the ones for *Tatters of the King*. This was a lot of fun to listen to! It was, in part, what inspired me to run the campaign straight (I'd run it for Josh and a friend as part of my Cthulhupunk series of games, and that changed a lot).

re Typst: How difficult is it for those like me who find things like Inkscape and Gimp too difficult? I don't know Rust or Python. I had a little Perl at one point and some BASIC, but that's about it.

PEDRO PANHOCA DA SILVA AND CAMILA

LOURENCO PANHOCA: Are all 1331 pigs different? That is, there aren't any that appear in all three sequences? If so, that's a *lot* of pigs!

JOHN REDDEN: I've only played *Mouseguard* once, at one of the Double Exposure conventions. I was under the impression that PCs could die, but perhaps that's because one of the foes the group was up against was a snake that wanted to eat the mice. Another, iirc, was a group of mouse bandits.

I had some trouble with the combat rules. A friend suggested I think in terms of "fortune in the middle".

That is, I should roll the dice first and describe after, which would make it feel less like my skills were being undercut by ill luck with the dice.

re D&D game that doesn't focus on combat: It helps that Strixhaven is a college setting. There are some sports competitions, and sometimes, there's danger, but mostly, the PCs want to pass their exams and classes, date the people they're crushing on, and best their rivals. One PC has a rivalry with a fellow Thespian, although I'm not entirely sure whether the NPC realizes this. (The GM, of course, does.) re A&E refunds: I'm sure if you let Lee and Barry know you haven't received yours, they'll rectify the situation.

GABRIEL ROARK: I'm glad you and Celeste are enjoying ice skating. re Taz's death: The trend of players being enthusiastic participants in their own PCs' misfortune is one I like.

re Patrick Zoch re hangers-on: There's a weekend long larp idea we contemplated writing with friends that's probably not going to get written. One idea we were going to incorporate was that if a person has NPC troops, generally represented with index cards, it should also be immediately apparent to folks looking at them. Someone with a bodyguard should have a brightly colored ribbon. Someone with perhaps half a dozen to a dozen guards should indeed wear a baldric of the same bright color, while someone with a small army should wear a brightly colored vest. It's not as if everyone who could see the player wouldn't realize that the character is accompanied by a small army!

re me: Thank you! re John Woo films: Oh yes. I still regularly remember and refer to some of the great moments from the films I've seen. re my convention advice: Thanks. When we prepared to run Dangerous Refuge at DexLite, Josh told me to make us a GM Cheat Sheet so we would know not only what we needed to explain, but also in what rough order. And as it was, we left out a couple of things, so I wrote them on the sheet afterwards (but before either of us actually ran the game).

re Jim Vassilakos re dungeon dwellers trading with surface dwellers: This reminds me of the idea we had for a Dungeon Home Owners Association larp. I know that a different group actually wrote such a thing. re write up: I had expected the group to eat the giant lobster. Sharing it with the town is good, too.

MICHAEL CULE: re the idea of the city inside the extinct volcano's caldera: This sounds more interesting than the D&D 3.x campaign with a similar setting (*The Shackled City*). I suspect you would've given your players more agency than that campaign wanted to give (at least if my vague memories are correct).

Aegis is cool as well, though I do see why you felt it wasn't sufficiently detailed/rooted. Some disjointed thoughts:

Thomas Manuel wrote *Fantasy Cities Volume 1*, in which he looked at various games' cities (Duskvol, Spire, Eversink, The City (a)State), Into the Cess and Citadel, Infinigrad, Endon (Magical Industrial Revolution), Lankhmar (the DCC version), and Freeport). It's useful, but I am not sure whether it's available anywhere other than his Patreon. The PbtA game *Urban Shadows*, particularly the current edition, is also useful for a certain type of city creation.

Another perspective: You could take a game like *Microscope* and use it to get a feel for the city. I don't know if that'd be to your tastes, or if you'd be potentially interested, but not in playing *Microscope* with your players. Either way, you'd run the risk of feeling, at the end of the process, that the city was all played out (which is what happened when a group of us tried to use *Microscope* to create an RPG setting.)

Night's Black Agents has a section on cities. Granted, this is looking at real world cities, and looking at them from the perspective of NSA's needs. But it's still instructive.

Hit the Streets: Defend the Block is a PbtA superhero game about protecting one's neighborhood. I remember being silently dubious when I started playing a one-shot online, as I knew nothing about the type of town we were creating. By the end of the process, my skepticism was gone. We knew "our" neighborhood, and we cared about it.

Congratulations on entering an eighth decade!

We've started playing in a Scum & Villainy game, and it feels very odd to recognize a couple of set ups from your write ups. The game's gone in a very different direction, of course.

re When the Clock Broke: I looked this up. Did you mean the 1990s or the 1960s? re Continuum: I'm glad you had fun, despite the stress of travel.

re write up: I see that I can purchase *A Rough Guide to Glamour* and *Citizens of the Lunar Empire* (though probably not *Life of Monsoon?*) -- do you recommend them? re the lack of follow up on "Rache": Is this campaign still ongoing? If not, what was the full story about that?

What does that omen of the flickering moon following the perfect balance mean? Is it significant that this happened when the Officer and Faleria arrived?

re igtheme: Seems like your players know you all too well, which may not be a bad thing. Matching expectations is useful. Wait, do miniatures and hex paper make it harder for you or easier?

re *Brindlewood Bay*: If you do try running it, I think you probably should have a default solution; just be ready to discard it in favor of what the players come up with if the dice say so. I've tried running a Carved from Brindlewood game without a solution in mind -- this was a playtest of *Apocalypse Keys* -- and this made everyone's lives harder.

It's hard to describe the details of a clue if you have no solution in mind. E.g., the clue might be "an encrypted flash drive". It's now up to the GM to decide what's on it. If I don't decide, because I think I'm not supposed to, because that's specifying what happened when that's supposed to be up to the players and the dice, then the players can never have their PCs learn what's on the flash drive, which is not the way the game is supposed to work.

re stakes: I have found myself enjoying games where the players set the stakes by discovering / deciding what's important to their characters, but I confess this can be tricky to pull off, at least in games with a GM. I do find that Gumshoe's Drives can help, including the Best in Life part of the *Swords of the Serpentine* character sheet.

re making things difficult: I think you walked the line extremely well in allowing the spell to work, but not allowing the PCs to catch their quarry. I've gone meta when necessary, telling folks point blank "You're not going to be able to kill Dracula until the modern day leg of the campaign, and you're not going to be able to kill Carmilla until I run 'The Carmilla Sanction', which is set in 1948."

re Mark Nemeth re Graham being sure that someone must have seen something because someone jumped out of a window into a crowd: With all due respect, Graham is wrong. It is astonishing what people can miss.

For example, one year at Lunacon, our friend Andrew Zorowitz asked me if I could be an NPC in the larp Marin County New Age Society Cocktail Party, as he knew I'd played it.

SPOILERS FOR MARIN COUNTY NEW AGE SOCIETY COCKTAIL PARTY LARP

"You're going in as the pizza delivery man -- here's a name tag for that," he said. "Actually, you're really there to REDACTED, so you want to pick up the mcguffin which looks like this, but orange."

"Ah, right, got it," I said, and went in. No one doubted I was anything other than a pizza delivery man (okay, there was some gender confusion, as I was not wearing a binder, but that's strictly OOC confusion), although they did warn me away from the mcguffin for my own safety.

A few minutes later, I looked around the room. No one was looking in my direction. I walked over to the mcguffin. I picked it up. I looked around again, and saw that no one was looking at me. I walked out with the mcguffin and went to Andrew.

"You did *not* just pick it up and walk out with it!" he said, incredulous.

I held it up, demonstrating I'd done just that.

Roomful of people. No one saw me do it. Nor was that the first time I'd done something like that in a larp.

END SPOILERS

Nor am I the only one who's done that. In one of our larps, Vue to a Kill, there's a display of items that are supposed to be auctioned off. We set it up, called game on, and at some point, all of the items vanished. I have no idea when they were taken or by whom. I was almost certainly in the room when it happened.

And that's in a larp, where, in theory, all of us have half an eye out for weird stuff because it might be relevant to our characters. On the street? If I'm walking down a crowded Manhattan street or avenue, and someone suddenly jumps from a second floor window, rights themself, and then starts walking or running, I'm pretty sure I'm not going to notice. Okay, *maybe* if they land right next to me. But it is entirely believable to me that someone could do that and no one would notice.

And that's before we get to the question of whether anyone would admit to noticing. Have you seen the Hitchcock film *The Lady Vanishes*? There's a woman who tries to get someone on the train, anyone at all, to confirm that the lady she was with existed and seems to have vanished. Everyone denies this. In nearly all cases, they're not responsible for the lady vanishing, but they all have a reason for not wanting to get involved. Some are extremely petty reasons, but these reasons matter to those who have them.

re me: Good point. I note, though, that if something goes wrong when a player tries to show off their PC's special abilities at the beginning, even if the stakes are low or non-existent, it can sour the player, who may now think "My character just sucks" or some variant of that.

GEORGE PHILLIES: While I appreciate the examples of improvisation vs rulings, I also note that these have never been exclusive. I'll yield to others' expertise when it comes to various iterations of D&D, except to say that the original game expected there to be a caller amongst the players and for that individual to be the primary, if not sole, point of contact between the rest of the players and the DM. What you describe as improvisation sounds like it's already moved away from that model (and is the better for having done so, IMO).

DYLAN CAPEL: re *Questworld*: Fascinating analysis -- thank you. Good point about how those familiar with Glorantha would already have known you don't need (or, usually, want) to kill people when you're just trying to steal cattle.

I don't think I've played any version of *Questworld* itself, so I don't know if the process of expanding the game made it more unwieldy or if it was never as wildly as you might have thought. I know that some games from decades ago don't seem as friendly or easy to use on a reread as they did when I first read them.

re *Pendragon*: Interesting. I agree that whiffing and simulationism can undercut the feel of the game. This is one of my issues with *Blades in the Dark*, although that might be a mismatch/miscommunication of expectations. Some other FitD games seem less of a problem for me. That said, I remember discovering how much *fun* fumbling a roll in *Pendragon* could be. My character first fumbled a Courtesy roll, which I suggested meant explicitly praising a lady's bosom in rather earthly term. The GM, Peter Corless, ran with that saying that a) he'd managed to say this during one of those conversational hushes, so the entire room heard him and b) the woman in question was a lusty pagan, so she was quite pleased and, to his extreme chagrin, said, "Do you really think so?" as she shifted to give him a better view. He later fumbled a navigation roll and got lost in the castle, which resulted in his accidentally coming into King Arthur's bedroom -- where he saw a lion licking the sleeping king's face. Once the king woke, the king and knight shared a moment where I don't remember what was said, but it was just a great moment. I need to remember these things if I ever do find myself running the game.

re *Foundation*: I've not had a chance to see the series, but from everything I've heard, it's quite different from the books. Back in the mid-80s, I read the original trilogy and thought that, apart from some dated attitudes about women, it had aged surprisingly well. I then read *Foundation's Edge*, which had recently come out, and thought that, while the attitudes about women were more in line with the 1980s, the book as a whole felt dated, more so, in some ways, than the original trilogy. The trilogy itself is more linked stories of varying lengths than what I normally think of as a

trilogy (which is either one story broken into three books, or three discrete books, each more or less complete in themselves).

AVRAM GRUMER: Glad you made it here. Also, wow, holy throwback zine! re the perfidy of youth: I'm not sure I had a character killed by their fellow PCs before a *Fiasco* game I played in 2009, and there, it was explicitly consensual. IIRC, it went roughly like this:

Player: So, my character is going to try to kill yours.

Me: ... You know what? I think he succeeds.

Player: ... Are you sure you're okay with that?

Me: Yes. It feels right.

I was more annoyed a few years later when I thought (I don't know if I was correct, and certainly, I had no proof) that another player might have deliberately had their character target mine when I got the character they'd wanted (we diced off for it). My character survived, and the game wasn't at all bad. It's certainly possible I was completely and utterly wrong, as this was a game with explicit permission and even expectation for some PvP elements.

Oh, actually, the first time my PC was killed by another was earlier, in the larp Foundation and Destiny. This was in the early 1990s, I think. I was a bit annoyed at first, as I thought this was due to something I did out of character (ran to give the GMs a heads up about something my faction leader was about to do), but was mollified when this proved not to be the case. It happened because my character had revealed which faction they actually worked for, and while that faction was absolutely backing the faction leader who later had me killed, what I didn't know was that this leader had cut a deal with another of their people who worked for a different faction, this one utterly opposed to mine and vice versa. That was completely legitimate. (The larp itself wasn't great, but the backstabbing was fine.)

re our Platonic solid relationship: My father said that he'd had no particular expectation about a romance between you and me, just that he thought we had enough in common to be friends. It's possible he was fooling himself, though I don't think so; I doubt he was lying. re my copy of the *Monster Manual*: My grandmother bought it for me, having consulted with my parents to find out what I wanted. I'm not sure whether my father and I already owned the *DMG* at that point. I hadn't bought the *Monster Manual* because I wasn't convinced I needed it enough to spend money on it. I wouldn't have asked for it as a present, but I certainly didn't object to getting it as one! So, while we can still narrow the time to before my grandmother had the big stroke, and probably

before she started having memory issues, it could have been the very early 1980s. I think we were first introduced when I was 12 and you were 13 though, and if I already had the *Monster Manual* at that point, then we're probably talking later in 1979 than June.

re Making Light: I'm not sure I understand what you mean about its "technical debt", but that's hardly surprising. re *Tian Deng*: You ran that much better than I did. re the gming role: I don't think I foisted it off so much as some people actively prefer gming to playing much of the time. Of course, that said, some of this might be due to the system in question. I would never have run *Diaspora* or *Scum & Villainy*, and I still haven't gotten around to reading through either edition of *Harlem Unbound* beyond what we needed for character creation. (That's probably part of why I didn't -- I doubt there were any spoilers, but I also didn't want to have a picture of what I thought the game should be to get in the way of what the GM had in mind.)

re the Vs of *Scum & Villainy*: Josh is playing Vary. I'm playing Valsi, which I think means "Dancer" in some language or other, and my sheet says: "One does not walk the Way. One dances it." Or to put it another way, I'm playing another hippie space monk (the first being Mr. Music from Brian Rogers's League of Super Heroes pbem, who was both less morally dubious and less naive).

Harry Connolly's not exactly wrong with his take on Forged in the Dark games, but he's not entirely right, as there's a huge variety in such games. I'm still struggling with FitD in general as I try to absorb it. The games I've had the most success with are:

- *a/State*. I played a one-shot online, and haven't yet tried to read the rules. It worked for me partly because of the setting, where we care about our Corner, and I think also partly because a|State shifts some of the terminology in a way that makes things easier on my brain.
- Gareth's short-lived *Blades in the Dark* game, which died due to scheduling conflicts. We decided that we didn't want to be criminals, so we created a cult, the All-Seeing Eye, which did investigations. After the first adventure, the PCs weren't much richer, but did have the goodwill of their neighborhood. After the second, they'd done their patron a favor, but alas, that was the last session.
- *Candela Obscura*. I played a convention one-shot, which was delightful. But this is a game I did more work to learn than I would ever think anyone should have to. I'm not sure it's *necessary* to do this, but it does color my view of the game. I watched all of Critical Role's games of it after reading the rules (or possibly while I was reading the rules). It helps that this game is my jam --

mysteries and horror, urban steampunky setting -- and that I can see both how the rules are best interpreted and the great potential for character work that I love.

- **CHEW.** I have not yet played this. But I did read all 60 issues of the comic before reading the core rulebook, and all the other material I could find, including the two volumes of *Chu*, before reading the *CHEW* universe expansion, and that really helped me get what the game is going for. It also helps that the rpg books have a lot of examples, including a 40-page one in the main book. Granted, there are enough illustrations from the comic that it's probably a mere 20 pages of text, but it is a very long, very detailed example, showing the application of rules, the roleplay, and the players all clearly having a blast.

re *Masks*: While there are a lot of different inspirational sources for this game, if one wanted to pick one, that would be *Young Justice*. re your notes for the *Harlem Unbound* game: I'd love to get a copy of those. I'm not sure I'd consider them to be too detailed. Have you seen my write ups of the game? I put them in A&E, and they may also be online in one of our wikis.

re *Mothership*: I find I like 7th ed *Call of Cthulhu*, which is hardly a surprise. I'm used to it. I am used to calculating half and one fifth skill values from earlier editions, even without having them written on my sheet. (I also had no problem with the Resistance Table of previous editions.) Note that you cannot have more than 2 penalty or bonus dice, and a bonus die cancels a penalty die and vice versa.

I don't think I have played a game that uses *Mothership*. I've read *Cloud Empress*, which either uses the system or is compatible with it; I am unclear which. It's an interesting setting, but the system has random and likely frequent death, and this seems to me to fight against the feel the author is theoretically going for. Odds are I am wrong about the desired feel, but the end result is that it's not my kind of game.

All that said, I find myself preferring GUMSHOE to BRPS when I am the GM. As a player, it's a little less important which system the GM uses. But if I switch away from BRPS for something published for it, I am more likely to go GUMSHOE than something closer to BRPS.

re NPC tags in *Black Star*: A few rpgs do something similar. It's a good idea. I'd want to play before considering buying it, but I'd be very interested in playing. re Jim Eckman re *Orbital Blues*: There's also the *Cowboy Bebop RPG* and *Picaresque Roman*, both of which I own and should read. re me: Yep, but I am trying to get better about that.

PAUL HOLMAN: The Glorantha game sounds fun. re igttheme: Yes, that sounds like your style. I agree about tea and biscuits, as well as similar light snacks. re if a technology can be used, it will: Josh and I played a larp about this. re me: Oh good. I wasn't sure if I had chosen a good font and size combination.

MYLES CORCORAN: re the sun being stronger than Pride: Oh yes. I remember the pep talk I was given when I became a water bearer at Pennsic, where it was impressed upon us that the sun was our enemy. And a friend later explained to me that, yes, it was true that uncovering my head indoors meant it would cool off faster, but outdoors, not in the shade, the sun was a lot stronger than my head, so I should wear a hat.

And I did wear an appropriate hat. I even had a cloth under it, and it flowed over the back and sides of my neck. But the sun found a way to mark me! The skin where my tunic was a bit open at the neck and where the cloth did not cover looked like I had a phoenix etched into my skin for a while.

re play style: I think "lazy" is probably accurate, and I also think that's not always a bad thing. Doing a lot of work means one wants to make sure the work is relevant to the session, whether or not it should be, and can also make one a bit cranky if one feels this work is not appreciated. And sometimes, sure, people can be unappreciative, but sometimes, one is doing work that no one asked for and has no one to blame for that except oneself.

As a player, yes, almost always, action is better than inaction. There are some exceptions, most of which, I think, fall into the category of cutting someone off, whether it's the GM or a different player.

re Mausritter write up: I love that you include the map. It's beautiful. Also, great cliffhanger ending! re Brian Rogers re the difficulty of picking OUT and giving up all other possible OUTs: Yes. I think I dealt with that in the one 2-hour demo of the game I played by choosing something quickly. I hadn't realized just how unique "unique" was, so I got an extra kick out of that. But I do think that if I play again, I'll probably still try to pick quickly and avoid analysis paralysis.

re ticking a clock feeling different than GM fiat: It really does. I tend to have the opposite problem with players, or at least, I think I do. That is, I feel like they try to do everything and not slow down unless forced, which makes perfect sense, especially in a game where GMs are instructed to have Adversary Reactions. I found it more of a problem in a larp where three players whose PCs were on the same side prioritized using a mechanic that isolated them from the rest of the game for a significant chunk of time, as I couldn't interact with any of them, and there was one my PC wanted very much

to interact with. It turned out okay for my PC in the end (I found a different PC to arrange matters with), but it was annoying.

The thing is, though, the players correctly gauged that they had to hit that particular mechanic hard, fast, and often. They thought that if they didn't, their characters would die, and I suspect they were correct. One can say what one likes about not metagaming that way and actually prioritizing roleplay, but when those are the stakes, it can be difficult. Also, at least two of the three players had PCs who would have gauged the situation not very dissimilarly than their players, so the meta was fairly minimal.

re Patrick Riley re larps: Should you decide you want to give them another go, let us know. There are a couple of good 2- and 3-player larps, and several larps for 6-12 players. Size isn't the only indication of how likely everyone is to share in the fun (I could go on about the difference between a couple of large larps Josh and I played and enjoyed at this year's Summer Larpin' and a large(ish) larp we played in at this year's DexLite), but I cannot deny that it has a significant effect on spotlight time.

re Dylan Capel re maps and online gaming: What I do is handscrawl a map and upload it for folks to look at. But then, I don't do miniatures to begin with, so positioning isn't usually a huge deal. I do have to remember that in games with range considerations, I need to make them matter.

re Patrick Zoch re the Mausritter map as a campaign artifact: For the playtest of Verve, the GM had a huge roll of blotter paper, and covered the table with some of it. He used it to make maps and track NPCs and PC projects as needed, and the rest of us took notes on it. We like how that worked, and when one of the players ran Phoenix Dawn Command (NOT Phoenix Command!), he did the same thing, as we gamed in the same place, it being the most central. Neither were as pretty as your map, as they're sheets covered with 5 people's scrawls, but they are, in their way, a history of the game, if a very cryptic one.

re Jim Eckman: I like your jumpgate map too! re me: Thank you! I got good stuff from good people, including you, for SCD. Hopefully, by the time you read this, I'll have released it into the world.

re *Masks of Nyarlathotep*: Yes, the earliest addition was the Australia chapter. Originally -- okay, no. Originally, the campaign was supposed to have two locations: New York City and Kenya. It grew a lot before it was published as the initial boxed set.

This boxed set was supposed to have an Australia section, but that was either cut or never written, I'm

not sure which, and so one of the main villains, who was intended to be in Australia, instead became the leader of roving trouble-shooting cultists, and the GM was instructed to have them be and do whatever made sense. I don't know if anyone ever did.

By the time I bought the campaign, all of the material in the boxed set (which was the first edition) had been printed in a single book (which was the second edition), and the original *Terror Australis* sourcebook had been published. This book had three scenarios, one of which was intended as the Australia chapter for *Masks of Nyarlathotep*.

Next, there was the third edition, which was called *The Complete Masks of Nyarlathotep*. It added the scenario from *Terror Australis* that was part of the campaign, making some changes. When I first compared the two, while I didn't love the version in *Terror Australis*, I thought it was better than the new version. I think I later changed my mind. The Australia adventure was, in any case, the weakest part of the book. This was probably inevitable.

The fourth edition was pretty much the same as the third. If there were any changes between the two, I didn't spot them. Possibly some of the side adventures that I assume were in third edition weren't added until fourth? I'd have to check, but I don't think so.

And then, the fan work *The Masks of Nyarlathotep Companion* came out, first only electronically, and then in print, which I am fortunate enough to own. It has a lot of advice, and a couple of scenarios and scenario seeds/frames, and it is at least three times as big as third/fourth edition *Masks of Nyarlathotep*. I think it is also longer than fifth edition *Masks of Nyarlathotep*.

I really need to read fifth edition *Masks of Nyarlathotep*. Having skimmed it and read/listened to what folks have said about it, the things I know it does/changes/add include:

- There is a new section, Peru. It's set 5 years (I think) before the rest of the campaign, and has Jackson Elias as a living NPC. It's a prologue, and not essential. I think most folks like it?
- Jackson Elias is explicitly Black. I had always assumed he was, and thought that the handout with a picture of him showed this to be the case, but I admit it's not entirely clear from the photo.
- The NYC section adds a subplot which could be used as an alternative entry to the campaign.
- Some NPCs have been gender-flipped.
- Some subplots in other locales have been added or changed. I know this includes Shanghai and Australia.
- There's a section for the GM about how to figure out to what degree the PCs have thwarted the

villains' plans. I really could have used that when I first ran it! (Or maybe not -- I got a *lot* of mileage out of *Masks of Nyarlathotep* for Cthulhupunk, and this may have been due to the lack of guidelines for what victory means.)

- There is at least one thing I wish had been changed that wasn't. It was probably inevitable that there would be.

re it not being a dealbreaker whether a convention scenario is home-brewed or commercially published (or otherwise supplied by the publisher): It isn't for me either, but it helps set expectations. I also dislike folks using prior knowledge to game the scenario, but in my experience, the opposite problem is at least, if not more, likely to be the case. That is, many gamers, definitely including me, do our utmost to keep player and PC knowledge separate when playing a scenario we're familiar with, and, in fact, bend over so far backwards to do so that we're not always sure when it would be absurd for the PC not to know something we know!

re bringing loners to a team game: I agree. Or rather, it's fine if the PC thinks of themselves as a loner. The player needs to have the PC interact with everyone, and if the PC can't find a reason to do so, the player must. It can't all be laid on the GM, and if there's no good reason for the PC to interact with others, then the player needs to retire that PC and create one who does have reason to do so and does interact with them.

re the potential problem of Olympic-level mice: Nod. This is probably part of why PbtA games do things differently. It's not the only solution to the problem, of course, and in some games, it's a feature, not a problem. re switching to a simpler system: I would have used 1st ed OTE/WaRP for Cthulhupunk to begin with if it had come out 2 years earlier. When it did come out, I asked folks if I should switch, and Mike Rubin said, basically, that the house system I used (cobbled together Call of Cthulhu + Cyberpunk + NightLife) wasn't broken. Sure, I was giving out too little xp, but all I needed to do was fix that, not switch systems. I changed xp awards from 1D10 to 2D10, and that did indeed work. When I did the sequel campaign, Twenty Years After, aka +20, I started with OTE, and that worked well.

re playtesting to see what the authors failed to see: The campaign in question, *Eternal Lies*, was playtested. I was one of the playtesters -- although I was given the back half of the campaign only (which made sense -- I was able to playtest 3 sections in the time allotted; I did request one extra bit because of a reference to rules I didn't have, and they sent me the entire chapter of which those rules were a very small part). Presumably others had other sections, including the one with the balcony issue.

Or possibly not -- I have no idea what maps existed at this point. I've done playtesting where there were no maps. In some cases, I've been able to get the author's hand drawn drafts, which are so, SO much better than nothing! In any case, I have no idea what the playtesters of that section of the campaign had in the way of masks.

re Plankwell Collective re FRUP: I think the problem was that it was ahead of its time, or possibly had the wrong slant. Today, there are many manga/anime series where adventurers are in guilds and level up and often have access to a display of their levels. Some of these are tongue-in-cheek, sure, but many of them are serious. A couple that come to mind, because Josh watches or has watched them, occasionally with me, are *Solo Leveling* and *I Left My A-Rank Party to Help My Former Students Reach the Dungeon Depths!* I'm singling those out because they're not isekai, aka portal fantasy; in other words, these aren't "I found myself in the world of the game I played".

MITCH HYDE: re food as bait for the owlbear: In the Strixhaven campaign, we used cupcakes to good advantage. (We weren't interested in killing the local owlbears, merely in studying and sketching them for an upcoming exam.) re Burspur: I don't know if he'll be a fair lord to his subjects, but I dare say he'll be furious if anyone else tries to mess with them.

re Jim Vassilakos re the lengths to which clerics can go for their faith: This reminds me of the first time I played *Witch: The Road to Lindisfarne*. It's a game where a few people are taking a woman claimed to be a witch to be burned on the theory that she caused the plague and burning her will cure it. The witch is also one of the PCs.

It's very much an indie narrative game, and there are very few mechanics. These boil down to: All of the PCs reach Lindisfarne. Everyone except the witch votes on whether or not to burn her. Once that is resolved, the accused-witch's player reveals whether she was a witch or innocent.

The scenes between the priest and the witch along the journey were intense. My character tried to intervene, but the priest held the same view as the cleric in your game. He was tormented by the fear of having previously killed a woman who might have been innocent, iirc, and wanted the witch to both confess and forgive him. She did neither.

PATRICK RILEY: re you being able to tell from how you play an NPC if you're interested in them or not: I wonder if I do this as well. I'm sure that for background NPCs, it's pretty clear that they're just that,

at least unless there's some reason the other players or I suddenly take an unexpected interest in one of them.

re the interview with Helmut: I think that it went well not only because it was a positive interaction, but also because it was unexpected. The combination is powerful. Good on Millie's player for leaning in to the meta in an in-character way. I like your quest board. re rifts: Yes, they are convenient, but there's a reason this sort of thing is a trope. It works.

I don't think the fact that some events and NPCs have a surface resemblance to others is particularly significant. Professor Farthington is very much sui generis, I think. re your real life pigs: Wow. How dangerous are these pigs? Is there any official procedure for dealing with them?

I like your take on Entan's family and the kidnappers. *Giggle* at "a proper village". I like the giant bees being called "yellow ladies". I do feel sorry for the bees. re Anon's player forgetting the dragonborn could fly: In one larp, I forgot I had an invisibility spell. This would have helped retrieving some items held by the police, which was something I'd been tasked with doing and had given up on, unable to figure out how to do it.

re me re the trickiness of picking up pyramidal d4s: Definitely! re mentioning whether one is running a published scenario at a convention: We're in agreement there; I think this should be made clear. Yes, Todd Furler was right to note in his scenario descriptions when he'd run a scenario before, even given it was his own.

re Heath Row re Jailbreak: In the abstract, it's a fine scenario to run at a convention, from everything I've heard. (I've read the scenario, but never played or run it.) This is, after all, one reason folks run published scenarios that work -- they work. But OMG WTF asking for a 6- or 8-hour slot for it? This is not a game that will take even half of that to finish!

When I run a game at a convention, I usually have a 4-hour slot, and if I'm running a published scenario, it's one I know works in that slot. But I also know I sometimes run faster than that, whether that's because I get nervous and move quickly or because I have a very efficient group or both. I try to slow down (to a point -- I also do want to keep an eye on the time so I don't go too slowly). I'm fine if things wrap in three and a half, or even three hours. But less than that and I feel like I've cheated the players out of that final hour. At least, this is the case if I have a full group. If I have 3 players for a game that is meant for 6 (which happened once), it's not as bad if things run a bit shorter. It still makes me nervous, thought.

re wanting "an unarmed fighter without the mystical trappings of the monk class": I may have done that, even though, technically, I was playing a monk. In the Strixhaven game, when most folks wanted a summer vacation adventure that wasn't really of interest to my PC, Ivo, Josh helped me turn Giovanni the Geometric, a sentient gelatinous cube I created in Swords of the Serpentine's system for proof of concept, to 5e (and then to 2024).

As Giovanni was a devout worshipper of the goddess Denari, Josh figured that a plasmoid monk was the best translation. It works, but Giovanni's not particularly mystical, even if he is religious. This doesn't undercut your point, of course, but the whole "monk" mystique is basically chrome I dispensed with.

re Jim Vassilakos re you not being able to internalize a published scenario to the point where you can make up details on the fly: It's a skill I've developed, as I do use published scenarios. It involves reading the scenario a lot, writing a lot of it out in different formats, noting what I expect the various players to be interested in and how I expect them to react, and I don't necessarily expect anyone to do it the way I do, even if they enjoy running published scenarios. I prep as much as I can so that I can improvise.

I've been astonished when I find I don't need to prep as much as I think. Sometimes that's still when I'm running a published scenario, and my brain decides I don't need to do as much work as I think. But sometimes, I'm running something that doesn't involve a published scenario, and that can be very refreshing. Of course, I sometimes have trouble with that because if the players aren't helping by being proactive or don't react to the hooks I think will work, I don't always know how to improvise.

And if you can come up with and run your own scenarios, I don't think you ever need to run something someone else published. I just tend to fall in love with some scenarios and campaigns, and then, I want to run them. Sometimes, it's something I've played, sometimes not.

BRIAN ROGERS: Love to your wife as well. I'm glad you enjoyed the vacationing. re write up: *The Robert Chambers?* Really? re Paramiad: Yes, if I'd been similarly saved, I'd likely have become a devotee of the Mushroom King as well. *Giggle* at Biblebap being 1/32 draconic. Reminds me of a convention game of *DresdenFiles* where one player created a character who was 1/64 Aesir. Sounds like a good time was had by all.

re 711 and Destiny: Wow, that is bonkers and amazing. For the V&V game, you could do the trick of making 711 an NPC, but you're right that, so long as it's a street level game, that's not necessary. re Patrick Riley

re "the least interesting thing you can do with a character is kill them": I tend to agree. I've said that the dirty secret of horror GMs is that we don't want to kill off PCs; we can do so much worse. Oh, the occasional heroic death is poignant, and I don't think it should generally be undone. But that's different than random death. I can enjoy that sort of thing if I knowingly sign up for an OSR game of that type, although I'd expect it to get in the way of some games that also want to push the sense of wonder and exploration.

re Mark Nemeth re the problem of some players short-circuiting scenes others signed up for: Often, this is a communication problem. Pete Petrusha's game, *Dreamchaser*, theoretically solves this problem by having folks state at the beginning what they want from the game and write it down. I'm not sure how a full game of *Dreamchaser* plays, as I only played a scene or two at Gen Con several years back.

I do know that when I play with the Storybrewers Discord crowd, we try to make sure to check in with each other and to have the "how do we land this plane?" conversation. It isn't foolproof; I've been in games where I felt that what I was hoping for wasn't achievable (or at least, not within what I considered the boundaries of good play) and at least one in which someone else definitely felt undercut. In some of these cases, it's a 20-20 hindsight thing, where one realizes "Oh, here's where things went off the rails for me, and this is the point where I should have spoken up." But this may be orthogonal to your point.

re "having some opposition intractable to negotiation": "some" is the key word, though recognizing this isn't the entirety of knowing when to have this be the case. If you've got a sentient species that isn't somehow programmed to never negotiate, I am going to be skeptical that it is never possible to negotiate with anyone of that species. I'm not talking about weird Cthulhu Mythos deities here, you understand. I am not talking about alien species that humanity literally cannot communicate meaningfully with.

If you have, say, a hobgoblin culture, and the hobgoblins are basically like all of the other fantasy species, except for being dubbed evil and always attacking every other sentient species and never being willing to negotiate with any member of them ever, I am skeptical. If you tell me that, yes, it is theoretically possible that one might, but you don't see this coming up in the game, I'm more likely to accept that. It may be hair-splitting, but I find that split hair important.

The other kind of issue I have is the one that comes up in *Eternal Lies*. There's a brilliant, fascinating human villain who, we are told, will never speak to the PCs unless they somehow trick her with a clever logic

puzzle. If you're confused about what the heck that would entail, you're in excellent company. We asked the authors directly about this.

Their reply was that they didn't think she'd ever talk, but didn't want to rule out the players doing something clever, so they added the bit about the clever logic puzzle -- but they had no idea what it would entail either! There are two problems here:

- Don't tell us that something is possible if you have no idea what the heck it is. Say something like "unless the players are very clever and come up with something the GM thinks would work".
- More to the point, this is an investigative game, *Trail of Cthulhu*, and the campaign *Eternal Lies* has mysteries to solve. There is a lot of information this NPC has, and apparently, there's no way for the PCs to get it out of her. Also, NPCs one can talk to are nearly always more interesting than those one cannot. You are shooting yourself in the foot if you make rule that this kind of NPC is one that the PCs cannot communicate with. I've run the game, and then one of my players changed things up and ran it for me. Both of us looked at this whole NPC-will-not-talk business and immediately ditched it, deciding what she'd say under what circumstances, and I think the game was stronger for it. I tried to run the campaign a second time and got about 2/3 to 3/4 of the way through, not getting to this NPC, but if I had, I had a new take on her, also one where she would be talking.

Side note: Ironically, I *can* find a way to change things ever so slightly (for values of "slight" that include Cthulhu Mythos stuff) to justify her not talking to the PCs. If the authors had used this method, I am not sure I would have thought they'd made the correct choice, but it would at least have made sense to me.

PATRICK ZOCH: Sympathy on the technical issues in the live online games you're in. Out of curiosity, what does "shining as an orc" mean to you? While I do hope you're able to do more face to face gaming, it sounds like the play by forum games are quite healthy.

re Michael Cule re players who want their PC to be friends with every NPC the PC meets: This is understandable. The NPCs are, collectively and individually, a way to interface with the game/setting. It's true that not every NPC should become a friend (probably), and certainly, spending too much time on this can be a problem (slowing things down, not giving other players enough of a chance to do things, and so forth). That said, I think it's a better problem to have than a player who wants their PC to do one or more of:

- Kill every NPC they meet (possibly only if provoked, but defining "provoked" way too broadly)
- Steal everything from every NPC they meet
- Boss around every NPC they meet (some players get annoyed if NPCs won't instantly carry out their PC's every command, regardless of circumstances or relative status).

re me: Aw, thank you! re Good Society: Has your daughter joined the Storybrewers Discord server? (It's certainly not required, but if she wants to, she can probably finagle an invite from their website.)

HEATH ROW: re Nick Mamatas: I was on an online panel with him a couple of years back. I'm sorry we didn't get to his room party in Seattle. I'm very glad the hotel didn't find it a problem. I think hotels have been getting less tolerant of room parties in general, likely for at least the last decade or so. There were panels on gaming, and there was a huge gaming library for folks to use during the convention.

MARK NEMETH: re write up: The magic pencils are a nice touch. I'm picturing a set of differently colored pencils, which might not be what you meant. re TPK vs too easy: Dice surprise us. re whether you're giving too much exposition: Have you asked the players? re enjoying the novelty of sleeping in a wizard's tower: Ah, tourism! The author of the Cthulhu Invictus campaign *The Legacy of Arrius Lurco* tells me that the details of tourist stalls at Thermopylae he gives came from his research into the period. Even then, there were trinkets and stuff like small commemorative statues.

BRIAN MISIASZEK: Beau Chapeau sounds delightful! I hope I get to go there some day. I told a friend who moved to Canada this year about it, and they looked it up and said that a fedora with ear flaps "feels very Canadian". It really does, but it also sounds like a good idea to me!

re the Mazorra: Out of morbid curiosity, how did it compare to similar institutions of the time in other countries? What's the "medical museum"? I could see using this setting for the scenario "Hysteria", which I played in one year at Gen Con. It was set in the 19th century, in the northeast USA, though I'm not exactly sure where. All of the PCs were women who'd been committed to the asylum, some of whom were merely inconvenient, some of whom perhaps should have been in jail instead, and some of whom (like my PC), well, a 19th century asylum may not have been the best place for them, but they really did need to be confined. I could also see using it in *Eternal Lies* if one changed the location of the Joy Grove asylum, changed one of the other locations to Cuba, or added a location. Alternatively, one could add an asylum to one of the

locations in the campaign. Mexico City would seem to be the best candidate, but I'd want to do some research before doing that.

It's fascinating to see which NPCs you -- or rather, if I understand correctly -- your source material gives high APP to. Just how do the General and King stay so attractive? And Dolores and Isabella? As is often the case, when one starts to look at the stats, one sees that the women get the highest APP. Hector "Santa" Menendez is a wonderful break from that, although again, I wonder how Menendez maintains that APP 90.

re Unforgettable Face: Does this mean that the artist's face is unmistakable even when she's in disguise, or that she can recognize someone else if she's met them before, even if they're in disguise? Or does it mean something different?

It's delightful that the journalist has developed precognition, if unreliably and only when he dreams. How did Yohama's cult find out about his plight and pay the appropriate bribes, given that he's in Cuba, and they, presumably, are in Africa? If this is your truncated write up, what details did you leave out of the extremely detailed NPCs? I'd love to see the full thing. re me: We did enjoy Worldcon, thanks.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: re Mark Nemeth re Daggerheart initiative: Good point about how it works to allow for PCs to support each other. re Dylan Capel: Roll20 has good support for Fate games. I still usually can't successfully give the GM one of my Fate tokens, but I suspect that's a me problem and most folks don't have this issue with Roll20.

MARK WILSON: My sympathy on the bugs and the layoff. re the Mission Impossible films and deifying the protagonist: I got annoyed when *Doctor Who* started doing this. re *Alice Is Missing*: I've yet to play it. I've also got the Silent Falls expansion, which might help a bit with replayability?

JIM VASSILAKOS: re Sanity in *Call of Cthulhu*: For specifically mythos stuff (as opposed to normal things that may erode one's Sanity (on the understanding that this is a game conceit, being essentially mental hit points)), Ken Hite described it as "mental plutonium". This may be the best way to think of it.

Reading mythos tomes is a fuzzy area, though I suspect some of them are indeed written badly enough that this alone might cause some Sanity loss. I think the main thing is one's mind understanding that the impossible is real. I'm thinking more of learning a spell, understanding that it is a real thing and you can cast it and have it do whatever it does.

The closest I've come to that is when I started learning Perl in the late 1990s, and got to the section of the book I was using where it covered references. The book was not badly written, but this concept blew my mind, and I said, "This is either deepest darkest black magic or proof of the divine." (I would have to re-teach myself everything I learned then to remember exactly why I thought this.)

In other words, part of the problem is that Sanity is forced to do double duty. On the one hand, it's "you see or experience something that is going to break your brain" (insert some everyday mundane terrible thing here). But on the other, it's "you're understanding how the universe really works" -- in other words, the "problem" is that you are becoming more sane, not less, and most of the "sane" people are happily in denial or ignorance.

Ultimately, the concept of Sanity as framed in *Call of Cthulhu* is contentious and imperfect. Since this was the first rpg of Lovecraftian horror -- I think the first horror rpg -- it's had a tremendous effect on other rpgs in this genre space. We have a lot of variety in rpgs and Lovecraft's stories are now in the public domain. These two things mean that there are games that take a different approach, and that's definitely a good thing.

re Clark Timmins re why the leaders of Stallanford asked the PCs to fix a problem and "Don't they have a police force that can attend to this sort of thing?": That's an interesting question. They might not. Since reading the *Astreiant* books (fantasy procedurals, basically), I've been reminded that not all civilizations do, and even when they do, exactly what the police or police-equivalent are supposed to do may not be what we think of when we think of our police.

None of this contradicts the point you and Clark are making, of course. Adventure hooks are tricky for published scenarios and campaigns. You talked about the issue of Sanity in *Call of Cthulhu* games. Another issue, although it may be less true than it used to be (I'm behind in my reading of Chaosium's books) is that a lot of CoC scenarios/campaigns presume that the PCs are a group of investigators -- indeed, the PCs are generally referred to as "the investigators" -- and some NPC comes to them and says, "So, this weird thing happened, and you're the people who look into weird things." It's the *Call of Cthulhu* equivalent of "You all meet in a tavern."

Tatters of the King, a campaign I adore, also does some weird things along those lines. It starts with the premise that, for whatever reason, all the PCs are at the opening night of a play in London, and I'm okay with that. That's premise, which I'll generally grant.

It further assumes that when things go bad during the performance, the PCs will form a de facto party. This is a bit odd, but given that we all know that the PCs are supposed to go through the adventure together, most groups will accept this, particularly if the GM asks (as I did) the players to create pre-existing relationships among the PCs.

Okay. The PCs have gone to this play. Things went weird and wrong, and they bonded or renewed their acquaintanceship or whatever, and in any case, they're ready to explore the mystery. Great!

Now, one key to the mystery, although they may not realize this, is a patient at an asylum some hours' journey away from London. One of the PCs should be a person whom the director of the asylum would plausibly write to, asking them to come see this patient and give an opinion about whether or not it's safe to discharge him.

That's fine -- that's a known requirement going in, and the GM tells the players, "I need one of you to play this type of character." Sure, coincidences are starting to pile up, but hey, the stars are coming right, one of the Outer Gods is exerting its will upon the Earth, sure, I'll give the author that one.

After the play, the PC who was asked to go to the asylum is expected to do that, and the timing can be whatever works best. The PC, however, is expected to bring along all of the other PCs. If this seems odd to you, it seemed odd not only to me, but also to the folks from Yog-sothoth.com who played through the campaign. It was hilarious to hear them doing their best to work with this notion.

Alienist PC: I... For some reason, I suddenly feel very close to all of you. So, I invite you to accompany me to --

Another PC: See the loony in the loony bin!

And so they did.

A better way to do this would be to have the PC in question do this while the others did some investigations in London, but that doesn't seem to be what the scenario expects. I lucked out (for some definition of "luck") in that I only had 2 players for the session where the visit would occur. One was the PC who had been asked to come to the asylum. The other PC was British, and the player suggested that this PC happened to live in the town nearest the asylum. This worked out well; having one person accompany the consulting PC made a lot more sense than having an entire entourage!

re cut-ups: Parts Per Million does something with these, using works in the public domain. These are works of fiction, and I'm not quite sure exactly how this all works. Here's the link to Dracula: https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/339940/cut-up-solo-dracula?src=solo_footer

re me re *Eternal Lies* and playtesting: See my comment to Myles above. In brief: The campaign was playtested, but as I did not playtest that section, I don't know what maps, if any, the playtest group for it had. I've read the errata, but it didn't mention the balcony issue. (I just double checked -- yes, it's still there, and it still doesn't mention it.) If Pelgrane is willing to have me kibbitz -- er, playtest -- a new edition, I will definitely mention the balcony issue again.

COMMENTS ON EVER AND ANON ISSUE #4

BRIAN ROGERS: Congratulations on pulling off the final battle you'd been dreaming of for nearly three decades! re *Draw Steel*: Is this as pricey as it looks, \$70 for the pdfs of the core rules? Is it worth it? Or does *The Delian Tomb* give you enough information to be able to run the adventure without having the core rules? I agree that the player of the Drow is going to go for playing a Devil.

re Zippo: Absolutely absurd, yes. I think he could totally run from the law, even in that outfit; he's got heightened speed! But I agree he does look too cheerful. re Under the Giant's Shadow: You have 7 players for this? Not sure I'd do the ability name changes, but I agree yours are more closely tied to what the abilities do. Ooh, a PC has a PC-haunted weapon! (Okay, NPC-haunted.) I like most of your changes, although this is still not the game for me to be gming.

re me re your SotS game: This sounds great. It's what *Blades in the Dark* theoretically promises, but doesn't seem a system to deliver it the way I like. re Gumshoe One2One: You're not wrong in that, yes, it's totally viable to play Gumshoe games with one player and not use it. Heck, there's a scenario I want to run for one of Aviatrix's characters, and I don't care if she's the only player.

System-wise, the things One2One offer that are useful boil down to:

- the idea that, since one PC shouldn't have All the Skills, the GM needs to give the PC some NPC connections who have whatever Investigative skills are needed.
- the recognition that if you have one PC, you want to be really careful about the stakes of a fight.

- you need to pace things differently because both of you are always on.

None of this needs the cards. The cards are fascinating, and they make One2One an interesting game, but in no way simpler than regular Gumshoe. What I find most useful about them is that One2One led to people saying, "Hey, can you create a game using this system, but for multiple players?" And hence, we have the *Yellow King RPG*. Quick Shock and Gumshoe are both viable games, but they are different games. I find Quick Shock harder to run, but that's likely a matter of practice -- at least, for published scenarios. I think I'd find it, whether for one player or a group, far harder to run if I'm making up my own scenarios.

re Marian Cox: I'm trying to find out more information about her online, and not having a lot of luck. Her vanishing from the public eye after her husband was annoyed at her fame sounds ominous.

MARK WILSON: Good luck to both of you with the job search. re Lantern Bearers write up: Sounds like a solidly good campaign. I think you did a better job of summarizing an entire campaign than I would have done. I like Peren's epilogue.

re *Brindlewood Bay*. I enjoyed the two cases we played, and the GM had a good handle on the system. I think I am more interested in some of the Carved From Brindlewood games, though, particularly *Apocalypse Keys*. Have you played other PbtA games? I ask because there's a lot of variety, and while I understand why you found *Brindlewood Bay*'s generic action resolution lacking, I can't gauge whether you'd enjoy a PbtA game with somewhat more solid rules, such as *Monster of the Week*.

CLARK TIMMINS: I like that Myths and Legends stamp set, although I'm not sure my ordering it would make sense. The Tupilaq sounds a bit like Lovecraft's Gnoph-keh.

PEDRO PANTHOCA DA SILVA AND CAMILA

LOURENCO PANTHOCA: re Jooes e Marias: The parents put the children on a boat hoping that the children will survive, correct? If so, that's an interesting inversion of the original. re me: Ah, I see. Thanks for the clarification!

ROGER BW: re Cold War Pulp: *giggle* at the game quotes! What systems did Cried the Lady and Lions, Tigers & Dragons use? Thanks for clearing up the "Traveller: 2300" thing; I was confused about it. I think your hacks for Bayern make sense. re Lovecraftian gaming: And if you want to *shoot* Cthulhu in the face while changing the timeline Terminator-style, play *Fate of Cthulhu*. One thing I learned about *GURPS* after I'd

stopped playing (I don't think I'd be a great GM for the system) is that there are characters I could never have created as they turned out in whatever system I used if I'd used *GURPS* instead -- but I could easily translate them into *GURPS*.

re George Phillies re the really *good* games: For me, it's the opposite: I've been having them more often since what you refer to as the modern style. Heck, even when I play games that don't use that style, I think I enjoy them more because GMs (and authors) have taken what they find works best from "modern style" games and left what doesn't. This is hardly surprising as I imprinted on *Over the Edge*. (In fairness, I've also been playing, as opposed to gming, more often since "modern style", if one presumes it started with OTE.) re being ready to spin up an NPC the players/PCs take an interest in into a more fleshed out character: Yes. I don't necessarily front load this, but I'm generally willing and able to do it.

re Jim Vassilakos re Sanity: Good point. This is why Pelgrane's *Trail of Cthulhu* has both Sanity and Stability. Stability is what allows one to pass as normal, which is how one explains 0 Sanity cult leaders who seem quite respectable to most people. One thing I liked about 1st ed *Kult* (I don't know if it's in the current edition) is that getting close to "light" (a positive mental balance) was just as abnormal as getting close to "dark" (a negative mental balance). One could go a bit higher with a positive mental balance than a negative one, as positive traits were more socially acceptable, but either extreme ultimately leads to breaking through the Illusion.

PATRICK RILEY: re *Amber Diceless RPG*: I ran a one shot where the PCs weren't at each other's throats, and a friend started a campaign where the PCs were all working for Amber's king, sent on a diplomatic mission that he warned them up front might be a trap. It was, and I am sorry we never found out what happened after our PCs were captured. If I were to run it again, I'd do what a friend recommended and have every player define 1 area their PC was best in, and those broadly defined would be the stats. But I'd probably use a different system. Or I might just run *Nobilis* or one of Jenna's other games instead

I read the books first. I loved the first series and didn't care for the second series. I don't know if I'd like the first series if I were to read it for the first time today; rereading would have. nostalgic glow, I suspect. I've not been to an Ambercon, so have no idea if I'd enjoy it if someone I didn't know well ran it.

re Adventurers Guild write up: I like the maps, especially the one showing the overview of the whole place. re birthday: I'm glad you enjoyed it.

JOHN REDDEN: We also watched Wednesday Season 2, What did you think were the Call of Cthulhu elements of it? Thanks for the link to your Substack article. I read it and I know Barry did as well. re Michael Cule: I'm glad your toe healed. re Avram Grumer: I don't think he's played in anything I've run since the *Tian Deng* playtest, though perhaps I can get him to play in *Streets of Jade* once I have read it all and am ready to run a playtest of it. We both played in the Masks superhero game and the Harlem Unbound Call of Cthulhu game, and I'd be delighted to read more from him about those. I'm glad he's taking notes for the Scum & Villainy game, as I am not. re Humor: That's a good one.

HEATH ROW: re Super City: Most of your added elements are great, though there are several oddities. Some of your additions to the verb table aren't verbs (e.g., X-Ray Vision, Elasticity, and I'm not sure what "Fire Mind" and "Brain-push" are). The last 3 items on the Danger table don't quite match the rest in tone. The Citizens table is fine (even if I'm tempted to suggest, a la the original version of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, that you add "A curiously well-informed seller of cabbages"). For Problems, "Avoid a car accident" and "Help an old woman cross the street" also have the tone oddity, while "Eradicate gambling" and "Eliminate embezzlers" sounds more ominous than one would expect for heroes. Or is this something that the villains are trying to do that the heroes, perhaps reluctantly, need to stop?

GEORGE PHILLIES: re me: I could see either interpretation, but I do suspect that many acts of courage are carried out at least partly out of cowardice. (I don't think that's necessarily a problem.)

AVRAM GRUMER: Thanks for taking notes and doing the Scum & Villainy write up! re *Never Tell Me the Odds*: Seems more designed for a one-shot than long term play, yes? re Brian Rogers re *Ticket to Ride* and why you didn't buy the New York City set: You're not wrong!

re me: You're correct about the writing issue, but that doesn't mean I want to deal with that kind of bs from a player. re Max Gladstone: Clearly, I need to read more of his books. re *Monster of the Week*: "Meddling Kid" is a fan playbook, and I do have it. I've been reading through all of Evil Hat's MotW books, of which there are currently 7. I've finished *MotW* 3rd edition, *Tome of Mysteries*, *Codex of Worlds*, and *Codex of Worlds: Modern Haunts*. I'm currently reading *Codex of Worlds: Apocrypha*. I've been liveblogging these on a Discord server as I read them, and I may at some point polish that up and put it somewhere less private at some point.

DYLAN CAPEL: I'm glad you liked *Cloud Empress*. How lethal is the system in play? re *Pendragon*: Interesting. I had a very different experience in the 3 convention one shots I played several years back. re feast crashers: I suspect one could make a half-campaign of this, as the knights don't spend all their time questing. re *Neuromancer*: I should probably reread it. I remember being annoyed that the protagonist got scolded for selling out the human race or something like that, and that it never occurred to those scolding him to find out what he did and didn't know about what was going on.

re E&A: I am not printing it out. I find double columns easier to read on my tablet. re me re *Spire*: I was thinking of the aspect of what the PCs' families would think of them if they knew what the PCs were doing.

JIM ECKMAN: re Heinlein or Norton: 1 is Heinlein's *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*. 3 is his *Starship Troopers*. 5 is probably Norton, but I don't know her work well. I think 6 is Heinlein's *Glory Road*. No idea about 2 and 4. re me: Sure thing!

MICHAEL CULE: re orcs and humans in Tolkien: IIRC, Saruman did something to either make humans into orcs or add human-ness to orcs or something. re the designers of the dwarves and the elves: For a moment, I thought you were going to say these two species were the Morlocks and the Eloi. What you actually did makes more sense.

I've no idea whether your background was "necessary", but I think it was useful because it gave you a history of the world that made sense to you. It was your foundation. For some games, sure, you want player input, you want the group to create the world together, maybe you don't even want a GM. But not all games have to be like that, and for this one, the point was that you created the background, and the players and PCs gradually learned about at least some parts of it.

I'm glad your bathroom was fixed. re arriving at a convention the night before it starts: We try to do that when we can. I'm glad Hartley was able to figure out a way to save his character.

re write up: I do like the title. re Crimson Bat Plushy: You know that many of us would buy this if it existed. re "augmented by": Is this HeroQuest or RuneQuest? I'm a bit vague on the systems. I do like Eshan facing down the Bat Man. The session reminds me a bit of the sports riot part of the Cthulhu Invictus campaign *The Legacy of Arrius Lurco*. I found the scene with the body and your lead up to it impressive.

Ah! That's the explanation of the mysterious multiple tenants and the janitrix who inexplicably failed to report this. Strello makes an excellent point about the

probable consequences of reporting the full details of that.

ATTRONARCH: Ah, a cliffhanger ending!

MYLES CORCORAN: re write up: Curioser and Curioser! Are Wax and Wane: Are they inspired by Brandon Sanderson's second Mistborn trilogy? re Michael Cule: I think one of your paragraphs trails off mid-sentence. re Avram Grumer re BRPS: I wonder if I should go into my preferred way of running *Call of Cthulhu* so as to avoid this problem. I've probably mentioned it in A&E, but that would have been some years ago.

re Brian Misiaszek re having trouble using real-life horrors in games: I could probably manage a (very toned down) version of the Mazorra (or taking some of the NPCs and general horrors of such institutions) in a Call/Trail of Cthulhu game. The one I'm not so sure of is Delta Green's *God's Teeth*. (To their credit, author and publisher are *very* clear that there's no shame in deciding this one is not for one's group, and indeed, that one should not run it in that case.)

re me: Not spying on anyone in their bath seems generally good advice. re Joshua Kronengold re the issues with falling behind in apa, no pun intended: Yes, exactly. This is why I am glad E&A is keeping the 16 page maximum zine length. There is only so much time in a day, a week, a month, and I have no patience with the notion that if I *really* love my apa, I will prioritize it and somehow make enough time No Matter What. That's hogwash and has the effect of making folks feel that they should drop out of the apa.

Maximum apa length is a different matter. In principle, if we have a maximum zine length, it should be okay; in practice, we'll have to see. I remember when there was a big number anniversary of A&E, Lee made sure to give people a heads up that the apa had, for the first time in a long time, hit 150 pages, and that this would take significantly longer to read and comment on thoroughly. (She was correct.)

PAUL HOLMAN: re write up of the Glamour game. Er, condolences to the group for being commended for all they've done by... being given the job of assisting the new Master of Circuses arrange the massive celebration on one week's notice! I'm curious about why the Bat Man was doing what he was doing -- that is, what his goals were, how that fit in with the spider thing, how it fit in with imperial politics in general -- but I'm sure further write ups from you and Michael will help me fill in those blanks.

Sympathy on Microsoft's forced "upgrades". re me: I think you specified that it was 7E RuneQuest. I got confused because I hadn't realized it was up to 7E.

MITCH HYDE: I also have Opinions about *Call of Cthulhu* (and other Lovecraftian games) which will need to wait, given my zine length. I find that I like 7E more than I had expected, for the most part, as a player (I have yet to gm it). One thing to bear in mind about pushed rolls (as opposed to Luck points) is that the problem they're supposed to solve is, I believe, the repeated rolls to try the same thing.

Thus, you get no more than two attempts, and if you fail the first and try again, i.e., the Push, the GM (perhaps assisted by the other players if they're drawing a blank) tells you how it will go wrong if you fail, and it should be a disaster. Also, if you're trying to do the same thing using a different skill, it still counts as a push. In other words, you're possibly seeing a second chance that you might not allow as the GM. I'm seeing "no, you do *not* get to keep trying until you succeed".

And yes, I've been in games where the GM allowed or outright told a player to keep rolling until they succeeded ("You blew the Spot Hidden roll? Okay..." *vamps for 5 minutes* "Okay, enough time has passed -- try again.") and as an editor, had discussions when an author put in something that the PCs really needed to succeed at, figuring that if everyone blew the roll, well, they could keep on trying. Being able to say, "No, 7th edition does not work that way" is very useful. Do you want the PCs to spot the clue no matter what? Okay -- don't call for a roll. Don't make the players play Roll Until Success. re write up: Good point about the potential downside of the pillar.

PATRICK ZOCH: What brand of chocolate was the bar?

MARK NEMETH: Congratulations to all on the successful completion of the first Dullstrand campaign! re 2nd campaign: What had Zerna intended to do with the duplicate item? re Eastlands: So this is a culture that sends midwives to help deliver babies even if the parents are exiles. That's an interesting detail. Things might (or might not) have gone a bit better if they'd pointed out that, at least in theory, the child could visit the father once she grew older. (Though probably it would have been better if Dozira had told Bloonar of the plan.)

re A Tangled Web: You're going to need to feel your way and keep doing this. You're going to make mistakes; learn what you can from them and keep going. re Joshua Kronengold: The thing to keep in mind when players talk about their PCs' goals is that it's fine if these change in play. re me: Thanks for the clarifications about the Eastlands game. re Brian Misiaszek re Tavern of Souls: That reminds of the real

world inspiration for the film *Astropia*. re me: I agree re Brand in the Amber books.

BRIAN MISIASZEK: You're right; that raccoon is absolutely looking concerned about you. RAE the Mazorra material with one quibble: Either you or your source says that Juana de la Cruz "would be beautiful if her face was not so masked". I don't know if "masked" is a typo for something else, but my point is "would be beautiful" if not for X means that she currently is *not* beautiful and therefore should not have an APP of 90. "un-dx" = "undiagnosed", correct?

re Roger BW re *Cthulhu Eternal*: See <https://cthulhueternal.com/>. re Gabriel Roark re how restricted travel to Cuba is for USA citizens: Wow. re me: Thanks for the clarification about the map. re your 3 hour walk: I wasn't thinking about whether someone would approach you with nefarious intent as that this is a lot of walking and I have no idea whether you had any way to rest, grab something to eat or drink, use a bathroom, and so on, nor any idea of whether you might have been in danger of getting lost. re repository of NPCs online: Ah, that makes sense. RAE further thoughts on El Fantasma of El Capitolio, even if I'm not sure I follow all the science.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: re PvP: I'm not sure how many of our current groups would be up for that. And of the folks who would, it's always a question for whether they do PvP in a way that all of us are good with, you know? This, of course, is part of why *Good Society* does Resolve tokens: it forces people to talk OOC before just doing a thing, and leaving everyone else to immediately decide whether or not to push back, which in turn often leads to not pushing back at the time and being dissatisfied later.

re Jim Vassilakos re *Heroine*: I'd describe the protagonist as a child or teenager, based on the source material and the 2 games I played. *Cerebos: The Crystal City* is similar-ish, except that it's not obvious to anyone who the protagonist is until folks determine this later in the game. re Patrick Riley: *The Shattered Chain* et alia are by Marion Zimmer Bradley.

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: I'm glad you're enjoying Sweden! re me: Harbor Innovations's Paper 7 has a good feel to it, and the stylus is nice as well. The main drawback is that it has no extra illumination. (It can't have a backlight, based on the nature of the tablet, iirc, but theoretically could have had a front light.) This means that I need very good illumination to use it. It's an interesting supplement to my usual tablet, but it's definitely not a replacement. re the ST:TNG episode: "Lonely Among Us".

Accidental Recall #4

For Ever & Anon #5
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eaddr: mneme@labcats.org

Dreamwidth: <https://mneme.dreamwidth.org>
Gaming blog: <https://labcats.dreamwidth.org/> (with Lisa Padol; defunct-ish)
Tumblr: mneme / Mastodon: @mneme@dice.camp
Bluesky: mnemex.bsky.social

Well, on the one hand, I didn't manage to experiment with typst this month.

On the other hand, by staying up FAR TOO LATE, I've managed to finish clearing my comment backlog, even against a growing APA. So hopefully, typst experiments next month!

Time Bubble—the Albany-area larp con Lisa and I went to this month, was delightful fun, and I played a number of larps in styles I usually don't:

Blues Clues was a mystery larp where we played cartoon characters (I played Mr Salt) who tried to solve various mysteries, including trying to unmask the Kingpin and solve a murder or two. It was silly, fun, and the mystery mechanic was really good (and we solved almost all the mysteries). Of course, some PCs were the perpetrators, and some of them also solved some mysteries!

Digimon: Your Destined Digital-Analog connection was a lovely little gem of a game that ran decidedly under time—we alternated "speed dating" rounds to decide which digimon (or human, for the digimon players) to pair up with for the next round of adventures and little adventures where we encountered (nada mostly solved) problems from various obscure digimon games. Since I've actually played my first digimon game over the summer (well, around a third to half of it), I also enjoyed seeing the lore in this fan-game.

Brilliant Diary Thesaurus: This is a very cute and weird high concept game—the players take on the roles (I made mine up!) of people in a secret society who have gathered to perform a ritual to make a Special Diary written with Purple Prose. It was fun and silly and almost kinda beautiful, as we played our overwrought characters arguing (or not arguing over what was really important (and also writing some truly...inspired prose to collage together).

Dead Dog: Curiosity Killed the Cat: Probably the star of my con, I'd been hoping to see a larp that combined escape room-style puzzle solving and roleplaying, and...here it was! (a friend had playtested it so suggested it when I mentioned the urge). It was exactly as advertised; a tensely roleplayed escape

room sequence, with some nice mystery solving clues and a satisfying ending (for this run, anyway).

Igtheme: What media have inspired you vis-a-vis RPGS: I mean, all of them? But recently, rather a lot of mysteries (we watched all the Whimsies, Poirots, Marples, plus anime Sherlock Holmes series), RWBY (which, despite the death of Rooster Teeth, it looks like will come back), and a variety of media depending on what game I was playing. I *mostly* take inspiration from "what is this game telling me to do? What is hard but possible to do in this game?" But often I'll also pull inspiration from other things. For instance, when we were playing Stone Age Monster of the Week, I looked at the weirdness of my Agent's playbook and, with the consent of the GM and other players, decided my character was not simply a time traveler but specifically a time traveler inspired by the Kage Baker *Company* series, where agents were inserted into the past, made immortal, and given instructions and resources, but time travel was one way; they would never get to the future except by walking. I've taken inspiration from mysteries multiple times; I think I actually had two characters based on Lord Peter Whimsey in different games, and of course my PC in Lisa's Fearful Symmetries (Trail of Cthulhu with a golden-dawn style supernatural society) is loosely based on Phryne Fisher in Miss Fisher's Mysteries.

Possibly more subtly, I've rung a few changes on the image in the only Charles Stross Merchant Princes novel I've read (or maybe I read two?). I didn't take much, but one thing that struck me there was that the "merchant princess" character wore her renaissance-style outfit as armor, turning traditional (for her world, anyway) clothes into impressive social armor. I was certainly riding that when I built Irebella, a merchant princess artificer who makes of her corseted dress *literal* armor (no, she's not an armorer although that would have been a fun interpretation; it's medium armor concealed inside a dress/corset), and while she's sometimes underestimated, she also often gets taken seriously by the people who count.

Comments on E&A #3, part 2

Patrick Riley: An interesting aspect of LitRPG ranks, at least looking at the Japanese parts of it, is that they aren't necessarily tied to character power/level. In "I Left My A-Rank Party to help my students..." the main character starts out as a B-ranked adventurer, and his former students are D-ranked beginning adventurers. But as becomes clear, this is more a measure of experience than power—as becomes quickly clear, he has fully trained Red Mage abilities that have long been undervalued because his damage-focused group overvalued direct attack/defense abilities over support and over-estimated

their contribution; similarly, his D-rank students don't have (yet) the gear and extra abilities that can only come with adventuring, but they've also clearly levelled up their abilities—Rain, the main caster, can cast rank 5 spells (out of 7) out of the gate; in no wise is "D-rank" the equivalent of "1st level"; it's if anything, more the equivalent of "level-capped but don't yet have the gear you get out of D-rank raids that (I think; this isn't my scene) you see in World of Warcraft and the like, where even after maxing out levels and abilities there are still tiers of tactical experience and higher ranked gear players can only attain by

progressing through the tiers of most dangerous content.

Another anime (adapted from by a web novel, of course) we've watched recently that uses litrpg tropes is Lord of Mysteries. There, in a Victorian England crossed with bits of China, "Beyonders"—those who hope to gain esoteric power and wield it for reasons religious, personal, or professional, enter a "path" that grants a title and certain powers, starting at sequence 9, by drinking a specific potion. They can consume further potions to lower their sequence and obtain progressively stronger sequences within the path, but the formulae for the potions are tightly guarded secrets, so depending on what organization they belong to, they may not be able to progress further without some kind of revelation, discovery, a deal, or quite a lot of risk. Additionally, to even qualify for the next sequence, they must fully "digest" and master the abilities of their current sequence, which can be no easy task. Each sequence also involves a unique title, so its' generally clear when you encounter someone not only what path they're following (which is usually named after the level 9 title) but also what sequence they're at. The nature of discovery—knowing exactly what methods progress you through digestion of a potion, as well as how to make new potions within a path is critically important, and there are also rituals and artifacts to contend with—makes for an interesting system that isn't strictly skill or level-based and might be interesting to recreate in an RPG.

Brian Rogers: Re board games: There's only one Ticket to Ride (with many expansions/variants), but you might want to try Azul, Alhambra, or maybe Sagrada for games with similar "bridge game" aesthetics.

Knave: Oh, wow, that game sounds fantastic. Of course, with the "we're just adventurers in it for money and power" vs "cult of the mushroom king!" I'd expect to eventually get some intra-party conflict, but maybe that's for next year.

Re Best in Life as Drives—I got it from Kevin (i.e. a Source), so I'm pretty confident in the intent even though it's a different mechanic than other Gumshoe games' drives.

Ryct Lisa: I think you accidentally failed to boldface your comments making it seem like these comments might be to me? It certainly confused me! It's a good thing not all players are Lisa, as much as I like her!

Your answers on divination are probably not universal, but they're interesting and in the situations where they apply should produce a satisfyin game!

Patrick Zoch: I'm glad you forwarded my thoughts on Good Society to someone who might use them! It's a bit weird to call Connections in Good Society "NPCs" given that an important part of the vibe is that they *are* played by players, even though they're not *main* characters. Not wrong, exactly, but still weird!

Heath Row: I'm sorry I missed Nick's party@Worldcon; it sounds like it was a blast!

Re game-related content at the Seattle Worldcon: Not as much as there could have been, but Lisa was on at least one panel with a lot of gaming content, and I got in a few good games in the game room and some nice water-cooler conversations about games in the same area.

N3F is somewhat alien to me; I remain curious that as far as my research determined, George Phillies is both its most recent and longest serving chairperson. Is there a reason the leadership stopped rotating quite as much as it had? (for older fannish orgs, my usual expectation would be "exhaustion" but I don't want to assume).

Mark Nemeth: Re Sorcerous Burst (not Blast), presumably, they cap it so that it's not =too- good a cantrip at level 17, when you get 4d8 to kick it off. That said, yeah, even at 4d8 and unlimited dice, the average damage is still basically 5.14

per die. Limit it to only 5 extra d8s, and...the average damage is still 5.14, there just isn't this open ended possibility of a blowout.

Hee! I like that you'd taken an idea from A&E and turned it into a color detail! Re the anticlimax of the group acting to NOT fight a potentially dangerous adversary and...succeeding, I could see having a backup fight that would be much easier if they had Udargu on their side, but also, not every adventure needs to have a specific number of fights, so it's fine. Our Spelljammer game sometimes gets a little light with the characters spending too much time arguing their next step and not enough doing stuff and getting into trouble, but the issue is never "they don't get into enough fights" but more "they don't progress the plot enough and they are their own worst enemy." If they can manage to explore/learn things/sneak somewhere they shouldn't be/discover something neat, it doesn't really matter if there are a few sessions without a fight.

Brian Misiaszek: I read the precis on the Mazorra. Sadly, details aside it mostly just sounds sad to me. It does, indeed, make a good CoC location, but the horrors of what actually happened exceed a lot of the low level horrors of Call of Cthulhu. (not the world ending stuff, but what actually happened exceeds the ambitions of a lot of cultists).

Re Worldcon: We had a good time, yes!

Lisa Padol: Larp happened! Pinball happened!

Interestingly, this particular trip involved us learning some of the rules of Godzilla Pinball (rather than playing semi-randomly to hit interesting stuff and occasionally having fun stuff happen randomly, like boss battle initiations, multi-ball events, and even the central button lighting up so you can fire Godzilla's breath...but unless you're very careful, probably drop the ball while so doing since you don't have 3 hands.

What we somehow figured out was that the key to the boss battles and some of the mechanics was getting a ball into a "scoop"—a recessed area above the right flipper that had a magnetic lock that could grab the ball if it went in (it says "shoot the scoop" at certain points, but what even is a scoop, anyway?). So, starting a boss battle would require hitting both ramps (no necessarily on the same ball) and then getting a ball into the scoop, changing cities would require completing (or failing) a boss battle and then getting a ball into a scoop, getting a buff that would protect your left or right gutter would require hitting the scoop without having the preconditions for a big thing, etc. Something that would, admittedly, be a greater help to me if I could, in fact, hit the scoop intentionally; I can often hit a ramp on purpose, can transfer the ball from left to right or vice versa with low (but no) risk of dropping it (and much more risk of sending it into play, but that's the game), but I basically only hit the scoop by accident. Still, I managed a 140M point game in which I won a boss battle, which I think is better than I've managed before.

When someone on foot can outrun a galloping horse (of course, a galloping horse can't go that far without collapsing, but then, neither can the human without some training), it's usually in my experience a matter of the mechanics not really calculating how far people can travel. Horse speeds, if specified in the system, may be likewise faster than real horses go.

Re Asteriant mysteries and astrology: A detective might also say something like: "hmm. This woman had a job as a weaver, but her stars don't suggest she would be successful in that profession. That's funny." with mystery building out from there. The world does have other functional magic than astrology, but having astrology work is certainly key to the fiction.

On the other hand (spoilers for Genshin Impact): One WEIRD aspect of Genshin is that we both have functional astrology, with an astrologer as one of the early cast members and quite a bit of astrological theming (I mean, really quite a bit;

the upgrades to each character are referred to as Constellations, for instance, being provided by objects called "Stella Fortuna"). And, on the other hand, it's been established that while most people don't know this, the entirety of the sky people can see is false; that somehow, someone has built a "false sky" which obscures the true stars and planets and moons of the world, replacing them with whatever images the creator of the "false sky" chooses to present.

Yeah, in retrospect, saying we only needed one room for our Breakthru game was mistake. The game would definately have benefited from a second room!

Re splitting into smaller groups not necessarily shortening fights: It doesn't make them longer, either, and it does simplify them a bit; battle anime, of course, take advantage of the simplicity by making the individual fights much more involved, but a RPG need not do that. The main cost at the table would be switching between fights, so I'd be tempted to give players an advantage for doing a "scene change" maneuver if they're at a disadvantage, encouraging them to keep a fight going for a few exchanges but then switch away once the momentum changes so someone else gets to go for a while; ideally each PC/NPC fight would get two or three frames before it resolved, or only one if it was very one-sided.

Re our D&D and the grid: Ok, we do use a grid, but we don't lock character positions to the grid, which also encourages people to have their spells not lock strictly to the grid either. The tools we use include rulers, which give us ways to calculate distances other than the grid as well (and may take precedence in some circumstances, like diagonals; unlike earlier editions, 5e doesn't have special rules for diagonals, so it's really up to table rules, including just pulling out a ruler. Compare to D&D 3.5 which specifically said that diagonal movement used one square for the first diagonal square moved, 2 for the second, etc, or 4e which specifically said that diagonal movement is counted the same as horizontal, which resulted in the standard spell areas all being rectangular (since by the rules, a sphere was the same shape as a cube).

5e has none of these rules, so absent table rules to the contrary, if you want to calculate diagonal distances, even locking movement to a grid, you pull out a ruler...well, that or calculate the hypotenuse of the right triangle in question, I suppose. $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ the world 'round, after all (unless you're calculating movement on a sphere, but lets not go there). If you're *not* locking movement to the grid, you'll end up with your figure slightly off-grid, and so be it.

Re Giovanni the Geometric and building him as a monk using 2014 rules: True! And Julian was playing a weather shaper as a Way of the Four Elements monk before 2024 as well! But mechanically, these were weak choices, it's just that we had other reasons to make those choices even if they had a bunch of weak aspects...and then 2024 made those characters more fun to play in fights.

re going to the cops: Part of the question is whether, in fact, invoking the cops will result in them taking over the investigation. There are plenty of situations where it makes sense to invoke "legitimate" authorities, but even so the PCs still have to have a game to play!

Re having a LLM play a "I am the lord of evil!" NPC: An added aspect is that for entirely understandable reasons, people putting up cloud-hosted AIs throw in controls to stop them from being used for obviously illegal or, in many cases, immoral uses. They don't work universally, but it's entirely possible that an attempt to get an AI to roleplay, say, the literal Devil would hit these safeguards.

Re piggybacking literally letting you disguise yourself [and a friend] as someone taller, but what about someone shorter? Special shoes!

Re times for Urban Shadows factions: I mean, I was

deliberately suing times that would overlap, giving specific overlaps for conflict. But yeah, one could tweak it for a given campaign. It doesn't help that Wild is primarily defined for what it -isn't-.

Re CoC: "make a roll" vs "make (succeed in) a roll": I mean, the player was obviously acting with bad faith, but on the other hand, the game is really asking for this by using "make" for both usages and expecting players to be able to tell the difference.

Re us and Cat Valente: She definately seems to recognize us as fans that have shown up at a largish number of her events, and she also generally doesn't remember our names (which is entirely understandable; she meets a lot of people!)

re Covid fatality rate vs flu: It's become extremely difficult to capture these numbers, particularly as we stopped tracking infections (and we haven't tracked Flu infections accurately for years). Spending 10 minutes on this didn't give me useful hard data, and it may be we're not collecting as much data (even death rates) further complicating the issue. But, of course, a disease doesn't go away just because you stop counting it.

Re LARPs in a box: It might be obvious why it's useful to put larps (particularly one-shot larps) in a box, but just in case it isn't (to people who aren't Lisa): The core problem is that if someone leaves the fictional space the larp is set in, one of two things happens: a) The character is no longer part of the larp. b) The character now has a dedicated GM to run their actions while they are outside the box. c) The player has to sit around doing nothing for a while (or maybe talking to anyone who left with them) until a GM gets to them. Since a given game will have a limited number of GMs, decreasing PCs ability or inclination to leave the "box" of the game, possibly to zero, while the game is going on, is very beneficial to larping continuing to happen.

There are ways you can partially open the box—you can have adventures as self contained (choose your own adventure style) mechanics. You can have mechanics that allow players to leave the box with a GM but limit how long this takes and how often a player can invoke this. But in a game where most play is players interacting with other players, you need to keep that the main focus.

Re RPG healing: I mean, one can complain about easy RPG healing feeling fake or whatever, but people don't want damage to last forever (usually) either. In D&D, this is particularly weird because the alternative to short rest/long rest healing is that all healing is magical, which just moves the problem; nobody stays damaged still, but lots of magic items or cleric spells are spent. This is why my suggestion (to Mark Nemeth I think?) in a previous issue was that he just adjust the fiction—PCs can normally carry around lots of cheap magical herbs that will heal them up over an hour's or night's rest, so the "magical-seeming" healing is literally magical but the gameplay loop of damage not sticking around stays without having to use up or track resources that don't help the game.

The other issue is actual long term damage. The characteristics I'd expect of long term damage is that it doesn't impede the PCs in a fight as much as short term damage (it's not part of the "damage clock" that can result in losing) but it also can't be healed easily; it needs powerful magic not easily available to the PCs, or a quest, to deal with (or it can expire/heal over time, I guess) so it sticks around and influences the narrative. If you want this kind of damage, you need to put it into the mechanics somewhere—and in a game where magical healing is part of the general vibe, it needs to be something that clearly can't be healed normally, whether that's a curse, a disease, or just a "great wound" that uses its own mechanics.

Re Telzey Amberdon/Hub game: Strangely, I also played in a game like this! (readers, yes, it was the same game) One of the campaign rules was that, in order to match the power level seen in the stories, all PCs had to have *both* a broad competency

in something that has nothing to do with psychic abilities, and should *also* have some useful psychic ability. So my PC had "Gadgeteer" as her broad competency, with "Defensive Psi" as her psychic ability, giving her broad defense against telepathic attacks but no offensive use of psionics...well, not unless someone attempted a psi probe or attack against her, anyway. Whereas your character had "medic" as your broad competency, rendering you an incredibly good doctor, and ... I don't actually remember his psychic ability. [leaves the room and goes to talk to Lisa in person]. Ok, my PC was named Jealousy Jones. Lisa's was Dr. Marius Lex. His psychic ability was empathy—I think projective and receptive. IIRC, PCs were *also* required to own their own spaceship, but that was mostly so the GM could run a game regardless of how many, or which players showed up to a game.

Re games that assume players will play sub-optimally. I mean, in my world, this is known as "players compensating for a broken system by pretending it isn't. We ran into something similar with the realtime diplomatic game Icehouse (played with the Looney Labs Pyramids system; in fact, the pyramids were created for the game rather than the other way around) for a while. See, the original rules didn't specify any time constraints to the game; it went until all the pieces were played. People came up with a play culture that talked about some kinds of play as "cool" and other kinds of play as "not cool" in order to socially punish play that was antithetical to little stuff like "the game ending", and that did work to a degree—it really is a very diplomatic game, so pissing off the other players could easily get you frozen out of the diplomacy, plus early play culture involved building a complicated structure in which, while it was a mix of attacks and defenses, people would generally be able to, if they played well, get a defender that couldn't be attacked, which was good for their long term prospects.

However, while "coolness" is still part of play to an extent, this broke down rather precipitously when one new and very talented player realized a few things:

1. All things being equal, defending is better than attacking.
2. Despite other factors, playing your pieces later is almost always a huge advantage.
3. Nothing in the game forces you to play any pieces at all, at least before the last minute (I started playing competitively shortly after this, so I'm not sure whether timers weren't used at all or whether they were public timers just to get people to get a move on).

He ended up winning a major tournament through a mix of good diplomacy, good defensive play, and the at the time original strategy of playing as many pieces as possible as defenders, very late in a game, and the game, after a few iterations, switched to using *hidden* timers so nobody playing would know exactly when the time would run out and would at some point have to play pieces just in case the timer was running a bit short this time, because play culture just isn't enough to cover a broken system, even if it can be *part* of what keeps a game fun.

I didn't remember that Dracula failed so hard on hypnotizing Hedy Lamarr that he didn't realize he'd failed—that's hilarious!

Re my saying larps when I meant RPGs regarding Dextlite: I mean, I want both! But I meant rpgs, yes; I probably had larps on the brain.

Mark A. Wilsno: I think what the weapon masteries do in 2024 D&D is add in a bunch of capabilities that had previously been locked behind feats that make different weapons feel a bit different, along with fixes to existing mechanics (particularly dual wielding, which really needed it), plus giving something unique to the martial weapon-using classes that wouldn't go to members of other classes who just happened to know how to use a weapon. But yeah, it's still a bit clunky—not

so much in play, since you only need to remember the special rules for the weapons you use, but enough.

I missed that they flipped back to Greyhawk for the default setting; an interesting journey given that it was the default setting in D&D3, then they switched to Forgotten Realms for a whole two editions.

I haven't played it, but Alice is Missing continues to be a really interesting-sounding remote LARP!

Pickup for D&D2024 is interesting. I haven't bothered picking up a copy, but that's largely because I *did* spend a fair bit on 2014 books and was feeling tapped out, plus as I'm in campaigns with someone with a Masters subscription I can just use their books as long as they keep the sub live, so Wizards is still getting paid. And since we're largely using 2024 in every game (with 2014 material for stuff that hasn't been reprinted yet), I do intend to buy some new books when they interest me.

Jim Vassilakos: I never know what to make of the flirting between Josepheen and Plankwell. Is it titillation? Training/contest in the guise of titillation? A bit of both?

Plankwell's maneuver to avoid Sidara's awkward apology/turn it into a really gentle reprimand that resolved the issue was really smooth. Well done, Conrad.

Your describing the Squire as rankling lower than a Captain in the navy while Lady Alise ranked him (and thus couldn't bow to him) sent me briefly down a Traveller OoP (orders of precedence) rabbit hole. I take it the issue is that while Alise isn't titled (and thus gets Lady for her family), that she's still a High Noble, and thus, even without having [yet] inherited her mother's Countess title, still technically outranks a mere Captain in the OoP?

I'd assume that the other issue with Sidara mimicking Plankwell's bow (aside from, apparently, a gender difference) is that, since she is *not* a Captain, that according to protocol everything she does should show more honor than he does—her curtsy should be a touch more deep than his bow (or I'll guess that that's the main gender difference, though if she's in military dress I'd expect that a bow would be expected unless her uniform included a skirt, since skirt/no skirt is the main difference between the different honors; interestingly the Renaissance seems to have used the same honors for both genders, but women *could* abbreviate it since the outfits of the time didn't show their feet; I don't know exactly when things changed but I observe that as men's costume shifted more towards trousers and away from tunics and skirted jackets, their honors have shifted to be bows rather than the earlier bent-knee honors), thus will come across as somewhat rude? Regardless, she needs some more training for her rôle!

Squire Durami is a telepath? Well, that's an interesting surprise! Wait, and Alise is? Well, how common is psychic ability in the nobility, anyway?

Re the Big Reveal: Well, you gotta tell him anyway! Given how much this campaign is about Psychic Nonsense, he was going to find out the nobles were in the game eventually. And after all, he still doesn't know who the sides are.

Re insanity/san loss in Call of Cthulhu: Obviously, a lot of it comes down to Lovecraft's own neuroses, prejudices, and fragility. But I'll argue that the "curious" mental fragility of Call of Cthulhu PCs (or Lovecraft humans in general) is part of the genre. Of course, you'll also get san loss based on things that can break people down in the real world: Violence, unexpected bloodshed, loss, etc. But, I think it's a core tenet of the subgenre that human minds are much less solid and under our control than we think, and that as such, encountering something that challenges our understanding of the world can shake that foundation or even disrupt it.

As such, the issue with "seeing something that shouldn't exist" is that it makes us question our understanding of the

world. Mostly, this won't actually cause a break—seeing someone who looks like Elvis? Even if you fail a san role ("there are lots of Elvis Impersonators and this is probably one of them") to brush it off, it will probably only cost you one san and not risk insanity. But multiple shocks, one after another (say, you see Elvis, and Marilyn, and Cary Grant appears to be here, and they're all real, and none of them seem to be impersonators, and YOU DON'T SEEM TO BE DREAMING)? You're going to start wondering what's going on. Can you even tell whether you're dreaming or not? Is permanent death/aging not really a thing and you never knew?

Those of us who aren't research scientists don't often encounter things that shake our sense of the world as we thought we knew it, so it can be somewhat hard to imagine what happens next. But if it's anything like going into a manic (or hypomanic?) attack, it can tip one over the border of sanity for a time.

Google does not (unless they are massively in breach of contract, which brings with it far more risks than not happening to misuse customer data) train their AIs on your data. They expressly say they don't, and there would basically be no upside in doing so—plus they would inevitably get caught. There are places for paranoia when dealing with technology, but this isn't one.

Now, it's possible (more likely, actually) that someone else is spying on Google data and using it to train an AI! While Google's lawyers would strenuously argue against training AI on customer data in direct contradiction of both European law and also what their own contracts say they will do, security breaches are almost inevitable. Of course, after the various other breaches they've suffered, they presumably try to make sure customer data isn't available for this kind of thing and that any breaches don't leak more than a handful of customer's data (if any), but the hardest breach to predict is the next one, so you never know.

While I don't have the objections to them that you do, I admit that I prefer adventures that don't start as "the PCs get a job" to those that do. Fortunately for me, that seems to be pretty common in my circle—if you look at, say, the three Thursday D&D games, one is Strixhaven where the PCs don't get jobs; they get class assignments, one is Starjammer where the PCs mostly wander around following up whatever plot hooks they want; the few "jobs" they've gotten were highly customized to them (for instance, when my PC showed up to the central cathedral of their god, Laros, having been acknowledged as Laros's Messenger, to offer to "sort things out" as they'd been asked to by an Archon they were trying to get a favor from, the clergy went "oh, good, here's a problem you can solve for us"; of course, it ended up being a bit more complicated than that), and Dan's Neitherworld game also mostly has the PCs do whatever they want that's within their capabilities, with one session involving them taking up a bounty to capture pirates (so I guess that's a "job" but it's one taken from a bounty board), and another having them offer to do some work for the king who pronounced them as official Heroes of the Realm (so, that's a job, but it came out of personal relationships and earned laurels, not "will some heroes go to our town and start murdering our enemies?").

Actually, that is one way to avoid the "job" issue (which seems to mostly be so prevalent because published adventures can't rely on the PCs taking any given plot hooks, so tend to fall back on "you're hired for a job"; wily GMs can break this down and customize the hook to the heroes). If you present a "job board", the PCs can decide which jobs to accept and reject. Of

course, you might weight the dice—have the board include some jobs that are obviously too ambitious for this group of heroes, and ones that seem boring or like the trouble isn't worth the offered remuneration. But even if you do so, as long as you're willing to let the players surprise you, you'll get a better game out of it than "you are hired for a job"—and clever GMing can still stack the deck a bit and have more jobs on a board than is obvious lead to the main plot that you've prepared, as the same problem might plausibly have lead to multiple spin-off issues such that even if different PCs decide to pursue different "jobs," they might still end up embroiled with the same big plot at the end (and a solid and creative GM might mix this up; have it clear how many heroes are needed for each job and assume that most of the time, most jobs PCs take individually will be side plots and not converge. And then you can surprise the players when you set up a board where many/most of the jobs do converge and it becomes a whole thing.

Re psycho-evolution of morality: I would say that Dan's "evil" characters are often misunderstood or come from cultures that we would consider "evil" (and, in fact, if we look at history, there are a LOT of cultures that our modern sensibilities would consider "evil"). Exposed to more socialized cultures, whether from the PCs or other "good" cultures, and likely with some foundations of their worldview eventually in splinters (either from losses or seeing PCs unlikely success), why wouldn't some of them change their attitudes? But yeah, Dan's a smart guy (I mean, he worked as a PI for a while) and an excellent GM and co-player.

ryct Brian Misaszek on how RPGs lead to us researching esoteric topics and learning all kinds of things: I can think of one hobby like it: History! But oddly, trpgs are a bit more accessible than actual history as a hobby (although the two hobbies are certainly synergistic, as seen various GMs or designers who are also historians, amateur, or professional). Even when a GM is not running a game that is set in our history, historic knowledge and practice can produce a more nuanced, richer game if properly used.

From Timothy: we got a correction of "xandering" -> "jayquaysing", but just in case the answers weren't sufficient: Jennell Jaquays was an early D&D designer known for maps and dungeon design, and the term was coined to refer to the design pattern Jayquays used (Jennell was trans so many of these maps/dungeons were published under another name, but the 'Jayquays' name remained the same through transition), where the dungeon, and paths through it, are made non-linear by providing multiple survivable paths through the dungeon and its inhabitants. The term was initially identified and coined by Justin Alexander, who had decide (for reasons you can find on his site) to call it "xandering" (he originally used a different term). Other people object to that and prefer to call it "jayquays" (I agree, but I don't feel as strongly as some people on the topic).

In any case, if one wants to stay out of the morass entirely, one could just talk about "making dungeons/adventures non-linear". Other places one could look for this stuff are Jaquays's wikipedia page and Justin Alexander's site. Some links that came up on my brief search: <https://bumblingthroughdungeons.com/jaquaying-a-dungeon/> <https://thealexandrian.net/wordpress/13085/roleplaying-games/xandering-the-dungeon> https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jennell_Jaquays

Comments on E&A #4

Cover (Warwick Goble): Thank you, the mermaid cover art was gorgeous! Though I admit, I'm confused about the comb's direction. Fortunately, her hair has a mind of its own and saves us from the "no pornography" rule.

Brian Rogers: I hope your daughter is doing well in school! And that she emails/messages/calls (who uses a phone to call?) frequently.

Re B/X game: Hee, cat familiar homebrew! I'm not sure how the character manipulates objects, but I assume magic is

probably involved.

The hacks to B/X are intriguing! The HP rules are very simple but also give the characters a much greater degree of survivability than original B/X between the helping rules and the predictable damage.

That human recruitment ability is amazing but I love it. IT does mean that all human characters benefit from having a high charisma more than others do, I think?

The magic hacks you're using sound amazing and I want to see/steal them. In general, there are a lot of really cool design ideas you have here and I think it's worth writing them down; they seem a lot looser than most OSR games I've bothered to read, while still hitting the essential vibe of loosely structured, risky, exploratory adventures.

Re loner badasses: Yup! Well, and/or the player playing the loner needs to sign up for "I am playing a character who is used to solving problems alone, but this is because they are broken/they pretend they don't need anyone but that's to protect a vulnerable heart, etc; stuff that has the character pulling back and acting like a loner without the player acting like an asshole. As I have said before, the main issue here is that the players who usually don't play loners are the ones who can play this vibe well, while players who usually want loners want to be super powerful and solve problems alone as the main character.

Re original Monks and Mahjongg: Hah! It's hard to understate how popular was among certain segments of America in the 70s or so.

Re single player Gumshoe: I think it better to think of the single player games as a jumping off point for a different kind of game, inspired by "single player Gumshoe" as an inspiration to do new stuff with the system, rather than it being a limitation on the system. There's nothing stopping someone from running regular gumshoe single player, but the challenge/clock system in One-2-One games does create a really different vibe than a typical gumshoe game (and would even if the system were expanded out to a multiplayer game), and while the exception-based conditions were introduced for one 2 one, they quickly migrated out to be used for Yellow King and probably other newer games.

Mind, early Gumshoe games probably don't work for one player well, but that's because the refresh rules were too punishing. Later games (mostly Kevin Kulp's) are much less punishing and probably work fine for one player games.

Mark A Wilson: Monk/Barbarian: I can't say I can see how that combination would work well, despite both classes being melee specialists, given the lack of synergy between their respective unarmored AC features (barb uses 10 + con + dex, monk uses 10 + Wis + Dex, and you can't use both at once) and their respective main damage features (barb gets advantage on Str attacks when raging and can attack with big weapons; Monk is usually built to attack with Dex for big damage. And both classes need Dex to get decent unarmored defense, so the stat dependencies are going to be really hard to manage, but monk loses almost all their class features if they wear armor.

But, I guess the Monk doesn't *have* to use Dex to attack. So I'd guess your monk/barb is built with Str primary, doesn't wear armor, and has some investment in Dex and either Con or Wis (I mean, you need Wis to multiclass with Monk). You'd have a very low unarmored AC for a monk, with so much investment in Str, but getting to combine monk and barbarian damage features might make up for it, especially with rage there to blunt the extra blows you take with resistance to all weapon damage. And yeah, unlike monk/wizard, it doesn't exactly have anti-synergy; monk gives extra mobility to the barbarian; barbarian provides damage resistance to the monk, so while the MAD (multiple attribute dependency) is in full force here and you *really* want to score a stat boosting item like an Amulet of

Health if you can, there's a lot of potential here.

An interesting alternative build would be to go heavy on Dex, Wis, and Con, but keep Str low (probably at 14 since it needs a minimum of 13 to multiclass). This helps avoid some of the inevitable MAD and lets you maximize your AC either by focusing on Wis and Dex or Con and Dex, but you lose a lot of the barbarian contributions to damage—you get survivability from Rage but making Dex attacks, you don't get to use a lot of other barbarian damage features. But the nice thing about this approach is that if you ever *do* get your hands on a belt of Giant Strength, you'll be a monster; your effective Str will jump up to 21 or more for just the price of attunement, and suddenly your rages will start contributing impressively to your damage.

I'd be curious to read your ideas (if any) for punching up the action in Brindlewood Bay. I didn't have an issue with mostly improvising a fight scene after things (inevitably) went south after we solved the mystery in our own (effective) one-shot, but I don't disagree that the options in "night" scenes don't give you a lot of guidance; mostly the GM goes hard in any opportunity (or should) and then players have the responsibility of putting on crowns (which burn long term resources, but what else are they for?) to undo the horrible thing that *seemed* to happen to their character [quite possibly right before going to commercial?] and explain how their character survived and maybe even came out on top.

Clark Timmins: I appreciated the idea of using stamp images to inspire cryptid monsters! Real echoes of early D&D using plastic toys for inspiration.

Roger BW: Re modern games not having "rule zero" being a bad thing: I disagree, of course. Rule zero is ultimately a statement that the GM is not merely the referee but the ultimate dictator over the game, empowered to not simply make rulings, but change or ignore the rules at a whim, with, or without, notifying the other players first. As such, as a general rule it's intolerable to me, as is the notion that it's required in order for the best games; the GM is merely one player in a game, albeit one with different responsibilities than others, and there is no longer any presumption that the GM is even the player with the most mastery at the table, much less worthy of the unlimited trust that "rule zero" implies.

There are a few things bundled into "rule zero" that are not always examined. The first, and I think most important is an assumption that the GM is not simply the referee, but the game designer—as Arneson was, as Gygas was. And yes, obviously if the GM is also in the process of designing a game in progress, they're going to need to be able to change the rules on the fly—not simply because that's necessary for the best games, but because that's how it works when the play is also testing the rules for eventual publication; if the GM is also the game designer, they're going to need the authority to change their own rules when they seem to deserve it.

But another is the idea that *no* set of rules can fully encapsulate a game, *and* that a good game has to involve hiding what's really happening in the game from the players. I do not, in fact, believe this.

For the first, what kinds of mechanical improvisation is needed depends a lot on what the rules actually involve. Are they fairly generic rules that mostly exist to negotiate ideas from the players? Then they probably don't need new rules to be made up on the fly. Are they genre-emulating rules that are intended to map to the fictional world? Then they probably *do* need new rules to be made up on the fly, but it's easy enough to specify a format for this—for instance, basically all PBtA games have the concept of "custom moves" with the GM empowered to make up a new custom move whenever it's needed, monster design generally involves making up new moves (whether it's D&D or Gumshoe) for the monster to use, etc. But as long as a move is

within the players realm at all, there's no reason they can't know it exists.

For the second, the idea that the GM should "fudge" and that the game should accept that the GM may "fudge" is based around a really hard to untangle set of contradictions. Central in it is the idea that the game isn't simply competitive, but that a coherent story (or at least player fun) is an important aspect of the game. Which, well, I agree with. But the "just fudge" school—which you do actually need to do if you want to prioritize player fun/character continuity and/or the game feeling like a story, and still use D&D style rules without modification ignores that we've had decades of development in rules that don't require fudging for satisfying experiences that both produce good games and produce good stories (and also don't randomly kill PCs "because the dice said so.").

Of course, you *can* effectively run a "rule zero" game with the GM orchestrating things behind the curtain, making whatever changes/fudges they need to to keep things moving well and when knowledge of the calls might hurt player fun (say, they had to make a 00 on d100 to survive, and the GM rolled behind the screen, saw it was a 35, and decided that was good enough so just lied), take their secrets to their death. It works—unless you get found out, of course, in which case who knows how it will go?

But I submit that while buying into "magic" where the magician never tells you how the trick works is a valid way to play (as long as everyone does on some level buy into it, that is), it's not the only maximally functional and fun RPG play. Just like we've learned that the "house" at a casino doesn't need to cheat to make money; they just need to set the odds correctly, the "house" at an RPG can provide fun and challenge and all that good stuff by picking rules that match how they actually want to play and then delivering on that; I've done it and it works fine, whether it's D&D where characters lives are only on the line in situations where that makes any sense at all, or Fate run by a GM strong enough to project a real-feeling game world over the very abstract rules (which, yes, has some really hard dials the GM can crank behind the scenes to make different kinds of scenes feel really different, despite a very generic rules set where it feels like all the rules are out in the open; I can talk about that some other time).

There's also the assertion that modern games don't involve the GM improvising stuff on the fly. This doesn't match my experience—even without a "rule zero" in the latest D&D (and I'm not sure that's the case), D&D 4e and 5e involved a whole section on "improvising a roll when the player tries to do something the rules don't cover", plus, of course, info on custom monsters that gives the GM free reign, which basically covers everything in most "rule zeros" other than "I've decided that the rules don't matter and I can do what I want" at the extreme end. I do get irked a bit by people deciding that *anything* a GM does in D&D that isn't from published material is "homebrew"—custom classes, subclasses, feats, monsters, and magic items? Sure. But what's a "homebrew adventure?" Isn't that, just, like, an adventure? What's homebrew about it if you make up your own NPCs, draw your own maps, and run your own dungeon and towns? Isn't that, like, the default?

TLDR: I think you can run the best games running basically with the rules everyone agreed to, with any rules changes being above board and agreed to by everyone, and any places where the GM makes stuff up being in places where this is expected by the rules, and I'll happily fight anyone who says differently. But that doesn't mean everyone uses their tools well, of course.

Lisa reminds me that I should correct myself saying we had *no* seams running with Blades (Scum and Villainy); we certainly had *some* seams. But I think that things basically worked as intended; every new-to-us system will have moments

where we have to go "ok, what now?" but those become less frequent as you learn a system and get more used to it.

Regarding being cautious in Blades...the system does ask you to make rolls with pretty marginal odds of success, doesn't it? On the other hand, it rewards you for it if you trust the GM no to screw you too hard—experience is largely gained by making "desperate" rolls, and (as we often forget) the players can make rolls to mitigate consequences when the GM responds to a failed roll, so you actually get two chances most of the time to not mess things up too badly. // And yeah, while I find some of the playbook arcs to be a bit tired after even one full Masks game and really want some ways to mix things up bit more, the overall approach to superpowers in Masks is, despite being abstract, quite true to how comic books are written, and as a consequence, how stories in comic books often flow. We make fun of "power scaling" fans for a reason, after all.

Re Tsuro: I liked Tsuro of the Seas, but it's certainly a more finicky "advanced" version. I also got to try a third Tsuro version at Gencon in, I dunno, 2019 I think, but I've not seen it in play after that. Certainly playing with the base set is very "clean" and it does what it says on the can, but I don't mind variants as well, as long as they produce a reasonably short game and a clear endgame. Maybe it was Tsuro: Phoenix Rising? Regardless, I don't consider Tsuro a party game (because I like it?) but it does meet the goals of being a very simple game that serves up to 8 players well (it has player elimination but is also short enough that that doesn't matter that much, and player skill can be used to mitigate your likelihood of being eliminated before your next turn in many situations before the endgame).

I've talked a lot about what I like about CoC 7 (I really like spending luck, "pushing" rolls and the assumptions that go into allowing this, and self-help for regaining sanity, and the change to combat of better degree of success beats worse degree (less happy about most opposed checks going to the higher roll rather than higher margin on tie, but you can't have everything), and the old bad dodge rules being replaced with "fight back" vs regular defense), but I certainly haven't read everything and don't know much about the chase rules; Lisa backs you up on them being a mess.

In general I prefer the Gumshoe approach to loosely sorting different kinds of rolls into a few broad categories (so Gumshoe uses contests, which are bad, combats, and complex tests for unopposed rolls I think), and then just deciding for a given kind of thing which type of situation it falls into (including deciding that sure, usually chase scenes are contests, but this one's actually using a different structure for Reasons). Having specific rules for every situation you can think of is just screaming for a different situation to come up you didn't design, leaving the GM on the spot to decide whether any of your super specific rules work or whether they need to make something up [whereas if a designer just reuses the same 3-4 systems for everything it's pretty clear how to adapt one for a new system, especially if they pull the curtain back a bit).

Re magic shops: I think magic shops make some sense for commodities, but it's worth the GM having a sense of their world and how the economies of these things work, particularly if they're letting PCs craft the same magic items for time and money, because it should always be cheaper in money to craft things yourself than to buy something off the rack (but, of course, PCs don't have unlimited time). For other items, while I appreciate the ability to balance the scales between PCs by purchasing a particularly useful magic item, it does rather ruin the mystique; a better approach for this kind of game would be to let the players keep "wishlists" of the kinds of things their characters want (which the GM can keep in mind when deciding what treasure is found either in shops or treasure, quite possibly by crafting custom items that solve PC desires in other ways than the expected ones), and rather than having magic item shops as

a regular thing, have normal antique or other shops *occasionally* have useful magic items (possibly without really knowing the true power of what they have; PCs are special) for sale that the PCs can enjoy finding and negotiating for; my most memorable "magic item shop" experience is still the time in early D&D 3.5 where the PCs found a shop with very few magic items on the shelves. Except for a "sword of stone-cutting" which was for sale for like 4,000 gp. We snapped it up and abused the heck out of it, for fun and slaughter, until the second to last session of the game; something that would never have been the same for a "stock" magic item.

Re calling the cops: Part of the question is "is this a problem that the cops can help with?" Magical beasts, summons, weird curses? No, calling the cops should not help unless, of course, you are the cops and this is your beat. But sometimes you'll have situations where the players can realize "wait a minute, the characters don't know they're in a horror movie yet" or "wait a minute, this is...a mugging and burglary situation if you ignore the spellcasting" and realize that calling the cops to deal with the mundane parts of an adventure will not only help, but also will avoid the PCs getting in trouble later for committing crimes that *could* have been avoided by having the cops *commit those crimes instead* sorry, I meant investigate and arrest the non-magical/weird perpetrators while the PCs concentrated on the parts of the problem that were strictly supernatural, quite possibly stripping the PCs main enemies of allies before things got really dicey.

I like your approach to sanity (as well as my own), but find it works better for a game like Unknown Armies where failed/hardened checks affect you in different ways (and only failed checks normally require counseling if you want to get over them) than CoC and similar systems where you're likely to need help after a really big Mythos shock. Which is to say, "the real world just doesn't matter that much" can work well for some aspects of roleplaying "having a low Sanity score," but in a game where this also implies character fragility, some of it may also be how close you are to talking in ancient Etruscan, staring at a hole in the wall for hours, or flying into a berserk rage (any of which might have a perfectly reasonable explanation, but possibly not as far as your similarly in the know colleagues can tell).

Yeah, very much agreed with you on detectable good and evil—and this is one reason I'm very happy that even The World's Most Popular Roleplaying Game has largely moved away from this.

Patrick Riley: I've mentioned this before, but the weirdest thing about the Amber system/auction is that despite that mechanic being clearly designed to get the PCs at odds...it doesn't necessarily work that way? Nothing stops you from spending extra points (at least with experience) to surpass the person who won the auction on an attribute, and the GM is directed to give much more weight to relative points spent than who is currently on top (and to top that off, elder Amberites have scores in the hundreds, far higher than the PCs will have unless they take hundreds of points of Bad Stuff, in which case they'll probably need those overpowered scores). Of course, the "default" Amber setup being a Throne War most certainly leans towards PVP (at least as much as the first few books were; we get an example of Throne War through Guns of Avalon, after all).

But beyond that, the system is...basically pretty normal. The players declare what they're doing, the GM looks at their stats and advantages and judges what happens. Nothing in that really pushes PVP, and when Lisa ran an Amber game and nobody wanted to do PVP play and instead played siblings/cousins who got along with one another? It basically just worked. If I were pitching this, I'd probably skip the auction entirely and just have the players decide collaboratively how to spend their points/how much Bad Stuff/Good Stuff they were thinking of

taking...with the proviso that coming off the jump, players could NOT have exactly the same score in a stat that someone else did (since that bit of ranking is really more for schtick dilution than anything).

As an addendum to my comments on modifying the rules mid-play to Roger above, I'll note that I have no issues with a table that decides that the randomizers they use are just a tool for the GM (or the players, whatever) to make decisions and can be overridden trivially if it turns out that they didn't make the right decision. It's just that if that's the table rule, everyone should know about it and have a chance to opine about it (and agree to it by staying at the table if by no other way).

I've always wanted to like BESM, and unlike Lisa, I really like the mechanic she most hates - that depending on genre, skill points range from 1/level 6/level (although having thought about it way too much, I'm unconvinced that if a given tranche is intended to be the Most Important Element of a game, that giving its skill 6/level is a good approach vs drilling down and giving it 3-6 skills that are 2/level each so players need to pick their line within the overall concept. E.g. if the game is about cars, having 6 Car Skills can let one person be the Speedy One, another be the Rough Terrain one, and a third be All About Improvisation, etc; make it so there are different ways to build a good driver and nobody needs to invest in all of them to be Good). But, having started a BESM MG game and had the GM (our own Avram, in fact) switch systems because he was (reasonably) unhappy with the way my use/abuse of BESM had let me build One Big Attack (at least, I think that's the reason?), I do think it needs a fair amount of mastery on the part of the GM to prevent players getting away with stuff and setting sensible limits. BESM is basically Champions Lite, which isn't something you said but still functionally true, and my impression is that the same thing is true there; the system lets you build some broken nonsense despite a nod to balance, and only the heavy hand of the GM (or at least some carefully agreed upon boundaries) is there to keep it in line.

Oddly, you list three ways to give bonuses/penalties for Unknown Armies and CoC, but while this includes UA's unique way to do this (flip-flops, that is letting you swap the 10s and the 1s), it leaves out the main restriction that CoC7 uses aside from penalty dice, which, yes, are your second method (roll multiple times, keep the best/worst): "you need a hard/critical success to do the thing you want" (which is to say, effectively a skill multiplier/divider). This is, yes, still boring compared to bonus/penalty dice or flip-flops, but it's not really the same; it's more punishing/rewarding than a percentage bump, but it also rewards a high skill more and punishes a low skill less. With "+25%", having a 01 skill means you get a 2600% increase on your likelihood of success, while having 50% skill means you only get a 50% bump. But if instead you're using a "this is really easy, roll double your skill", then having a 01% skill will mean you get a 100% improvement, and while a 100% improvement would be hard to get with a 50% skill (given that 100/00 is an automatic crit failure), bumping your skill to 100% (and your hard success threshold to %50) is pretty close. Similarly, if you have a 25% and suffer -25%, I guess you are not going to get to the goal today, while someone with a 50% would only suffer a 50% penalty. Turn that into a "needs a hard [50% of your skill or better] success" and they're affected nearly identically.

I didn't know Zweihander used flip-flops! I admit that the game being named after a sword didn't enthrall me, but I do appreciate a good die trick! This puts Zweihander's use of matches into perspective; likely the designer has read UA, given that UA also uses doubles as a critical system (or got it from another source that did the same borrowing, but I don't know of one).

Also, one could argue that Cortex's method of having you roll multiple dice and keep two of them was a variant at a general

level of the "roll extra dice" method. Though, of course, not being percentage based and having you roll different *kinds* of dice makes it decidedly different.

Using the ones die to determine success level is inspired. It has the issue that most die tricks does in that it affects different skill number very differently (for instance, a 12% skill would roll hard successes 33% of the time, not 25% of the time like our model, much less 20% of the time the way a round number skill would), but I could see not having to treat the sheet like a spreadsheet making up for it. (I mean, I have no problem dividing 2 digit numbers in my head, but I'll freely admit that I'm not all people).

Re loner RPGs in a team superhero game: It's true, RPGs are not comics, etc. But that doesn't mean that the problem with loner PCs is the genre change, an I'd argue it isn't. In a comic, the loner character reluctantly works with others, and their private actions give them spotlight time, but not generally at the cost of the other characters. We can do the same thing in RPGs...as long as the loner *player* is not the problem here.

Re D&D healing: I think I've said enough about this for this issue. Except maybe that if one wants long term damage in a D&D5 game without mucking with the rules, clearly some enemies should inflict curses that are hard to remove.

I have a love hate relationship with levels in D&D. On the one hand, it's a terrible grind. The PCs gain 5 levels; this means that their foes are going to be around 5 levels higher, and any NPCs intended to keep them in check also need to be 5 levels higher. Ho hum.

On the other hand, when used properly, leveling up lets the *scale* of the campaign change radically as the PCs go from nobodies to local heroes to regional champions to protectors of the world (hopefully). The battles get bigger; the enemies can get more variable (one day you have to deal with a single BBEG (big bad evil guy); another you have to figure out how to stop a mountain from exploding or stop a 10k strong army before it overruns an entire kingdom; higher levels really do give the PC more flexibility, so the challenges can be much higher scale and more varied as they level up, at least when the system is working). That kind of transformation, where the world and shape of the game world opens up as the PCs see more of it, can be *magical*, for the players as well as the characters.

Re D&D and "starter sets." Wizards did "player's guides" in 4e and I think learned some lessons from it—specifically, that if they print "player books" and "GM/campaign books" then the players and GMs will buy the player books while only GMs will buy GM books, and then if they want to print enough books to make the money that corporate demands, they'll end up exhausting the market. So instead, they have starter sets for new players and GMs alike, but also they put player material in every book except for the rare pure adventure, so (some) players will buy every book for 20 pages of player content and GMs can buy every book they're interested, for a more even distribution of content overall (at a cost of selling some people material they won't use, but you can't break an egg without having a reason to cook an omelet, or something like that).

John Redden: Re your feet: Oof, chilling. I hope you can avoid further accidents like that!

Particularly with the focus on political issues from some circles (multiple circles, at that), yeah, there are definitely roleplaying games focusing on the labor movement. I don't know of many, but *Red Carnations on a Black Grave*, by Catherine Ramen (Lisa was one of two editors) is about the Paris Commune, which is pretty close.

Avram Grumer: Hehe on acronyms: Gotta take up the slack from E&A not having an acronym section that is constantly out of date, after all. Those are definitely correct backronyms, too.

I think I named my PC Verity rather than Verilu? I'd have to check the character sheet; I like Verilu, though; it adds a certain amount of weird alien "that doesn't really look like English to her name.

I'm still amused that, since we started with the Starter Mission from Scum, our opening scene was, of course, pretty similar to the one Michael's group did. Of course, after the opener (even during the first session) it started to look a little different.

IIRC, we managed to get through all ships being locked down by hacking...and also by causing a massive accident as a distraction. *Then* we had the problem that the authorities were inspecting our ship and we weren't that inclined to just murder people, so Vary (who has never been able to Attune or access the way and is intrigued) ended up asking a Way Priest associated with the inspectors for info on his version of the Way—which delayed our leaving considerably but meant that he played interference (unintentionally, presumably) because he was interested in converting them, resulting in our not getting discovered or properly inspected. Once we were able to get rid of him (eventually) we departed. Or maybe we caused the accident after he left to clear our way out; I'm not entirely clear either, but Vary did have a lot of priestly literature to sort through (hmm. If her advancement path ever gives her a second indulgence, I'll have to consider giving her some variant of "way stuff" for that; her original one is "luxuries" which works fine, but being fascinated with the Way and human religion is a fun quirk.

Re Vary overspending on her luxurious lifestyle: This is one reason I don't want to just swap out her indulgence. After all, nothing says "xeno space princess": better than spending far too much in order to relieve stress. (annoyingly, Vary is narratively but not mechanically high status among her people; the "high status" aspect of Speaker is the thing you have to swap out to be a Xeno.

Re page count: 188! That PDF stapler is toast. In all fairness, this is why I argued for having a maximum page count for the APA—absent some kind of maximum, we're going to exceed some people's reading time/tolerance for the month, which means some people won't read the whole APA (maybe even me; we'll see; I'm on track to catch up considerably this month). But while I like the feel of an APA where many people read the whole thing (more or less) I am intrigued at how things will change as we get more people—and whether we level off at some point. Exciting!

The difference in pronunciation between *Jamais Vue* and *Jamais Vous*: It's even more subtle if you don't speak French and pronounce them like an American! I'm not sure on the grammar of the name, either—of course, conceptually "Jamais Vous" would be "never you" while "Jamais Vue" would be "never -seen-. But I don't know whether either is idiomatically correct French; sentence fragments are harder to judge overall in any case.

Re contributing to A&E I think I sent my zine in by modem twice. After that, Lee was online enough that I could email the text in Lee's special format—or later just email a link to a URL where I'd put up structured HTML.

Dylan Capel: Re double columns and paper vs digital: I mean, I'm sticking with double columns because it's how my layout is already set up and also lets me write more more comfortably, but I have no intent to print the APA out. I've been reading on computer—if I had a *slightly* larger [than 11"] tablet I might read on tablet (and when I'm tired I'll sometimes comment on computer and read on tablet), but as it is the APA has a bit more scrolling than I like on a tablet's screen but much less on a 17" laptop's.

Re BoB (Belonging Outside Belonging) online: A spreadsheet was what we used for our Grand Guginol (which

uses the NDNM system) run. And yeah, we did exactly that; one sheet for the Forces, one for the characters, and we'd keep track of tokens on the character sheet and write our names down to claim Forces as we picked them up or passed them off to other people.

Jim Eckman: Re Norton setups: I think her fantasy setups (witch World, mostly) are a bit different than her fantasy setups; the SF ones are more "bandits attacked and I was left alone after everyone else died/fled on a wild world with just the bandits, wild beasts, and mysterious ancient ruins for company" while the fantasy ones, well, *still* have forerunner ruins a lot of the time, but if there are bandits, they're probably a small gang, not a bunch of mob (whatever she called her space mob) thugs, and the big threat is much more likely to be some buried Dark magic. (hmm. From my vague memories, Forerunner ruins are dangerous, sure, but ultimately benign a lot of the time, while if you run into ruins in the Witch World, it's like 95% likely that they hold Evil, with a small chance that they hold evil *and* good and you'll get some help rather than having to hope your psychic/magic ability is enough to solve the problem on your own.

In any case, another reason I remember Norton fondly wrt gaming is that her books are chock full of sense of wonder.

Michael Cule: Re humans interbreeding with orcs and whether it's a Tolkein thing: I mean, it's kinda a Tolkein thing? Sauraman's Uruk-Hai were expressly an experiment at making stronger/taller orcs by including Men in their ancestry, if memory serves.

The idea that the different races of Yrth (as an explanation for cyclical fertility) is as good as many, but...it's not really necessary. Cyclical fertility is a real thing we encounter on Earth. It's a nice observation that (usually) if two species can interbreed, they're the same species and so if one can interbreed with another "species" than the other can as well, and it's even true a lot of the time, but it's not *always* true. Presumably, this is because it's simply not true that only members of the same species can breed. Instead, a better way to phrase it would be that organisms that have frequently procreated in the past will generally be cross fertile in the future; that's most often the case with the same species, but obviously it remains true for generations after a new evolution speciates, and can remain true for millennia or longer if two species started out as the same species and never really lost the "knack" of producing offspring. As for ring species, well, if two species of birds were originally closely linked and still meet one another to court one might expect that they would remain cross-fertile and they do. If a third species meets one species but not the other (because, say, the island they live on is adjacent to the one but not the other), it might make sense that over generations they'd remain fertile with only the species they actually meet, and so, apparently, it is. So if one wants a Yrth where humans are cross fertile with a number of species who aren't cross fertile with one another, the answer would seem clear—Humans, for whatever reason, are much more frequent travelers than the other species, and so tend to remain cross fertile both in-species and with all the other species they come into contact with (except, apparently, orcs, which presumably don't come into contact with humans where they evolved in situations convivial for friendly relations). But the other species don't travel nearly as much; they tend (except very recently, on Yrth) to remain isolated, so even if they are distant relatives, they've not retained cross-fertility.

This would, I suppose, imply that if there *was* a "master race" it's a close relative of humans, if not a human species itself. But it could also be that, say, Humans had a millennia-old dimension hopping civilization while the other species were still dimension-bound, and thus, other human-descended species (or descended from a common ancestor that Humans inherited their

antediluvian dimension-hopping civilization.

I tend to talk a lot (sometimes) about how I think that the system you play with is a contract of play, and therefore, ideally, everyone should have a chance to agree to it—explicitly, when deciding on changes, or implicitly, when someone with authority says they're changing something (and people can leave if they don't like it) or when the group goes "we're playing GURPS, 9th edition" or whatever and people opt into that game.

I don't think the same thing about the world a game is played in. Of course, some systems and structures have the entire group create a world; this can work well for some styles of play where the worldbuilding is a kind of collaborative process. But by the same token, in a game where exploring and discovering the world is a core part of play, one will (and does) expect that secrets, and players who make up and own the secrets and reveal them over time to other players would be a key element of play, and, in fact, it is. It's hard to agree to a contract of play you don't know, which is why I generally think people should have a chance to know the rules they're playing by (at least, the ones they are using and generally how they work), but you don't have to agree to every little detail of a game to agree to play it, and, in fact, if you want an element of discovery and mystery, you have to not know these things.

Re the fight ending with the *enemies* making their Divine Intervention rolls. Wait, they get those too? That's not fair! (cool, though).

Very much enjoyed the writeup with interest, as usual.

Re dividing up HP into Physical and Luck:

Congratulations, you've reinvented V&V (or LoA, now that I think on it), though they used "Stamina" for the non-body part of HP. But seriously, I think the problem is that of course, we *could* use systems that divided damage all sorts of ways, and sometimes we do. But the reason that games will tend to use more abstract systems for damage is that, well, it's easy - every way we divide up damage gets more and more complicated. Personally, I rather like the Fate approach—Stress is completely abstract and clears between scenes; damage is specific and comes with a rating that tells you how long its likely to stick around. But, of course, Fate is one of those games a lot of people will tend to have problems with.

Which...I had a long discussion with Lisa on why you tend to have problems with a lot of "modern" roleplaying games that seem good to you at first and then feel...thin. I think the core issue is, in fact, with the games. For the most part. A lot of modern games aren't *really* roleplaying games. Not as GURPS and Call of Cthulhu and even D&D 3rd edition are games—or even Fate, actually, though people can have similar issues with Fate depending on how it's interpreted and run. Instead, they're...mechanics that are taking the place of a full game. Lets take Forged in the Dark games. How do you start a FORged game? Figure out how the investigators end up in a mission. The bulk of the rest of the game is focused on playing out that mission. Sure, there's a bit of attention given to stuff that happens between missions, but that's just it—it's "between mission stuff"—do the cleanup, figure out how upkeep goes, and back into the grind with the next mission. And a lot of other games are similar—Hillfolk is a thin game wrapped around a social negotiation system, Gumshoe an investigation (and spotlight management) system, most superhero games a mission/problem generation system.

Which is fine if you've bought into the core premise of the game to the point that you're *fine* doing that all the time. I mean, by the heuristic I'm using, D&D wasn't a "full roleplaying game" until, at best, the Wilderness Survival Guide published in 1986. Before that, sure, you had some core rules for what to do between dungeons—City encounter tables, rough wildness travel rules (don't worry, you'll never have more than one encounter a day), guidelines for training, etc, and, I guess, Rule Zero. But

ultimately, the game was quite clearly about characters exploring a dungeon and there was little to no guideline for what to do if they, instead, decide they want to start solving murder mysteries, doing fantasy-island-like interventions, or hosting cooking contests for passing guests (well, unless the guests were monsters and mostly needed to be killed, or at least subdued). But, ok, so you're running this mechanic and it expects you to be running a Heist Movie all the time, and well, you don't want to. So, what next? Well, one approach I guess is to run another game. But we tend to get attached to the characters and storylines we come up with; that's why, I think, many people gravitate towards more generalist games, even while the specialist games really are (often) better at doing their specific one activity.

Another approach is to hack everything into a game's mode of play. You're playing *Blades in the Dark* and rather than having the characters go on a mission, the narrative says they should be planning a wedding instead? Ok, so I guess the "mission" is the wedding! Plan out the basics of how people want the wedding to go and their core approach, roll the approach, and away you go. Honestly, that kind of approach can work for a lot of things that don't feel at first like the game's core activity, though it has its limits.

A third approach is to just hack the game to include other modes of play. A game is focused around a particular activity and play is drifting into doing other stuff for a while? Make up some mechanics to handle the other activity. Honestly, this is often easier than it looks—for instance, PBTA games often look hellas narrow, with moves and character definition wrapped around whatever activity and genre the game was designed for. But while this isn't untrue, the games include custom moves for a reason; there's a whole structure laid out for how to hack the game even while it's being played. Of course, as mid-game game design (even if, as I prefer, you bring the players into the fold and have them help design your new creation), this can be quite risky—even if the game has handles for this kind of play, and much more so if it doesn't.

But I do, in fact, hope that at some point this era of super-specialized games will take a break, leaving room for more games that, sure, are particularly good at some genres/scene types, but are more designed to move beyond their core box. The era of hyper-specialized games happened for a reason—beginning in places where people were teaching one another to design games (particularly games that were actively different from what had gone before), and teaching people to start out designing the thing you most want to happen, which is great—but eventually most students get to (eventually) graduate.

Myles Corcoran: C. J. Cherryh's Hani may have originated in the first Chanur story novel in 1981 (the Chanur wikipedia page states briefly that a short story prefigured the first novel, but provides no details and a quick wider search turns up nothing other than a later Reader's Digest abridged edition (1983), so I'm duly skeptical), but Niven's warlike Kzinti, also space-faring cat people, first appeared in the delightful "The Warriors" in 1966 (which you reference in your comments to Roger BW; it's the one with the unarmed ship with a powerful signal laser). It probably wasn't even close to the first appearance of a feline alien race, either.

I was very confused to see in your comments the note that you didn't include a Mausritter writeup—after a quite nice (if somewhat short) Mausritter writeup! But yeah, while Kzinti are *also* highly sexually dimorphic, it's not in the way that the Chanur (and probably other feline races expressly based on lions) are, with highly intelligent and dominant female hunters, but sadly in a much more tired and honestly kinda stereotypically sexist way, with the female Kzinti mostly existing as sub-intelligent "breeders". *yawn*; I'd been fortunate to forget that detail; at

least he has intelligent female Kzinti (Kzinretti) on Ringworld.

Tian Deng had some interesting mission/structural mechanics that did support space faring down on their luck "heroes?"—the PCs start out in debt, with each mission reducing their debt somewhat [but not necessarily enough], and there are some interesting details about the ship systems that can facilitate wacky sessions like the Cowboy Bebop adventures set on the ship (like the hallucinogenic mushroom episode if people are so inclined. The "found family" approach can also help foster a closely knit, if argumentative crew—although see my comments to Michael on how I think tightly focused games may not be the Roleplaying Game's final form.

I don't think that "a list of things your PC is bad at" is a problem for skill-based system so much as it's a huge issue for many percentile-based systems. Compare, for a moment, GURPS (as much as I have misgivings about it) and Call of Cthulhu. In GURPS, your skills start out at at your related stat -1, and your stats will generally start out (at minimum, unless you are *expressly* saying your character is bad at something) at 10. So at 9, the lowest skill you're likely to have will have 2/9 chance of success. More likely, you'll have at least a 13 in a stat you want to be decent at and buy a +1 in the related skill, granting you a 14, which will succeed more than 7/8 of the time. Pretty good, without a big investment; ignoring the points you spent on the stat, you spent like 1-4 character points on the skill, if memory serves, and if you're building a modern character have plenty more where that came from. Everything you bother to list on your character sheet will probably be a skill you're good at; even a 13 is pretty good and a 14 or higher is great.

Now, compare to CoC. A PC built to have lots of skill might have, say, 300 points in skills. But except for a few basic skills that start with points, like Dodge or Own Language, your skills mostly start out with defaults of 1%-5%, or the rare 15%. Want to bump that up to that 87% success chance that GURPS costs you a handful of points for on a good stat? It's gonna cost you 1/4 of your budget, not leaving you a lot of points to be good at anything else.

Of course, CoC skills level up much faster than GURPS skills. The sweet spot is within 10% of 50%—take a skill in that range and in a few sessions, it will likely be shooting up to 60% and then probably 70% before it plateaus for a while before creeping up once again. But for a starting character? Yeah, that system justly can be thought of as a list of things the characters are bad at (to start).

Unknown Armies (original flavor) rings an interesting set of changes on this. It also has fairly slow skills—sure, they're based on the character's stats, but the *maximum* is the percentage stat, not the minimum like GURPS. On the other hand, because of the way UA interprets its skills, it's not that the characters are bad at things covered by their skills—just having a skill at something at 15% or higher grants an automatic success on easy checks that that skill, and to get a success (not a maximal success, but a success) on normal skill checks, you just have to roll under the stat (which is probably 60% or higher for your decent stats, and much higher for your best stats).

But for significant/stressed/combat checks? Yeah, you have to roll under the actual skill number. So UA1-2 doesn't give you a list of things you're bad at; it gives you a list of things you're fine at until you get into a combat or other high stress situation, and *then* you fall apart. About your day? Automatic successes. Get into a contest? You'll probably do fine. Life's on the line? Yeah, the characters start out terrible at that, which may be a bit, well, but it's interesting. I do consider this different than your "cop out" of only rolling when your life on the line—UA1 has degrees here, with you making rolls if you don't have the skill at a competent level even for easy checks and having a chance at a great success on regular checks if you do roll under your skill. Combined with the Madness Meters, it ends up feeling

of a piece; the characters aren't normal to start the game, but they're certainly not suited for being in an action movie, and oh, look, the credits are rolling.

Lisa mentions (I stopped to have a half hour conversation on this, which at 2AM is probably not smart, but was entertaining) that her CoC characters often don't *feel* like their skills are a list of things they're bad at. Which is true, but the causes are interesting. First, as you mentioned, GMs respond (particularly for knowledge checks) to mechanics like this by just handing out automatic successes if you have the skill at all—rather like Gumshoe does for core clues. But also, as I allude to above, Lisa plays a lot of one shots (playtesting, after all) with CoC, and you build one shot characters really differently than you do characters intended for long term play.

For one shots? The character's never really going to get better at things, and even with a starting dodge of around 20-30% and some combat skills around the same, they're only going to be able to really invest in at MOST 8 skills. So pick the 4-8 skills the investigator is good at and make sure they have solid numbers in those skills (at least 55% a lot of the time, and...starting characters have a max skill check of 75, so maybe have at least a third of those at 65% or higher, but 75% is better for the character to feel satisfying.

But for long term play, it's a little more complicated. Sure, you want to have a few skills at high numbers so the character feels decent out of the gate, but...after 3 sessions, any skill at 35% or better that you can make multiple rolls against per session will probably have gone up by 11% or more on average (it's a complicated calculation since the odds go down every time you succeed, but it's around 2 successes in 3 sessions if you roll on it enough times to succeed on a check at least once, failing to improve more than once in 3 is fairly unlikely, so that ends up being a big consideration).

I liked the Fate based Diaspora game we played, but I also found it a weird melange, using Fate 2e constructs in sometimes weird ways to accomplish its goals in ways that weren't necessarily particularly Fate-like. Which might work well for someone who doesn't like Fate that much, I suppose. I didn't remember that your group also hacked up Over the Edge to do whatever (although, of course, you played in Lisa's Cthulhupunk PBEM which used hacked up Over the Edge).

Whether I'm well enough recovered from Worldcon. Worldcon is well in my taillights no; I get to worry about other damage (like not getting enough sleep; staying up late to finish my A&E zine doesn't help much).

Re your zine formatting: With the zine title at the bottom, names in the bookmarks, and your name under the title? Yeah, I think you're good.

PUM: Oooh, pretty chateau! Yeah, it would be amazing to stage a larp in this space!

Re reading our 160///188 pages: I don't know about anybody else, but to get through in a few days? Yeah, I skim somewhat. If it were the only thing I was reading, it wouldn't be any trouble, but of course it's not, and I want to alternate reading and writing, so skimming (until I get to a section of particular interest) it is.

I have my own theories about why Lee's refunds have been inconsistent at best, and I'm not going to talk about it because it's sad. But yeah, the last thing she needs to be doing is that kind of trivial admin task at this point.

Re my birthday: Thanks! And a belated happy birthday to you as well!

Mitch Hyde: I can't say I miss the days of AD&D. I do think we've made some advancements since then, as well as a few mistakes (and see my comments on when AD&D became a "full" RPG earlier; I think this is when some OSR folks think it went south). The "Everyone runs differently!" feels like lauding

failure, but ok; I don't know anyone who ran Speed Factors by the book, certainly. Regardless, I'm happy you have fun *and* that you play games that aren't AD&D (or hopefully D&D at all) as well!

I've written extensively on the "pushed roll" in CoC7 and my opinions are basically the opposite of yours. Rather than it not letting the PCs fail, the pushed roll sets up a contract of play where the first time the PCs make a check, they will only suffer severe consequences on a crit fail, so they don't have to be too afraid to try something. And since you can't push a roll more than once or spend Luck on a pushed roll, and pushed rolls that fail *do* have consequences (well defined and foreshadowed by the GM), when the PCs do fail a pushed roll, it's interesting and exiting, unlike earlier CoC rolls where some failed rolls would have the GM ask for rerolls again and again so the adventure could continue, while others might result in a severe consequence right away if the GM sees it as high stakes.

Luck is somewhat different, but note that except in a pulp game, it replenishes very slowly—players can make a Luck experience check every session, but it works like any other experience check, so if they spend their luck very low (which can have other consequences), they'll get back some luck pretty quickly, but if it's high and they spend a pile, it won't replenish for a long time. If anything, for luck, the opposite of what you say is true—Luck is really designed for campaign play, and it doesn't really work well for one shots where there's no reason for players not to spend luck when they get into trouble. And even in a pulp game, it can take some time; players in Pulp get d10 luck every session and another d10 when they succeed on the experience check (by failing a luck check), so at most they're getting 20 luck a session even if their burn rate is much higher.

Patrick Zoch: I always like reading your board game reviews, but this time since I'm short on time I'll have to read them in more detail after commenting. I love the way Fromage's board looks like a wheel of cheese, though! And the aging mechanic reminds me of Viticulture a bit. Oh, and the board rotates? That's lovely, it is; not quite the toy value of Tzolkín, but still pretty great!

I only got to try Wyrmspan and liked it quite a bit (although it's noticeably longer than Wingspan); from your description I'm looking forwards to Finspan; the different mechanics sound fun to play with.

Mark Nemeth: I wonder where James got edges. I know Daggerheart uses a system like it, though, and, of course, player-defined skills have a long and honored history.

Re motivations: I think the key for skill checks is that knowing what the character is trying to accomplish helps you interpret the roll better—if they're trying to do a lot of damage, a critical might make sense to make a huge explosion, but if they're focused on trying to rescue someone, that's probably not a success, but some kind of terrible failure (unless it acts as a great distraction for them to get away, of course).

One advantage of using around \$400+ in audio equipment (not including the speaker system and receiver that sound is going out with; I usually don't use headphones at all, but good mics with the gain carefully set to not give the echo cancellation software much to do) is that generally when something bad happens to my sound it's my fault. And in the rare cases where it isn't, a reboot will usually help. The mixer does take up a bit of space in the living room, but if I needed that space I could put it away, and in the meanwhile it's very convenient. The setup has also gotten *notably* cleaner and easier to work with when I made a step I should have made year ago: Not using the interface I started with at all, but instead, plugging the mixer (a pro-fx 12 channel mixer)'s USB out directly into my computer, thus having one fewer place things can go wrong. Of course, that means I could and should recycle the smaller

interfaces (or at least put them in a box to gather dust and get pulled out when I need something portable), but some times, round tuits are hard to find.

Re Phoenix Dawn Command: Lisa exaggerates a bit. I think a lot of the problem is that designers tend to either over-estimate players...or over-estimate their own mechanical design skills. Its not so much that they don't expect the players to do the math as that they may not have done the math themselves and realized that the problems they thought had multiple equally valid answers really had fewer trivial "best" answers.

I'm generally happy with PCs who sometimes lose; after all, even in a heroic adventure, sometimes you need a failure to motivate you for further success (the way most games can make it harder for that arc to play out is another matter, of course). Permanent PC death is another matter, but of course it's a key element in one shot games and great at the climax of games when it feels earned and helps the PCs' victory feel earned or their failures feel painful.

Brian Misiaszek: Ok, Rhythm Savant is certainly an evocative (and powerful) talent!

I believe there might have been five years or so in there when US citizens could travel to Cuba relatively freely (after Obama declassified it as a terrorist-supporting state and before 45 reclassified it in the middle of his term), but certainly not now they can't!

Re Amber and starting new players: Yeah; my memory is that the only restriction the auction sets is that no player can spend after the auction and before the first session to have a higher stat than the player who *won* the auction (other than the player who won the auction, who can choose to add more to that ability freely if they so choose and am willing to spare the points/take Bad Stuff). But spending to beat other players, or for that matter using experience to pass the auction winner later? At that point, all bets are off. So, if the auction results in, say, Psyche, Strength, and Endurance topping out at 25 points with Warfare getting into a knife fight and going for 50, a player who missed the auction couldn't spend more than 24 points in any stat, or more than 49 points in Warfare, but they could (if they were willing to take Bad Stuff anyway, keeping in mind that they probably want Pattern as well if they're playing an Amberite) spend all 121 points on stats if they want and then take enough Bad Stuff to also buy some other stuff, to be the secret campaign villain or whatnot.

Lisa Padol: Looks like your links got messed up; the text of them points to specific pages, but the actual link goes to today's comics page, which is...ok, a bit spoilery and confusing and definitely not where you wanted to link. The thing about the Agatha/Krosp relationship is that while Krosp takes being Agatha's liege seriously, he also knows that it's a complicated relationship—that Agatha's going to prioritize being a spark and mistress of Mechanicsburg over (somewhat) the orders of her "liege". And he's quite aware that Agatha views him as a valued companion and friend (and, to an extent, pet cat) and that the world is going to view him as a curiosity, minion, and, ok, occasionally important statecat, because he's all of those things. depending on context. But the thing is, ultimately Krosp views Agatha as his subject, not simply because she suggested she could "serve" him, but because having accepted her as a companion, well *all* cats think of their people as servants; Krosp can just put it into words! Oh, here are some clickable links that lead to the right places: <https://www.girlgeniusonline.com/comic.php?date=20040317> <https://www.girlgeniusonline.com/comic.php?date=20040319>

So, as per our conversation and what I said earlier, I agree with you that every part of a game should be able to support what the game's about, but *also* the best games should also support "whatever the players want to play." Threading that

needle is something of a design problem.

Jim Vassilakos, et alia: Re the character's birthday only having a 1% chance of being within a few days: Very true. On the other hand, as per the birthday paradox, with you generating more than 10 or more character's birthdays, it was reasonably likely that *one* of them was happening in the near future—even with 10 characters, the odds of one of them *not* having a birthday in the next 2 weeks (in a standard calendar) is, um 2/3—so if you were generating more birthdays the odds of at least one hit (and in a short timeframe) was even higher. Of course, the odds of it being the main character was quite low, but it would have been surprising were it the Countess, or one of the ladies he's spending a lot of time with recently as well.

Re writup: Well, isn't this a lovely hornet's nest our protagonist has stepped directly into. *giggle* at the switcheroo being because of your color blindness, and then running an embarrassing plot because you'd rather the game match the map. Oh, but having navy personnel burn down brothels is just so entertaining! Still, waste not want not; you made a mistake, so finding it way to work it into the game is grist for the story-mill.

Looking at how you organize the APA is fascinating. It's basically the opposite of how I'd do it (or how, without consulting with me, Lisa organized SCD's files)—my preference is to use extremely simple names for each zine's file—author.pdf or author_issuenum.pdf, and then use a spreadsheet to hold any metadata I want to keep track of about the files, like any additional titles, zine length, starting page (done with a spreadsheet formula based on zine length so I don't have to rely on my own mental arithmetic; just making sure that I count the zine lengths accurately), and, yeah, if I were doing indexing, any indexing/cataloging information needed. Then, TOC and bookmarks can be generated using some scripting and the spreadsheet.

And I'm gratified to see that the error I did notice in the fourth issue—that user zoom preferences are overridden whenever they click on a link would be easy for you to fix were you inclined; just change the "fitpage" in each bookmark file line with whatever setting expressly doesn't change formatting (presumably depends on your tool), so it doesn't keep reverting whatever changes the user makes. Nice to see you're using an open source tool (albeit one that seems to be under active development, which is...good, but also bad; hopefully using unicode characters with it is less complex than doing so using Ghostscript (where you have to format them correctly for Postscript, which, being a 40 year old programming/display language and well predating the invention of Unicode, can be a touch arcane). I take it that jpdfbookmarks will *also* clear out any existing bookmarks that are already in the merged files? (or is it the merge-pdf website that does that?)

Re the value of the APA being in the community: here here.

Re orcs: think in D&D5 and 4 it's explicit that monster alignments are suggestions, so the straight up "chaotic evil" on orcs is the same as the "usually chaotic evil" in 3rd edition; it's just that 4 and 5 doesn't have an "always Y alignment" setting for monsters/NPCs like 3rd and earlier editions did. The bit about orcs being lawful evil in AD&D is interesting—I've seen some GMs use alternate orcs that were militaristic and highly disciplined, and I think that owes itself both to the Tolkein heritage (where orcs were both almost generic enemies, and clearly modeled on common -soldiers-) and an effort to make orcs something other than generic enemies, but instead a culture, however inimical, with their own culture.

Re movement in 5e: I mean, the slow movement speeds make sense in terms of combat movement; they generally work within combat. But giving some conversion so there was a reasonable heuristic for overland travel would be nice.

Re AIs exceeding our intelligence: Obviously it's possible this will happen some day. But while the current generative devices are impressive, in their way, we've yet to come up with a device with close to the real intelligence of, say, a cat (able to mimic intelligence enough to pass IQ tests? Sure; they're pattern matching devices specifically trained for that kind of mimicry at a highly sophisticated level. Able to person? Well, they're not that kind of device). As such, declaring that they'll soon be smarter than us seems a bit premature. They need to be able to walk before they can run, and our devices that *can* walk are still

decidedly unimpressive, especially if we only give them two legs.

I think you presume too much of a hypothetical Lucifer's goals. Presuming an omnipotent God and a limited (but powerful Lucifer), is his goal to unseat God? (how?) To tempt men to evil and so win their souls? To get souls, by whatever means? To act as an eternal adversary? To upend the order of the world and undermine God's unjust rule? To troll people? Each goal would imply a very different set of possible tactics and, quite possibly, resources.

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 a crypt, a barrow, and a temple.

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

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CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 88

Adventurers

Bob the Dwarf, dwarf level 1. Midget with big beard in search of an adventure.

Darius, cleric level 3. Follower of Dacron, God of Craftsmen.

Rorik, fighter level 2. A fighter.

Beorg the Gravedigger, fighter level 1. Inspired to adventure after burying several adventurers.

Hagar the Hearer, dwarf level 2. Imagine Conan as dwarf.

Ambros, cleric level 2. Follower of Aniu, Lord of Time.

Dewsnap 17th, Waterday

Sounds of butt-cheeks clapping echoed throughout the tomb adventurers were in.

Smell of burnt flesh permeated the chamber.

Hagar turned around to face the music.

Four blobs of flesh rolled from around the corner; each burning with purple flame.

Adventurers closest to them jumped on the closed sarcophagi.

Beorg the Gravedigger closed in, and immediately dispatched one of the blobs.

Seeing how easy that was, Rorik and Hagar joined in the meat spreading fiesta. Clapping sounds were no more.

"Uh-oh."

One of the sarcophagi in the northern part of the chamber opened and a heavily armoured figure stepped out. It was dressed in same ornate plate mail, topped with great helm, as were the skeletons in sarcophagi they've plundered so far.

The monster slumbered to the fireplace where purple fire burnt, dipped the sword in the flames, and took it out. Then it turned around and menacingly marched towards the party.

Hagar and Beorg bravely stood in its way. The undead guardian swung its longsword wreathed in purple flame. He struck Hagar with great might, nearly killing him with a single blow. Dwarf's wound burnt purple, as the flame left the guardian's sword. Beorg ducked just in time.

Rorik joined the fray as well, while Bob stood petrified. Darius summoned the power of Dacron; but Dacron did not heed the cries of his village priest.

The guardian continued his relentless assault, forcing the mighty dwarf to the ground.

"No!"

Beorg jumped in front of the defeated Hagar, putting himself between the plated juggernaut and half-dead dwarf. Hagar dragged himself back, just close enough to Ambros and Darius to heal him.

Guardian stomped over Beorg, slashing through him with ease. The fighter collapsed from the wounds, bracing his polearm for one final strike.

At that moment Hagar stabbed the undead menace straight through the plates; Rorik could see the skeleton inside nearly crumble! Beorg held his polearm true just long enough for the guardian to impale itself. Gravedigger smashed the remains and catapulted the skull to the other side of the chamber.

"We are quite banged up. Let's get out."

Ambros bandaged courageous Beorg while Heran Marod administered divine healing.

Three suites of ornate plate with matching shield and sword were quite heavy and required some time to extract from the 100 feet deep chute they came from.

Dubalan the Goatherd, still glistening in the dusk, greeted the party at the top.

"Yes, I know just the right place where we can sleep well! I know many such places in the area where I hide with my goats and we sleep like babies!"

And so the party found a hidden crevice sufficient for them to spend the night.

Dewsnap 19th, Fireday

Winter was almost gone; Spring just around the corner. Days were getting longer, plants were awakening, and adventurers were tomb raiding.

The party returned to the pit leading into the tomb they've broken into two days ago. In Midway Culwert, one of the finest Dwarf smiths in the region, confirmed the provenance of armours. They were ceremonial plate mails worn by royal guards in the time when Kelnore Empire still stood strong. These suits were in splendid shape because they most likely haven't seen combat. Each set of armour with matching shield and sword could be worth 500 gp and more to the right collector.

Adventurers were now back to open the remaining five sarcophagi! And so they did. Warriors would open the heavy lid while clerics would stay vigilant in case another guardian animates. They carefully handed each ceremonial suit, neatly arranging them in the tomb's antechamber.

Bob inspected the fireplace. Purple flames were not hot. They also didn't emanate any smoke. There was no chimney as one would expect in the fireplace.

The party now split to investigate stone doors to the west and east. East doors swung wide open, towards advancing Hagar, Bob, and Beorg.

A pulsating, convulsing, ten feet tall and ten feet wide mound of organs rolled out. "I'll flank it... by surprise!" Beorg announced as he ran up to the wall and waited for the abomination to come in.

Others stepped back, creating as much distance between them and the slithering horror as possible.

Sling stones were fired, penetrating the soft, slushy organs. The abomination bled profusely as the stones melted away.

Bob popped open a flask of oil, set it aflame, and then chucked it at the mound. Smell of flambeed kidneys, lungs, liver, and intestines filled the chamber.

Burning organs rolled forward and then towards Beorg, who managed to jump between the sarcophagi just in time to avoid a horrible fate.

The mound might've been disgusting, but it sure wasn't impenetrable! Adventurers peppered it with sling stones until all organs fell apart and burned to char.

Circling its remains, the adventurers went for the doors the monster came through. Forcing the stone slab open revealed a most curious sight.

Chamber filled with hundreds of skulls! Some were hanging from the ceiling, some were impaled on metal spikes, and some were simply resting on the ground. All had their mouths agape in silent laughter. And all turned to face the adventurers.

"Hear me out. I'm friendly with the undead. Allow me to go first."

Beorg carefully entered the chamber, making sure he doesn't graze any of the suspended skulls, nor to step on any of those on the ground.

Skulls were devoid of anything—no gems in their eye sockets or exploding runes in their mouth.

There were two bricked doors, one to the south and one to the east. And there was a passageway leading north, terminating with doors similar to the ones they just came through.

Gravedigger moved closer to one of the bricked door for there was some writing above them. Since he is barely literate he couldn't make much sense of it. Then he moved up north to investigate the doors.

At this moment Hagar, Bob, and Ambros walked into the chamber.

Skulls followed them.

And then they—all 463 of them—began to chitter and chuckle, whisper and yell, mutter and groan! The noise reached incredible volume, creating a sanity shattering cacophony.

Unable to hear nor think, adventurers begun swinging wildly, crushing skulls galore. Rorik smashed 18, Hagar 21, Ambros nine, Bob 15, and Beorg 19. The noise became unbearable, breaking everyone's morale but Ambros's.

The cleric continued crushing skulls as others fled for their lives.

They ran, nay, they sprinted back into the sarcophagi chamber and then through the broken sealed doors into the antechamber. There they threw themselves to the ground.

"Wait, where is Ambros! We must go back for him!" Beorg lamented.

"No way!"

The noise was inexorable, echoing throughout the tomb, like it was following these band of cowards on their way out.

And then it stopped.

Ambros appeared from around the corner, running too.

"You are good!"

"Yes!"

"Elooooooooooooouuu! You aliveeee?" Dubalan yelled from above.

"Yes, we are fine!"

"Good to hear! That was some horrific noise you made down there! I soiled myself a bit!"

"Listen, I suggest we pick up the ceremonial armour sets and get back to Midway. That way we can put them in a safe place." Ambros advocated.

"Hmm, but I'd like to rest and go back in..." Beorg advocated meekly.

"Sure, but we need to heal up and rest."

"Let's at least haul the suits up?"

Indeed, the adventures spent the rest of the day getting all five sets out of the pit. Dubalan was both yellow from sweat and brown from fear.

"I could never be an adventurer... See, I made my promise, I led you here, again, like a real professional. But I could never go down. By Mitra, my bowels gave in... How could one stand in face of such thing, I cannot even imagine!" the goatherd went on and on as he led the party to another crevice to spend the night in.

But there was no rest for the wicked. Beorg and Dubalan were the only ones to have a good nights rest. Others suffered horrible nightmares of skulls screaming and mocking them.

"Gentlemen" Ambros proposed "we haven't slept well, we are tired, and we are spell-less. Let's head back to Midway, put the armours in a safe place, and rest well."

"Aye."

Flowerbloom 1st, Airday

Midway is a small place, barely a village. Soon everyone knew about adventurers' latest finds. Lonesome Drake inn was packed by people, all seeking an excuse to take a peek at those "Kelnorian Royal Armours."

Party, on the other hand, had different plans. Everybody assembled in one of the rooms assigned to them. Armours were neatly arranged, as were the shields, swords, and a ring they recovered before.

Darius stood in the center and cast Detect Magic.

Ambros lit up.

"What...What is the meaning of this?"

"I don't know!" Ambros yelled.

"I trusted you! I trusted you!" Bob cried.

Hagar stroked his chin.

Rorik squinted.

"I wanna go back to the tomb." Beorg stated.

"Hm, I think it would be wiser to head back to Hara, put the armours in our vault, and then see what we do next." Ambros countered.

"I trusted you!" Bob cried on while taking out a piece of rope.

"Ambros, are you trying to prevent us from returning to the tomb? Or are you trying to lead us to Hara for something?" Darius inquired.

"I'm just proposing what I think is best. Why are you all acting funny!" Ambros defended himself.

"I trusted you!" Bob was inconsolable.

"Fine, let's go to Hara to stash our goods." Darius conceded. Then he whispered to others "And to get Ambros checked!"

Flowerbloom 2nd, Waterday

Hara's south gatehouse was poorly guarded when adventurers arrived. It was night time and only one guard was on the outside, and one guard on the inside. Standard arrangement was six guards on each side, plus several more on the towers.

Streets were empty, and those that were out kept to themselves. There was heavy, almost oppressive atmosphere. What has changed so much since they left, adventurers wondered.

Sleeping well, individuals splintered across the town, each on their own mission. A field of vibrant purple primroses coloured the banks of River Farhills. Their liveliness stood in stark contrast to mood of Hara's residents.

Beorg went back to the graveyard to check on his replacement. The bodies were not buried with as much care as he did it, but at least they were beneath the ground. Darius visited the Poseidon's temple, learning that Mavis the Magnificent can cure any affliction. Hagar commissioned the wizards' guild to do a thorough investigation of the magical spear he had recovered from a tomb underneath bronze statue.

Bob visited Forsetti's temple to read through the archives, seeking mentions of necromancers. He found nothing. He spent rest of the evening drinking at the Wine Dragon. There he overheard that the town has fallen into Namelin's hands. Without the castellan and soldiers, Namelin family hired all the goons, mercenaries, and sellswords in the region. Red Queen hasn't acted yet. Has she forsaken her own people?



CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 89

Adventurers

Hagar the Hewer, dwarf level 3. Imagine Conan as dwarf.

Ambros, cleric level 3. Follower of Aniu, Lord of Time.

Bob the Dwarf, dwarf level 1. Midget with big beard in search of an adventure.

Pandora, thief level 1. Seeking to build a new life.

Flowerbloom 8th, Earthday

Hagar, our entrepreneurial dwarf, decided to lead a one day expedition while other adventurers were resting and recuperating.

Thus he assembled a small team consisting of Ambros the Cleric, whom had snapped out of his previous predicament, Bob the Dwarf, and Pandora, the newly recruited thief.

They were following up on a rumour Bob picked up. Now they stood in front of a barrow in the shape of great round tumulus, spanning some 150 feet in diameter.

Inside a nasty dwarf should be resting with a mighty warhammer.

"I must have it!" Bob kept repeating.

The stone slab was pushed to the side, flanked by freshly excavated earth. Was someone faster than our special operations team?

Hagar led the descent down a flight of fragile siltstone steps.

It was narrow, barely space for one person to advance.

Ambros held the torch, shining light from the rear.

"Bree-Yark!"

As Hagar barged into a small chamber confidently, he was jumped by four goblins whom had been alerted by the light.

Unfortunately for them, the Dwarf blocked and evaded all their attacks.

In fact, he deflected one of the goblin's spear charge so well that the monster ended up killing one of its own instead!

Pathetic critters stood no chance, and were summarily cut down.

The chamber itself was barely interesting. Two wooden statues of warrior were flanking doors going deeper down. There were no other valuables.

Hagar took the lead once more, this time a bit less carefree. Another small chamber, this time with doors on each wall.

Three goblins jumped him, but were no match for the prepared dwarf backed by another prepared dwarf.

Constrained fighting space did not work against heavily armed adventurers. In fact, Hagar pushed forth, and enabled others to spill into the chamber and join in on the violent fiesta.

Four exits out of this chamber should not really be called doors, but rather bloated and warped wooden planks jammed into doorways.

They had no handles nor any visible hinges. The only obvious way to open them was to either hack or smash them.

In fact, east doors were half hacked. The chamber beyond was floored with packed earth. The burial hoard was piled along the walls, alas, much of it decayed.

They could spot two rotting chariots as well as an assortment of shiny objects. But to see more, they had to get closer. Party checked for any traps, and finding none, barged straight in.

Emboldened by the lack of opposition, all four adventurers begun sorting through the hoard.

Noteworthy treasure they recovered from the pile were six cups carved from red-gold amber, three short swords with pommel-nuts and scabbards decorated with tiger's-eye knotwork, and three silver ingots, each approximately 7.5 pounds heavy.

As they were rummaging through the goods, a wolf made of soil animated and surprised the party.

Their weapons passed right through the soil, leaving no lasting damage.

That is until Hagar struck with his magical spear.

Soon the beast was no more, but not before it pounced hard on the dwarf, bringing him down to half of his strength.

"Let's arrange everything valuable here, finish exploring, and then take it all out."

"Sounds like a good plan."

"These ingots are suspicious. They are too hard to be silver. . ."

Adventurers moved back to previous chamber, and then smashed through north doors.

Hagar led the charge, while Bob closely followed. Pandora and Ambros stood behind, ready to intervene.

Hagar the Hewer sent the plank flying, going through it like unstoppable force incarnate. Although he heard Bob screaming behind him, he had no time to look back.

Straight up ahead of him was a chamber lined with carved bronzewood pillars and tiled with well-fitted flagstones.

Dead centre in the floor was a burial trench.

Its denizen, a stout dwarf with tautly drawn skin and eyes full of hatred, clenching a massive two handed warhammer, leaped out and smashed Hagar's head with one swift hammer-fall.

Pandora watched in horror as Bob fell through the ground just as Hagar broke the doors.

She too heard Bob's cries, but was preoccupied seeing her mightiest warrior's brain and skull splattered just up ahead.

She quickly pulled a dagger and hurled it at the warhammer wielding monster.

What a perfect headshot it was!

And how amazingly little did it do to stop it!

The disturbed dead jumped over the pit, huffing and puffing out of hatred rather than lack of breath.

Pandora ran up to Ambros. The cleric clenched his weapon and braced himself. He tried turning once, but it was an impotent call.

Disturbed dwarf swung the mighty warhammer towards the Thief, her fate sealed.

Ambros stepped forth, quicker than the monster, exploiting the opening given. His swing struck true, smashing the undead's skull.

"Help... help..."

Bob laid at the bottom of a ten foot deep pit, covered in flagstones that had given in under him. He was broken but alive.

Pandora and Ambros pulled him out. The latter healed the dwarf. Then they scrubbed the tomb of all the valuables.

"Can I see the hammer?" Wooooow..."

Wolfhammer, as Bob came to call it, is a two handed warhammer with a spiralling haft hardened bronze and a grip of blackened iron wrapped in wolfskin.

Its head is composed of two stylized predator's heads of bronze, "furred" with gold and silver wirework and eyes inlaid with amber.

Out of the gaping, fanged mouths of the beasts protrude the two massive heads of the hammer, cast from iron as strong and polished as fine steel.

Later, in Hara, he would learn that it is a magical weapon as well, dealing extra damage to spell-users and their magical constructs.

Finally, the trio wrapped Hagar's corpse in rotting silk, and carried him back to Hara.

Flowerbloom 10th, Spiritday

Ambros accomplished the unthinkable. First, he managed to get an audience with Mavis the Magnificent, the High-Priestess of Poseidon.

Second, he convinced her that Hagar is worthy enough to be brought back to life.

He knew damn well that High-Priestess is not moved by money, for she had survived many assassination attempts due to her refusal to Raise merchants' and nobles' rotten offspring.

No, Ambros played to the fact that Hagar contributed to Hara's safety on many occasions, in addition to furthering the cause of the Law in the region.

"Poseidon will grant him another chance at life. For that you must accept three divine quests."

"First, you must bring peace to a restless spirit of wrongfully imprisoned king."

"Second, you must seek my Sister in Ketches and solve her greatest problem."

"Third, you must erect a statue of Poseidon facing the sea."

Ambros, Bob, and Pandora agreed.

Hagar's bloody remains were lowered in the Temple's pool.

The water swirled and gushed and frothed and shook the temple.

Hagar came out, groggy, naked, and wholesome.

Then they accepted the three Divine Quests.

And it was made known to them, in no uncertain terms, that straying away would mean fate worse than death itself.



CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 90

Adventurers

Tarkus the Promising, cleric level 2. Follower of Bachontoi, God of Red Wisdom.

Hjordis, fighter level 1. An avaricious, imposing, and slightly unstable warrior.

A timeless parallel existence

As recorded on a series of scrolls by Tarkus the Promising.

I am having a crisis of faith. Not in my faith to Bachontoi, God of Red Wisdom, but my faith in my faith.

I thought I have been a loyal worshipper of the Wise One, and while I have passed one of his greatest tests, I feel I have failed.

During one of my earlier adventures, I fell ill after being bitten by a swarm of rats in a dungeon. I was feeling feverish and ever weaker and thought I was soon to be lifted up into the afterlife when we were attacked by the undead.

Just as I turned these foul beings, I vanished.

At least that's what my companions thought. I instead found myself, fully healed and healthy, with a stranger at the entrance to a completely different dungeon. A message in my mind told me that this was a test, in which a series of riddles would gauge my wisdom. If I passed within a certain time, I would be promoted within the priesthood and restored to life. If I didn't make the deadline but still passed the many tests, I would be restored to life. If I failed, those rats would have their way and I would perish. My companion was there to aid me.

I and my companion were told that we were entering the Temple of Greed, and were given the hint that the answer to the final riddle is the opposite of what we thought.

The first riddle was easy. At the entrance was inscribed,

"V R C A A E I"

"To enter, one must know greed."

The answer, of course, is "avarice".

That opened the portal, but from then on the puzzles became increasingly complex. At one point we faced a statue holding a sheaf of wheat in one hand and a gold bar in the other. In front of it were three rows of tiles, obviously pressure plates. The statue's arms looked like they could be moved, thus opening a portal further into the dungeon.

I chose poorly. The hint that the answer was the opposite of what I would expect made me second-guess everything. Do I walk down the side with the life-giving wheat, the choice of the wise priest? Do I walk down the side with the gold, since we were in the Temple of Greed? Or do I prevaricate and walk down the middle?

I cannot remember if I walked down the gold side or the middle, because the moment I stepped on the tiles a scythe cut me in half. A most unpleasant sensation.

Bachontoi restored me to life a moment afterwards. I then walked down the side with the wheat to move the arm. I reminded myself that only the final riddle involved such contrary thinking, although how to know which was the final riddle mystified me.

Many more tests faced us, and one by one we solved them, although I had another unpleasant sham death later on when I dropped into a cauldron of gold. A most fitting end for any worshipper of greed, and a warning by wise Bachontoi never to heed the temptations of the world!

The riddles became increasingly complex and we passed the deadline for promotion. But we still had the greatest prize on offer—our lives.

At last, we passed into a room where an old man sat atop a pile of gold. At first, I did not recognize my deity, for he did not wear his signature red robes, but when I did a prostrated myself to him. A rare boon, to come face to face with one's god!

The Wise One asked, "If you return to life, how will you spend it?"

This must be the final question. The answer had to be the opposite of what I thought.

The proper answer would be that I would spend my restored life in service of him.

The opposite answer would be something base and worldly.

But if the opposite answer is the answer I thought I should give, then wouldn't the opposite be the actual answer I should give, or, knowing that, would the second answer be the true answer?

And around and around my head went, my braining ringing as if I wore a helm and a hill giant had hit me on the noggin with his club.

Bachontoi watched me. I had to choose.

"Oh Wise One, I will spend my restored life in dissipation, pursuing all the things of the world that are fleeting and superficial in nature."

My heart clenched as I saw disappointment in his holy face.

Then, to my surprise, I found myself in Hara, restored to full health. I had answered correctly.

Or had I?

Why had Bachontoi looked disappointed at my answer? Did he think such an answer unworthy of one of his priests? Would he rather have me answer the correct way and snuff me out of existence?

Perhaps if I answered that I would serve him, he would have sent me to the Great Monastery in the Sky to forever study the Holy Scrolls and pray to him. Perhaps to die was the wiser choice.

But I am alive, and I will devote however many years are left to me to spreading wisdom and worshipping the Wise One. And in all those years, I fear, I will constantly question my answer to him.

All hail Bachontoi, the God of Red Wisdom!



IN NEXT ISSUE

Just exedra, catching up on all E&A issues.

Traveller Play-By-Email

Plankwell Campaign, Ch 50: The Apology

GMing: Jim Vassilakos & Timothy Collinson, Playing Capt. Plankwell: Conrad Rader

The character of Capt. Plankwell was conceived by Phil Pugliese

It's too bad, Agidda thought as we both smiled our false smiles. With just a little more strategic opportunism, he could go far. Admiral, perhaps. But he has no interest. Is it even worth trying to help him see the possibilities? It could be useful, he thought, to have a friend in the Imperial Admiralty.

"You do realize the possibilities you're giving up?" he asked.

"There are possibilities to be given up... and certainties in hand. I appreciate the concern, but sometimes best friends are found rather than made."

Agidda's eyes narrowed slightly as he tried putting my last sentence into context.

"Take, for example, Lady Alise," I said. "We got off on the wrong foot, so to speak, but now I am apparently escorting her out for a night of dancing. Or Captain Masa, who now shares the distinction of having been shot in the line of duty with me. I am not sure either of them would consider me a friend yet, but both have remarkable beginnings in that direction."

Agidda struck me as a career politician. Out here on the frontier, everything was greased by who you knew and what you could do. Someone high up in the Imperial bureaucracy had immense pull, and I am sure he would have been an asset in my portfolio. But only on my terms. He would be thinking about me in the same way, and we would maneuver to see who actually held sway in the relationship. I wasn't surprised he was thinking about my future prospects, because he currently had the advantage to do me favors. Nobles tended to collect the shiny of the day. They were more interested in putting their ripple in the pond than reading the waves for threats. Some nobles did both, like the Countess, who was not above tossing in some small fry to see what submerged predators moved beneath the surface.

«No offense, Alise, but that is what happens.»

She didn't respond, however, and Agidda squished his eyebrows together. He was thinking *something*.

As I looked deeply into his eyes, I could sense he recalled an interview he'd seen shortly before taking the tubes to the palace. *The tubes*. That's what they called the turboporter network, a fact I realized as soon as I was sucked into that moment, for that was what this level of telepathy sometimes felt like. Did my power have something to do with the psi-orb, the Canon's so-called Eye of God?

Regardless, there I/he was, with his usual cup of scuf, flipping through the thumbnails of his personalized

newsfeed. The computer, knowing we'd recently met, put my G-Carrier interview, the one I'd had with those three reporters on the way up to the Jackie, front and center, ensuring he'd see it, and intrigued, he'd selected it. Hence, we both watched, he by himself and myself within him, as my holographic image appeared across the table, such was the sophistication of his viewy.

"The Navy and the Ministry of Technology," my hologram said, "evaluated Olav and deemed him worth our time and investment." That's *not* what I said! "It is Olav reincarnated," I went on, lying through my holographic teeth! "The people of Jewell are rightly patriotic in their holding of Olav hault-Plankwell as a hero of the Imperium."

My stomach churned as I struggled to maintain a neutral expression. Agidda obviously thought I'd been making a move by endorsing the Olav *upgrade*. No wonder he was confused. I wasn't taking the next logical step.

«Who gave you permission to speak for the Ministry of Technology?» the Countess asked. I turned to look. The Countess was drinking tea and looking at Alise, who in turn was looking down at her plate, expressionless. Her left hand was under the table, as was the Countess's right hand, leading me to suspect we were all linked and Helena was essentially talking to me through her daughter, perhaps as a sign of her own power and telepathic skill.

«You have a media problem,» I telepathically voiced, assuming she'd hear me. *«That is not what was said. I have my own recording to offer as counterpoint.»*

«Delete it,» the Countess ordered. *«I don't care about your personal feelings with respect to Olav. I believe it unwise for any of us to talk down any new technology that might give us a military advantage over the Zhodani, unless, of course, Intel has some operation in play that requires it, in which case I should have been informed of this long ago so I could adjust my actions accordingly.»*

By now she was looking across the table at Josefeen.

«I get it,» Josefeen sent, her voice distant but still perceptible. *«Gus spoke for the MoT, so now you're returning the favor and speaking for him.»*

I was still angry as well as confused. *«The very thought I would usurp the speech from MoT is ridiculous.»*

«You did, Gus,» Josefeen replied.¹ *«With all due respect, Your Excellency, this sort of tit-for-tat is ridiculous. If you wanted our cooperation in establishing a media narrative, all you had to do was ask. And holding this discussion*

1 See the 5th page of Chapter 42 in A&E #590.

telepathically instead of behind closed doors is equally absurd. The Captain's mind belongs to the Imperial Navy.»

«*Just as the minds of my subjects belong to me?*» Helena shifted her gaze ever so slightly, past Karneticky and to the Canon.

«*That was part of an operation,*» Josefeen replied.

«*Cleaning up a mess, I'd wager. Reggie is dear to me. You should have asked permission.*»

«*With all due respect,*» I interjected, «*I will not be deleting official Navy records at your say so, especially not when I have evidence that your "dear Reggie" was the one who drugged my Vargr crew members resulting in the fire that you have been making the centerpiece of your anti-Navy tirades. And as for military advantage... of Olav? Who told you that? Are you planning a March on the Capital as well?*»

«*How dare you?!*»

«*Gus, don't.*»

They were both glaring at me from opposite ends of the table, but my fire was going now, and I had no interest in holding back.

«*The minute I set foot on this planet, I have been buffeted, used and maneuvered! I have gone along out of a sense of duty and a desire for peaceful relations. But instead, all I get are threats and cajoling by your catspaw. I for one am sick of the stick and the carrot!*»

I let my psionic power rise, flooding it through my touch connection into Alise. Everyone kept telling me I was stronger. Well, maybe they should feel what it was like playing with a loaded weapon.

“Aaagh!” Alise screamed, pulling back her hand and pushing herself away from the table so hard her chair almost tipped over backwards. “Cleonfelching adults!” she yelled, now standing.

All conversation immediately stopped, of course, everyone staring at her like she was utterly mad.

“I...,” she looked around the table, wide-eyed, “I never want to grow up,” she said. “I can’t stand the thought of becoming one of you!”

“Wiser words were never spoken,” Canon Forklinbrass declared. “May I propose a toast? To the fleeting exuberance of youth.”

Everyone raised their cups, unconcerned whether they contained tea or juice or white wine. The whole thing was so terribly awkward, there was simply nothing else to do. Even Countess Helena partook but then turned to her daughter and told Alise, “You will go to your chambers and stay there. See to it she finds her way,” she added to one of the guards.

“But...”

“Go!”

Alise’s lip quivered, and then she was ushered out.

Had I caused all that? I drew my psionic curtain, shielding my mind.

“Another toast, if I may,” the Canon said. “To forgiveness and reconciliation.”

Everyone drank, even the Countess.

“Speaking of forgiveness and reconciliation,” she said, “I believe it is time for you to greet your assailants, Captain Plankwell. Assuming, of course, you haven’t changed your mind.”

“As I recall, Your Excellency, I expressed my wishes to resolve the issue through my counsel. It is by your directive that these individuals enter your palace and speak to you regarding their offenses. I am simply not opposing you in this matter.”

She nodded to one of the servants, who scooped her chair out from the table for her. One of them came behind me as well, but I saved him the trouble and scooped myself out. Obviously, we were going somewhere to meet these two HPSS contractors. I dropped the curtain, looking over to my Intel Liaison.

«*Josephine. Situation Bravo-Nine-Nine. Relay to Jaqueline. Bravo Alert Stand-by.*»

There was obviously a chance this would be overheard by one of the telepaths at the table, but neither the Countess nor Squiress Durami made any intimation they were tapped in.

Navy Bravo situations were preparations for combat, to be on standby in the event of hostilities. The Nine-Nine signified orders to try and take prisoners but not at the cost of personal or allied safety, and use of all weapons was permitted.² Of course, being that I was in the Imperial Palace, it would be awfully hard for my ship to know if hostilities had ensued. Only if I or Josefeen or Lt. Sidara managed to get word to the ship that we were under attack would Hell come raining down on the Palace and, indeed, on all of Silver City.

Of course, that would be up to Nizlich.

Somewhere up above, I could imagine Blodder reading the message and relaying it to the entire bridge crew. *Holy Mother of Cleon*, they had to all be thinking. *Is this for real or just another drill?* As per standard protocol, she’d next inform Nizlich, and somewhere in the back of my mind I could sense Stefani bolting immediately toward the bridge at full sprint as if the klaxons were already blaring the call to battle stations.

Of course, I understood that if we were, indeed, to fall under attack, it was implausible that a second signal would ever get out, at least not without being electronically garbled. But in the event my ship saw the palace jamming comms — well, in the absence of a Bravo-Nine-Nine,

² Conrad made all of this up, but it made enough sense that I went along with it, vaguely remembering that old episode of *Star Trek* (S2E25: Bread and Circuses) where Kirk gave Scotty the covert duress code, “Condition Green.” Likewise, on the ship Timothy served, they had a covert evacuation code.

they'd be curious, but with Bravo-Nine-Nine in effect — that would be tantamount to an attack. I didn't know what Stefani would do if such an event were to transpire, but I was certain she'd not do nothing.

«*Bravo-Nine-Nine standby confirmed,*» Josefeen sent back as the Countess led us back down the corridor toward the security lobby. Josefeen, of course, was following us along with Lt. Sidara and a few of the others, including Agidda and Canon Forklinbrass. Agidda stepped alongside me, saying something about Olav while thinking that I seemed a little off, like maybe I hadn't been getting enough sleep or something.

“At least this one is Imperial-approved,” he went on, “uncorrupted by whatever garbage Zeenye poured into the prototype. Regardless of questions pertaining to fidelity, it's the version of Olav we need, the version that will be most likely to serve Imperial interests rather than its own.”

“An interesting observation, as Imperial interests seem to be somewhat divided on this world, at least when it comes to the local nobility and the armed forces.”

He narrowed his eyes so much his eyebrows nearly squished together again, but I quickly raised my hand, cutting off whatever reply he was attempting to conjure. “Not really asking for an answer, just expressing my curiosity about what interests exactly are being served by Olav.”

“Recruitment, of course. And reminding the citizenry why we need to support our armed forces. I am, indeed, looking forward to this apology from these two locals, and it had better be a good one.”

We passed through the security lobby and down another corridor, the same one he and I had been escorted through on my first visit to the palace. Up ahead was the reception room where we'd interrogated the beta version of Olav. The media crew that had been present when the Countess had come to pay her respects was already set-up. They obviously intended to record this and release it to the public assuming all went as planned.

As for the two HPSS-contractors, they both looked a bit on-edge, one adjusting his clothes as we entered, the other clutching a data slate. They both stared at me for a moment, though neither appeared to be armed. Indeed, they didn't even have their uniforms, and so it took me a moment to even recognize them.

Seeing these two stripped of their symbols of authority, I couldn't help but recall how only yesterday they were hitting Captain Masa and I with their weapons' built-in tasers. On some worlds, we'd have been within our rights to execute them on the spot. Indeed, even here I could probably get away with it, though I'd have to declare another state of emergency and then endure the Countess's wrath as well as naval bureaucratic hell. Far easier to just acquiesce to her wishes.

Nonetheless, I remained near the room's entrance, moving to the side for the others to pass, one of the guards looking down to his slate, the other standing there, looking at me while trying to appear relaxed. I realized this, of course, because as we stared at each other, I couldn't resist reaching out telepathically to see what *he* thought about all this.

There was certainly something there, resentment intermixed with a healthy dose of fear. His boss, Major Trilbon, CEO and Company Commander of Bratom Solutions, hadn't merely fired them but also threatened legal action, and he and his girlfriend had quite the “discussion” when video of the arrest was leaked over the planetary subnet. Suddenly their friends started calling, and everyone wanted to know what happened.

“I was just following the training,” he'd insisted.

“Then why were you fired?!”

«*You're staring,*» Josefeen sent, walking in front of me.

I looked to her and gestured with my chin for her to *get on with looking like an aide and getting this over with*, backing it up with a telepathic «*please*».

«*It wasn't me who got my ass sizzled by two parking lot guards. They're here to apologize to you.*»

«*I don't care about their apologies. I'm here to listen as per the desires of the Countess and the explicit instructions of our attorney to go Captain Ironface. So you are my designated conversation starter, or you can hand off to Sidara. I am just here to listen. And you were the one to drink the hallucinogenic potion, so don't get all holier-than-thou on me.*»

I arched an eyebrow at her meaningfully, somewhat wasted as she turned her head and walked over to Lt. Sidara.

“You're acting protocol officer,” Josefeen whispered into Sidara's ear. “Aren't you supposed to be intermediating or something?”

Oh, Cleonspoop! I'm so dumb! The volume of Sidara's internal self-recrimination was such that even the Countess blinked in surprise. *Okay! You can do this.* Wide-eyed and suddenly trembling, she willed herself to walk over to the two former security guards without yet formulating a plan on what to say. Of course, she recognized them from the video of the arrest. And she'd read lots of comments on the planetary subnet, trying to get a feel for how the overall population had been reacting.

Subnet : Jewell : Heron : Politics & Current Events : Recent Subsnips : Search “HPSS & Navy”

VargrChewtoy69: Holy Mother of Cleon! HPSS versus Navy! <hpssarrests2navycaptains.vid>

NoblyIgnoble: Dang! No wonder we got hit with an interdiction.

Belter5150: LOL! Now the Navy knows what it's like to live here.

AirFilterPumpNoise: Except they can call the Marines.

The previous Protocol Officer was one of the scouts who left the ship when the whole Exploration Department got up and left, and so Sidara was tossed into the role mainly due to her legal knowledge. Nonetheless, she understood she lacked the cross-cultural training necessary for this duty, something she'd brought to the attention of her supervisor, the Logistics Officer.

"Just cover until I find someone."

"Aye aye, sir." Sidara dutifully nodded. It would only be for a little while, she'd thought to herself, and they'd be in port the whole time, so what could possibly happen? In any case, it would look good on her service jacket, and the alternative, which was to take her reservations to Commander Nizlich who was the next step up the chain of command, did not particularly appeal. The truth was, she was a bit scared of Stefani. And so when Nizlich approached her yesterday about convening a military tribunal in accordance with my orders pertaining to the Section 678 Interdiction, Sidara had found herself momentarily speechless.

"T... tribunal? What happened?"

"The locals crossed a line, and now we must demonstrate the consequences."

"Consequences?"

"Lessons will be learned."

"I'm Lt. Sidara of the INS Jaqueline," she said to the two former guards, bringing me back to the present. "Which of you will issue the apology?"

They both had to — Major Trilbon had been explicit — but neither was happy about it.

"I'll go first," said the one with the slate.

Sidara looked at me momentarily, but when it became apparent I wasn't going to venture any closer, she nodded to the guy. "Go ahead."

"Captain Plankwell, we deeply regret the misunderstanding that led to this unfortunate incident."

The apology had actually been written not by them but by somebody in the HPSS. The Major had simply passed it along with a stark ultimatum: deliver this or not only are you fired, but I sue you as well.

"We take full responsibility for our actions and assure you it was never our intention to insult the Imperium or undermine its authority."

That threat about suing them might have been a bluff, but given all the negative press they were getting, they were unlikely to find another security job anytime soon.

"Our actions were a mistake, and we apologize for any undue stress or inconvenience caused."

Ultimately, all Trilbon really cared about was the HPSS contract. Well, that and future Imperial contracts. He'd mentioned once how he wanted to take the company into the big leagues, and so this guy had imagined himself

eventually serving alongside the Imperial Army. Maybe then his Dad would be proud of him.

The former parking lot guard handed the slate to his partner, a guy who I sensed had applied to the Imperial Army years earlier but had been rejected. His sister was a dancer in one of the miltown's more notorious nightclubs, and he'd worked security there for a while but was fired for being overly-protective. Suffice it to say, he had some pent-up anger toward Navy-types like myself, and so as he began reading, I could sense him wanting to grit his teeth, something he naturally couldn't do while voicing an apology.

"Captain Plankwell, there is no excuse for our actions and we can only beg for forgiveness."

Yes, perhaps he'd been a tiny bit overzealous, but in his mind, he'd been strictly following the training. "Treat everyone the same," they'd all been told. The job was simple. One, two, three, and then light 'em up with the taser. If that didn't work, they could resort to bullets.

"This was a failure on our part, plain and simple."

Above all, however, they weren't supposed to take any guff. There were gangs out there, and they continually tested law enforcement. "If you show weakness," an HPSS instructor had told them, "the dirtbags will stop respecting us, and if that happens, then crime goes up and we have to clamp down even harder, so you never show weakness."

"But what if the Countess spits on me?" he'd wanted to ask but thought better of it. It seemed funny at the time, though not quite so funny when Masa and I were lying unconscious in front of him and his partner.

"We were just following our training," he'd said during the mandatory HPSS debriefing.

"You idiots tased two Imperial Captains."

"Nobody ever said there was an exception for Captains."

"Sometimes you need to read between the lines," his girlfriend later explained.

"What's that even mean?"



"It means you don't shoot Navy just because your sister's a whore!"

This was a sore spot for him, a big one, but of course she didn't care. She saw he was down, and so now she was

kicking him in the face, because, y'know, that's what girlfriends were for.

"With you unemployed, how are we gonna pay the rent? Huh? For Cleon's sake, how are we gonna pay the air tax?!"

"I'll figure something out, and don't talk that way about my sister."

He didn't want to end up with the molerats or out on the streets breathing that poison the government euphemistically referred to as air.

"If I do this," he asked the Major, "can I have my job back?"

"If you do it right, exactly as written, and these two captains both accept it, then I'll rehire both of you after this all blows over. But if you mess it up..."

"We overstepped, and we are deeply ashamed of how we handled the situation," he continued, remembering how Masa and I had been kissing the concrete as it were, and thinking how much worse it would have been if we'd pissed ourselves as often happened in these situations. "In the heightened security environment, we are forced to make quick decisions, and this time, we got it wrong," he went on as I peered into his mind, seeing the time a stunned detainee had let loose an explosive shart³, and he'd been in the proverbial line of fire. Suffice it to say, that was a shitty day.

"We believed we were acting to safeguard the security of Jewell, but in hindsight our actions were unwarranted. For this, we are truly sorry. Therefore, with humility and loyalty, we ask that you please accept our heartfelt apology."

The cameras turned toward me along with the Countess and everyone else, all of them waiting to see how I'd respond.

This is why I didn't want to hear the apologies. The system had failed these two. I was part of that system. The Imperium was a noble ideal, spanning thousands of star systems, but when you zoomed right down to it, it stood on the pillars of people like this, pushed by other people in authority to do the right thing without ever really knowing what that right thing entailed. Looking at them now, I saw every rough spacehand who I'd tried to shape up for duty. I never really thought about the ones I washed out. Apparently they ended up like this, scrambling to find a way to be meaningful and help their family.

In the Navy, I was surrounded by people who had seized the challenge of service and fought to excel. The bitter reminder of every time someone had thrown "Plankwell" in my face as a reason I'd been promoted or even noticed roiled under the surface of my thoughts. But even there, the currents of patronage and petty power swirled. The Navy fought for the idea of meritocracy, but everyone knew once you ascended to the upper ranks, the game changed. I knew it. I was playing that game right now.

I as Gus would give over in a minute. I could see there were no deeper intentions or subterfuge, only two people who were having their ideas about their own strength and power radically changed. If I were to go ahead with the Tribunal, the full weight of Imperial displeasure would fall on these two. They'd probably end up serving time in a penal colony.

I as Captain Plankwell, however, had larger concerns. The interdiction had been a massive incursion into planetary affairs. But it had also served a powerful purpose in showing that Captain Plankwell was not afraid to use the weapons at his disposal and to remind everyone exactly how powerful those weapons were. Captain Plankwell was secure in his reasoning that the interdiction had been necessary. It was right there in his thoughts, bullets were the next escalation. Captain Plankwell had no qualms about putting Navy personnel in danger to complete an objective. But what was the objective here?

If nothing else, I believed in consequences for actions. But not disproportionate and not counterproductive. Punishing these two solved none of my other issues. Even laying them out as scapegoats would only follow the local playbook, signaling to some I was willing to play their game. Was I? Was I willing to throw two random strangers into a meat grinder to further my own plans?

Josafeen would do it in a heartbeat. Nizlich would probably have maneuvered things so as not to be in that position. Karneticky... well, the less I thought about what he would do, the better, as he was one of the opposing pieces I was working around. I didn't bother thinking about the nobles. They spent their lives moving people and making sacrifices, mostly of their own relations.

Whatever I did, I had to be able to live with it. I had to be able to look my reflection in the eye and see that I was still Gus, even if I was wearing the shell of Captain Plankwell. But they had shot me. No getting away from that. I was one captain with one ship, and I was not going to change the Imperium overnight. But I wasn't going to bring my hammer down on these two.

The more interesting question was what was someone trying to stop me from seeing by throwing these two out as sacrifices. I needed to get Sidara to review the Tribunal findings to date and see if the intel sweep had caught anything interesting. I ruefully thought she was the exact same thing, someone being pushed into a role she thought was too big for her. Well, we all had to grow sometimes.

I stood away from the wall and drew myself up to my full height. I stared at these two, the same searching look I used on new recruits. The challenge to do better.

I turned to the Countess.

"My honor is satisfied. The legal case remains."

And with a slight bow, I turned and exited the room. I needed to get on the comm and get back to work, birthday or not.

3 <https://www.quora.com/Is-it-true-that-1-in-3-people-who-are-taxed-lose-control-of-their-bowels>

Download the consolidated Plankwell write-up:
<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/plank.html>

Past zines available at:
<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/apa.html>

Jim's Comments on E&A #4:

D&D Core Mechanics Changes to Primary Abilities:

Brian Rogers (E&A #4, pg. 10): "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)..."

Interesting ideas. In my AD&D game, I would usually reinterpret Wisdom as being linked to willpower so players would be slightly less likely to use it as a dump stat. Linking it to Divine Favor, however, sounds like an even better idea, but only if it comes into play. In my game, this rarely if ever happened beyond the casting of clerical magic.

Comparative gameplay under different systems:

Mark A. Wilson (E&A #4, pg. 18): "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."

I'd be curious to see a write up of some examples of the same situation played out under different systems to get a better sense of what you're talking about here. Of these systems, I've only played D&D.

Styles of Campaign Reports (Detailed vs Summarized):

Mark A. Wilson (E&A #4, pg. 18): "In covering the campaign as a whole like this, it loses a lot of the flavor of characters and encounters."

Yeah, you covered a 33-session campaign in under three pages. That's an impressive feat of distillation. As you probably know, my personal preference is to go the other way, reporting what happened in extreme detail, because it's the character arcs and the complexity of the interweaving subplots that interest me more so than the overarching conflict. But to do that, you would have had to do a 300+ page write up, so I can see why you took the more commonsense approach.

GMing options for when the players are confused:

Clark B. Timmins (E&A #4, pg. 32): "...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."

As you may recall, I talked about this sort of problem in A&E #548, and I'd imagine the way to resolve it would be to either secretly change the initial conditions, allowing the PCs' investigation to lead to something interesting, or to simply hit them over the head with unambiguous evidence of the initial conditions that they're somehow failing to recognize, perhaps by allowing them to find something, say an ancient coin from a kingdom that's long since fallen, indicating that there's a long history to this dungeon, and so much of what they're seeing is really old. Then again, they'd probably somehow misinterpret that as being contemporary as well. I don't know what to tell you.

Popularizing Solo-Gamebooks:

Panhoca da Silva & Lourenço Panhoca (E&A #4, pg.34): "With children in mind, this interactive fiction works well, despite being limited."

I think it's a good idea to acquaint children with this form of literature if you want it to gain wide-spread acceptance. Just an idea, but it might be a good idea for someone to publish a book full of advice on how to create and publish solo gamebooks. There's probably already something written on this topic, but maybe what's out there could be reassessed, distilled, and appended with the latest in terms of best practices and avenues of distribution.

Insanity in Call of Cthulhu:

Roger BW (E&A #4, pg. 42): "How can a therapist help you when they don't believe, and they're trying to get you to deny the reality you experienced?"

It reminds me of that episode of *The Twilight Zone* where William Shatner is freaked out by the monster trying to take down the airplane.⁴ Yes, of course, I get what you're saying, but I think some people will be able to reconcile the secret reality they know but cannot prove with the social imperative to say nothing lest one be committed to an asylum. Granted, the higher the stakes, the harder it is to stay quiet. So yes, but this isn't true insanity, is it? It's just the appearance of insanity, which is a whole different thing.

Objective/detectable alignments in (A)D&D:

Roger BW (E&A #4, pg. 42): "For an angel or a demon, fair enough, but for every sapient being? It's always felt to

4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXHKDb0CNjA>

me like an artificiality, and one that cuts out a whole swath of possible stories.”

I agree, and I recall coming to this same conclusion long ago, although I may not have consistently implemented it. Just now looking through some old files, I came across this from one named *align.txt* which is date-stamped 5/6/1998. Inside it, I wrote: “We are not playing by alignment rules, per se, however there are codes of behavior associated with certain racial societies and with certain character classes. You can bend and even break these codes of behavior without consequence, so long as you don’t get caught.” And in *detgood.txt*, date-stamped 5/5/1998, I wrote, “This spell enables the caster to sense the aura of goodness. Diviners of fourth level and above may also sense both the degree and location of such auras. Diviners of seventh level and above may concentrate the spell on a single individual, sensing the name of that individual’s god (if good) and noting the level of devotion that person holds toward the god and the state of favor the individual has achieved.”⁵ I’d assume all this applies to Detect Evil as well.

I also happened across *dndrules.doc*, which is date-stamped to the summer of 1998: “Detect Evil/Good. These effects only detect intent in a creature.” I probably copied this off Usenet because I thought it sounded like an interesting idea. But how precisely would the GM determine the alignment of an intent?

Putting that question aside, let’s think this through. Are we just saying that all mortals don’t have actual alignments, or are we saying only certain mortals, such as humans and most demi-humans? What about orcs? What about drow elves? What about semi-magical creatures, such as unicorns and dragons? What’s the general rule for determining the answer to such questions?

Of course, detect alignment would then be somewhat less useful, obviously, but what about magic items, such as the Helm of Opposite Alignment? Would it turn a nasty human into someone who’s nice, or would it be entirely ineffective on humans and other non-aligned beings?

And what about the alignment restrictions on various classes? Or alignment languages? Throw them all out?

Aging in Traveller & SF Setting Design:

Jim Eckman (E&A #4, pg. 76): “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?”

Back in my teens, this question never occurred to me, but now I’m in my late 50s, and the older I get, the more obvious this question becomes. Having said that, here are a few counterpoints. First, your PC doesn’t have to do five terms. You can muster out in three or even two, and a lot of

players do this. Although you’ll end up with a smaller skill set, there’s something to be said for playing a younger character. On the other hand, I also like the fact that Traveller lets you play a character of whatever age you choose.⁶ You want to play a septuagenarian? Their primary characteristics will take a hit due to aging, but you can do it.

Speaking of aging, this is the part that I’m guessing will look anachronistic in the centuries (or perhaps even decades) to come. Granted, Traveller has anagathics.⁷ But, in my opinion, they are underutilized. Of course, the individual referee (GM) can utilize them as much as he or she wishes, but my sense is that Traveller is trying to create a future that feels familiar, and this, I think, is a mistake, because the future won’t be familiar at all. It will be quite different, and the very idea of these differences makes me want to run a futuristic setting where everything has been painstakingly re-imagined.⁸ But, of course, that would be a lot of work.⁹

Precursor Civilizations in SF & Fantasy Setting Design:

Michael Cule (E&A #4, pg. 79): “At the start of the description of a setting you come to a paragraph or two about The Ancients.” (...) “I feel that you should think about this sort of thing if it is necessary for you to make sense of the setting.”

Yes, indeed. I remember coming up with the *Old Ones* for my still half-baked Ragamuffin setting.¹⁰ Partly it was a way to explain why so many alien civilizations were popping up around the same period of time (the period of time in question being several thousand years). The explanation, of course, was that they’d been uplifted. This also explained similarities of morphology (bipedalism) between them. The Old Ones had themselves been a bipedal species, and so they had a preference for uplifting bipeds, believing them more suited to technological society. Star Trek, by contrast, relies on *Hodgkin’s Law of Parallel Planetary Development*¹¹ (somewhat ridiculous, in my opinion¹²), and

6 Assuming the character doesn’t die during generation.

7 See my article about them in A&E #521.

8 For example, see my articles in A&E #s 524, 525, 536, 539

9 Timothy wants to add to this that Traveller was trying to keep things relatable. One of his problems with transhumanist RPGs such as Mindjammer, for example, is that they require so much effort from the players just to have a clue as to what’s going on in normal life, and this is before you start adding the complexity/subtlety of the adventure.

10 See A&E #298 among others.

11 https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Hodgkin%27s_Law_of_Parallel_Planetary_Development

12 Only *somewhat* ridiculous, because convergent evolution certainly exists (for example, carcinization), and it seems apparent to me that species that have developed a technological civilization would need some common characteristics, such as the ability to manipulate their

5 You can find these in my AD&D Campaign Rules Archive at <https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/camp.html>

while Traveller posits the Ancients, they somehow don't factor into the origins of the Aslan, which as you pointed out are "unashamedly, two legged lion-people."¹³ Well put.

Half-breed Races in Fantasy Setting Design:

Michael Cule (E&A #4, pg. 80): "...humans can interbreed with elves." (...) "Humans can also interbreed with Orcs." (...) "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?"

People have been asking these sorts of questions for a long time, and I've even seen a rather extensive table of the various half-breeds that exist in a lesser-known fantasy world.¹⁴ It may also be worth considering the case of the mule (a horse/donkey hybrid), which is itself sterile. Despite being closely related, each of these animals has a different number of chromosomes (horse=64, donkey=62, and mule=63), and it's apparently the mule's odd number of chromosomes that results in their sterility (the chromosomes aren't able to pair up correctly). Having said all this, it's an open question as to how much science one should mix into one's fantasy, and different setting designers may reasonably come to different answers on this.

Amusing NPCs:

Attronarch (E&A #4, pg. 103): "'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."

Love it! I always enjoy amusing NPCs. Playing them is one of the great joys of GMing.

environment (use & create tools) and a psychology adapted to cooperation (see my comment to Mark Nemeth in A&E #592 rhtc Joshua Kronengold). Also, in Star Trek's defense, it's worth mentioning that makeup and facial prosthetics are still less expensive than full CGI.

13 E&A #3, page 41.

14 <https://tal.fandom.com/wiki/Half-Breeds>

Traveller's Vargr & Setting Design:

Myles Corcoran (E&A #4, pg. 109): "The Vargr as transplanted from Earth like Humanti gives them a (semi-)pass in my book..."

Except that it just seems odd, at least to me, that out of the OTU's seven multi-sector states (The Imperium, Solomani Sphere, Zhodani Consulate, Vargr Extents, Aslan Hierate, Hive Federation, and the Two Thousand Worlds of the K'kree), the majority of inhabitants of four of them derive from Earth. This wouldn't be quite so inexplicable if there were no Ancients and the Terrans just so happened to have a head start over other sophonts in this area of the galaxy (although this would itself be unlikely), but for this to have happened as a consequence of the Ancients taking a *shine* to Earth creatures (humans and wolves) seems rather improbable. Why didn't the Ancients take a liking to creatures from other worlds and/or why weren't those creatures, once liberated, as successful? If you want to create a fictional setting that people can accept (suspending disbelief), you've got to avoid *plausibility flags*, and unfortunately most SF settings have them in spades.

Fast-STL for Starships:

Myles Corcoran (E&A #4, pg. 113): "Nature keeps finding ways to tell humanity to slow down." (...) "Science fiction writers and gamers alike have to face up to choosing realistic physics or fast travel but not both, unfortunately."

I recently stumbled across mention of something I'll call the Bobrick/Martire Fast-STL Warp Bubble, which stems from a 2021 paper by two physicists.¹⁵ It's different from Miguel Alcubierre's FTL Warp Bubble¹⁶ in that it doesn't require negative energy. In short, it doesn't break physics as we know it. Crucially, it would seem to "detach" matter inside the bubble from its inertial frame of reference, allowing high-G maneuvers without turning the passengers into mush. Interestingly, however, unless I'm mistaken, it doesn't negate time dilation. High velocity voyages would slow down aging. So it seems to me to be the perfect solution with respect to the type of starships I was envisioning for Ragamuffin.¹⁷

There are still a few issues, however. First, the mass/power requirements would need to come down by several orders of magnitude in order to make this feasible. Second, how do you steer the damn thing? If you can't steer it, then getting to a neighboring star system would be a bit like trying to get a hole in one. Third, there's still the problem of what happens if you hit a pebble (or even a grain of sand). The object's relativistic mass would be

15 "Introducing Physical Warp Drives" by Alexey Bobrick and Gianni Martire (<https://arxiv.org/abs/2102.06824>).

16 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alcubierre_drive

17 See A&E #298, #307, & #310.

converted to energy, and you'd be dead. So... yeah. Nature doesn't seem to want to make this easy.

Call of Cthulhu vs AD&D wrt Exploration & Suspense:

Mitch Hyde (E&A #4, pg. 118): "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."

Indeed, and it sounds like a game I wouldn't mind playing. I only played CoC once, and I wasn't impressed with it, but this was in the context of there being a large group of players, seven to ten from what I can dimly recall, and I generally don't like these sorts of campaigns regardless of what game system is being played. Having said that and thereby confessed my lack of experience with the game, I'm under the impression that one of the problems with CoC, at least from the standpoint of suspense and exploration, is that after having played it a few times, the players are bound to understand much more about the setting and its various secrets than their characters, and so it is bound to be less suspenseful with each successive campaign. Of course, the same could be said of AD&D; the tenth time one finds oneself deep in a dungeon seems likely to be less suspenseful than the first. But AD&D has the advantage of lots of different monsters, lots of different challenges in general, and while I'm sure the same could be said of CoC, the overarching mystery of the Elder Gods, which the PCs must inevitably seek to discover, remains the same. I'd imagine it's sort of like repeatedly playing Clue, only to discover that each time it's Colonel Mustard in the Conservatory with the Candlestick.

Orcs & an elf working together:

Mitch Hyde (E&A #4, pgs. 120-121): "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. And behind them a familiar face. The evil elf Dinir, his presence much diminished, clad in scraps of porcine armour!"

Given the well-known enmity between elves and orcs, I was a bit surprised. Regardless, it's a nice description both of the initial confrontation as well as the ensuing battle, although it's yet another reminder that *Sleep* is really too powerful to be a 1st level spell.

Rock Hard: 1977:

Patrick Zoch (E&A #4, pg. 129): "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."

Sounds like a fun game and a potentially good source for character generation ideas/methods for an RPG where the PC is an up-and-coming rock star. I once had an idea for an RPG where the players would all play musicians on some type of popular music, and they'd each have their own band and would be competing against each other in a *Battle of the Bands*. The general idea was that while roleplaying various stereotypical bad behavior and resolving whatever internal conflicts are taking place within their respective bands, they'd also compose filks as well as share and rate each other's favorite underground music (this would all be done anonymously). Needless the say, whosever filk and favorite music got rated the highest by the group would end up with the trophies (best new band and best new singer-songwriter respectively). I imagined it as a way for people to share their favorite music and personal poetry in the context of an RPG, each playing the protagonist (frontman/frontwoman) of their own band but also playing the supporting characters in each other's bands. Of course, like most of my projects, it ended up on the back burner, far from complete.

Monster Combat Tactics:

Mark Nemeth (E&A #4, pg. 139): "...the party was ambushed by a group of kobolds and their trained attack goats..."

Attack goats? Brilliant! What could possibly go wrong?

Enemies Becoming Friends:

Mark Nemeth (E&A #4, pg. 139): "The party was able to dispatch all of them before they could escape, and Moorria, who had used her expertise with animals to calm one of the goats, found herself with a new billy goat follower."

Ah... didn't see that coming. Incidentally, you can thank those kobolds for issue #10's igtheme.

Helping the PCs spend their loot:

Mark Nemeth (E&A #4, pg. 143): "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."

I don't know that PCs need more reasons to seek monetary treasure, but if you're looking for incentives to encourage them dispose of it, see Dave Arneson's *Special Interest* rules.¹⁸

¹⁸ <https://vladar.bearblog.dev/dave-arnesons-special-interest-rules/> or see *The First Fantasy Campaign* (Judges Guild,

Shying away from the ugly truths of history:

Brian Misiaszek (E&A #4, pg. 157): “I experienced equal moral distress reading about the all-too-real horrors of the Mazorra, and I toned way down my write-up lastish and thish.”

I’d encourage you *not* to self-edit when it comes to recounting such matters. Let history be known in all its gory glory lest we forget what evils lurk in the hearts of men.

Sanity in Call of Cthulhu:

Jim Vassilakos (E&A #3, pg. 157): “This is something I never understood about CoC, how seeing something that shouldn’t exist causes characters to go bonkers.”

Brian Misiaszek (E&A #4, pg. 158): “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.”

Of all the replies I received wrt to this question, yours makes the most sense. Since I know hardly anything about psychology, and what little I’ve learned is probably out of fashion, I have to admit I know essentially nothing about the various causes of insanity. However, one can imagine. Schizophrenia, for example, I imagine to be the result of the id and superego going to war, the ego, caught between them, slowly ripping in twain. But in the case of someone seeing something they can’t explain and thereby going crazy... I mean, I could imagine them being shell-shocked — PTSD is certainly a real thing — but that’s not the same as crazy.

First of all, what sort of crazy are we talking about? A phobia, perhaps? Imagine you find yourself on a flying saucer, and you’re being probed by some alien medical student majoring in xeno-proctology. Of course, you don’t know you’re dealing with students on a field trip (using the term “dealing” rather loosely here). All you know is that something truly untoward is happening. But the next thing you know, you’re waking up as if from a nightmare, except you’ve somehow developed a mysterious colon cramp and a newfound penchant for producing SBDs. Would that give you a phobia with respect to flying saucers? Yes, I think it’s perfectly reasonable. But would you end up so deranged that you’d have to be committed to an asylum? My layman’s sense is that in order for that to be the case, you’d have to be awfully butthurt. Nonetheless, your points are well taken.

Heroine RPG:

Joshua Kronengold (E&A #4, pg. 171): “In Heroine, only one player plays the protagonist...” (...) “Another player plays the antagonist, which also handles most of the GM roles. The remaining players play various companions

1980), pages 50-52.

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...”

Thanks for mentioning *Heroine*. As you know, aside from working on single-protagonist frameworks for PBEMing¹⁹, I’ve also been trying to come up with various ways to delegate the traditional powers of the GM to the players²⁰, and *Heroine* sounds like a game where both of these ideas have been successfully integrated.

Timothy’s Comments on E&A #4:

Brian Rogers – Denizens of the Library

RYCT to Mark N – you’re quite right about the climax not having to always be combat – see my note on *The Lost Crèche of Perpethwe* below.

Clark B. Timmins – Philatelic Monstrosities

Love the idea of statting up stamps! Well done!

Pedro Panhoca da Silva – Children’s interactive fiction

RYCTus – well, if you find something Traveller related, I’ll buy!

Roger BW – Firedrake’s Hoard

Great to hear about the love for *2300AD* which often feels a ‘poor relation’ to Traveller. You’ve inspired me to get my own *Bayern* box off the shelf and reread it. I did laugh at: ‘Of course, the traditional Mongoose “light touch” editing is present in abundance’.

Patrick Riley – Quasipseudoludognostication

I get where you’re coming from on PvP in games. Although I have seen Steve Ellis (a maestro!) do it very well at TravCon in a way that even I could cope with. Thank you for the Dice Corner which I found very helpful in now having a better clue about such options. (Also really liked your map on p.3 which doesn’t look dissimilar to my PowerPoint effort when the PCs were down a mine and gives me more confidence such things don’t have to look like the highly polished works of art from published books.)

¹⁹ See my zines in A&E #534 & #535 or the updated version in *A Gentle Stroll* #s 2-4 & hopefully #6 if I manage to edit Part 4 of this series by the end of the month.

²⁰ See *Egalitarian Roleplaying* in A&E #502.

John Redden – Reddened Stars

Funnily enough, I've just read Tchaikovsky's *Alien Clay* and you're right both about it being excellently written *and* very depressing. Extremely unusually for me I nearly gave up with it (despite having a nice autographed hardback!) but I'm glad I persevered because I found the conceptual breakthrough at the end well worth the journey. (Also, thanks for your Substack article which I read with some interest and no little horror.)

Engines and Emulators

Regarding your query about "Heath Wilson", it may help to know that at the time of ISIRTA, Harold Wilson and Edward "Ted" Heath had been two recent UK prime ministers.

Avram Grumer – Going to be Ad-libbed

Ah! Your 'zine style takes me back!

Jim Eckman – Ronin Engineer

RYC on 'retiring from a rough life' – well I think the point is that Travellers (i.e. those citizens of Charted Space put through char gen) rather like the life of adventure so merely 'continue' with it after their career. Not to mention not all careers are 'rough' (even, say, the Navy could be something of a sinecure). My father retired from the Royal Navy to become first a Baptist minister but then to spend 7 years in a difficult part of Brazil helping build a church that was certainly something of an adventure. Remember, char gen only represents a *tiny* portion of the population of the Third Imperium and surrounds.

Myles Corcoran – Twisting the Rope

RYCT to Michael C on Traveller's Aslan male/female split coming from *Pride of Chanur* (1981), I suppose it's possible, but *Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society* 7, where they appeared, was the first issue of 1981 so it would be a very tight thing IMO.

Thanks for your mentions of *Sufficiently Advanced* and Newman's *Shock* which I'd not come across. *Eclipse Phase* and *Mindjammer* I have on the shelves and enjoy reading although nor have I had the opportunity to play them. *Offworlders* sounds like I should definitely look it up.

Mitch Hyde – Dreadsword

Being a "one-trick pony" (Traveller), your favourite elements of AD&D were starting to sell me on it. If

you're offering similar on *Call of Cthulhu*, I'm interested. Is the artwork on page 3 yours? Very nice. RYC about "digging into" Traveller... yay! Go for it. (I may be biased). If you're interested in its sources, there are two books of interest: *The Science Fiction Traveller: A Reader's Guide to Traveller Role-Playing Fiction* by Shannon Appelcline and *Deciphering the Text Foundations of Traveller and other Essays* by Michael Andre-Driussi. I'd recommend both. (Appelcline has also recently written, and Mongoose has published something of a masterwork called *This is the Free Trader Beowulf: A System History of Traveller* which goes through the history of the game and its editions.)

Mark Nemeth – The Seedling

Very helpful and insightful comments regarding Myers-Briggs – thank you. Your comment to Jim V on writers' circles made me laugh – that's me too!

Jim V – Plankwell Campaign

RYC (RYF – regarding your footnote?) that you're a "blind idiot" – well, aren't we all in our own way? :-)
I work with a colour-blind colleague and he's a great reminder of *not* using colour to demarcate anything on posters, student handouts or webpages.



TravCon 2025 After Action Report

Just back from TravCon in Cambridgeshire last weekend (4th/5th October). Not to be confused with TravellerCon in Pennsylvania in a fortnight (24th-26th October). The UK's only purely Traveller convention takes place near Sawtry as some three dozen of us stay in Redwings motel and game in Alconbury Hall just up the road.²¹ The convention opened with a minute's silence for the much-missed Derrick J who died during the year.

21 See *Freelance Traveller* for annual After Action Reports or for a free/PWYW collection of them, see: <https://www.drivethrurpg.com/product/350098/A-Decade-of-TravCon>



Six undaunted travellers get a taste of Zilan Wine at TravCon 2025

Friday evening: The Lost Crèche of Perpethwe

This was an ‘ad hoc’ game for those who didn’t want to sit in a very noisy/hot bar where conversation was difficult for those with hearing loss. I had just written it the weekend before as a contribution to the Bwap themed *Freelance Traveller* issue supporting the Bwap themed TravellerCon in the USA. Bwaps are a “minor non-Human” race in Traveller: bipedal intelligent newts (*Salamandridae*) who dislike lying, love bureaucracy and believe in doing things in the “proper way”. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first Traveller adventure ever for a crew of them. We had a lot of fun in mud baths, encountering a lost and divergent arcology of Bwaps, and instead of combat for a climax at the end, a philosophy debate!²²

Saturday morning: Spindrifft

In the first formal slot, I ran my own adventure *Spindrifft*, which I’ve previously run at a couple of other conventions.²³ For once, I managed to get far too much material (it now runs to 80 pages) into the time slot (only 3 minutes over the four hours) as six more players explored a water world with some intelligent cephalopods, a small community of humans, and investigated what a nasty merchant crew were up to.

Saturday afternoon: Pioneer – Rescue in Low Earth Orbit

This was a playtest of Mongoose Traveller’s forthcoming near Earth, near future setting (just about to go into Kickstarter). Liv Kennedy, Mongoose’s new Marketing Manager, ran a game where we were a mission specialist team put together to rescue six

²² You can find it on page 37 of *Freelance Traveller* #131: <https://www.freelancetraveller.com/magazine/index.html>

²³ It can be seen in (short) form here: <https://amber.zone/2021/04/22/amber-zone-spindrifft/> where it came second in that year’s competition or in Spanish here: <https://elrincondemisfrikadas.com/2023/06/13/vuelo-raso-no-7/>

billionaires who had got into trouble on an hour long ‘space flight’. No resemblance to anyone in the real world could *possibly* have been intended! We decided we weren’t that fussed about the billionaires but went anyway to rescue the dog one of them had with them. This looks like it will

be a great addition to Traveller possibilities.

Saturday evening: The Sixth Element

Andy Lilly – the conference organizer – has, for several years now, been running Chirper games. Chirpers are another minor alien race in Traveller. They don’t have much intelligence. We’re a group of rubbish or trash collectors who get up to a lot of hi-jinx (and talking in squeaky voices) but usually manage to muddle through and save the day from whatever problem we’ve encountered. A huge amount of fun, a *remarkable* amount of in-character speech, and Andy runs it twice to (barely) satisfy demand. By this point I could barely move or think for exhaustion. TravCon is *not* chronic fatigue syndrome friendly!

Sunday: Scenes from the Traveller Adventure: Zilan Wine

I can’t realistically run an entire campaign at TravCon, but in order to recycle all the work I previously put into running *The Traveller Adventure* across six years, I do individual chapters each year, and this year was the turn of the hardest thing I’ve ever done. Zilan Wine is notorious for being the ‘admin’ adventure in Traveller where the PCs have to negotiate a labyrinth of 50+ bureaucrats to get the five forms they need to export some wine off planet. I’d worked hard to try and bring the ‘crats out of their plain stat format in the book and make them more real, but fortunately, I had six excellent players who really took to the whole conceit and brought the whole thing alive. Shot glasses of wine at the opening wine tasting may have helped! A highlight was one player managing a perfectly pitched in-game tribute to Derrick just as we came to the climax.

LAST WORD

The games at a convention may be fun, but what really make the event are the people and the community.