



EVER & Anon

Issue #7

January

2026

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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 #7 (ver. 1) – January 2026

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This issue’s IgTheme is: *The dumbest/silliest/craziest things the players ever did.*

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

What is This?

A Newbie's Guide to APAs

Q: What is this?

A: An APA.

Q: What's an APA?

A: An Amateur Press Association.

Q: What's that?

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

Q: What's a zine?

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

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

A: Exactly.

Q: And each one has a separate author?

A: Right.

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

A: Those are comments. We comment on each others zines. When you see *Mark Wilson: 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://attonarch.com/goodbye-to-alarums-and-excursions-apa>

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

I Want YOU!

to join our flippant fellowship



Send us a zine. Or some cover art. Or comments. Or a blurb.
Or just flatulate 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

Common Baloney Face

THE NEVERENDING SAGA #3

LOOKING FOR EXTREME VENGEANCE THIS CHRISTMAS

BY MATT STEVENS

8 HILLSIDE AVENUE, GOLDENS BRIDGE, NY 10526

KENT.ALLARD.JR@GMAIL.COM

(ARTWORK IN THIS ISSUE BY ME!!!!)



I have a number of responsibilities coming up in late December, so I hope to get this in early before the crunch. So what's on the agenda?

WHALE WHORES: STUPID PLAYER TRICKS

This was in “**Big Scary Dave (BSD)**”'s D&D 3E campaign in the mid-2000s. I played **Valenthe**, a low-Charisma (female) barbarian (shown above right). **Michelle** -- who was new to D&D -- played **Ivy**, a sexy rogue (picture below left). There were a half dozen other PCs.

For some reason -- I forget why -- we had to sneak into a castle, and the two girls with Stealth skills went in on their own. One of us flubbed our Stealth roll, though, and a guard came by to ask us what we were up to.



Ivy: “Hi! We’re.... Looking for work.”

Guard (looking Ivy over): “Oh, you’re **looking for work**, huh? The boys will be happy to hear it!”

He escorted us to the barracks, where “the boys” were thrilled to meet that night’s entertainment. I felt Valenthe -- low Charisma, remember -- was utterly out of element, but did her best to play along.

Valenthe: “Oh...boy. Look at, uh, all these ... hot guys. I’m so horny? Yeah, I’m ... so horny.”

Ivy and Valenthe were led to separate cubby holes with their first clients. Valenthe stalled as much as she could, until Ivy decided she’d had enough and stabbed her john in the chest, killing him. So Valenthe chopped her guy’s head off, and the two of them fled into the night.

Luckily, Michelle found the whole incident delightfully funny and became a D&D fan.

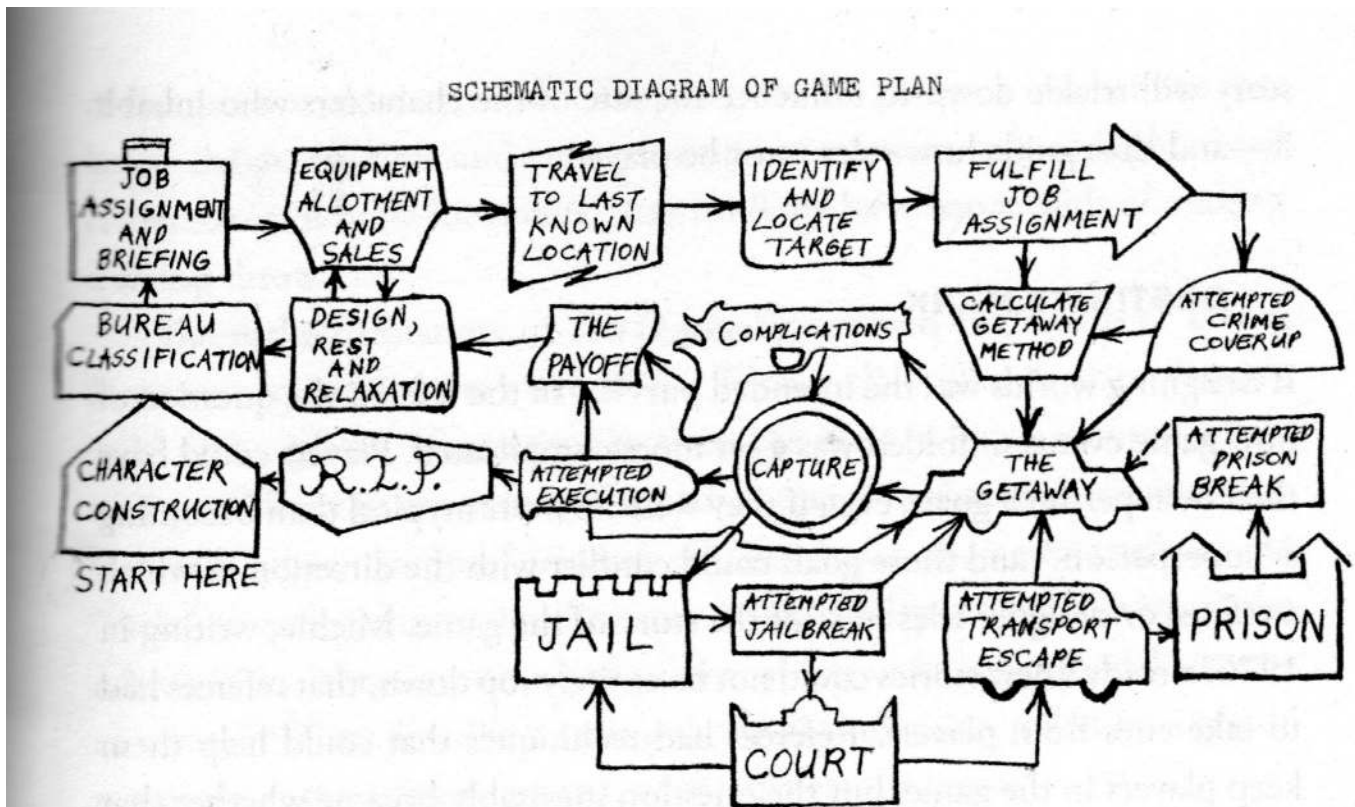
P.S. As I recall, BSD showed us a map earlier that day, and our response was “it looks like a whale.” So this became the “whale whore” session.

THE TOP SECRET PLOT DIAGRAM

This is a diagram from an early draft of Merle Rasmussen's *Top Secret*. Originally, it was conceived as a literal game board, in which PCs would be moved from cell to cell, and ability checks would be used to determine progress. (The closest game like it would be FGU's *Flash Gordon and the Warriors of Mongo*.) That idea was scrapped and *Top Secret* was released as a more conventional RPG.

So what? Not only is it cool history, but I think this would be a good starting point for many RPG plot diagrams. Not for **all** missions; only those in which PCs go somewhere, do something illegal, and run out. (“Illegal,” in this case, means “something PCs don’t want to be caught doing.”) Other plots would require different diagrams, and while I shudder to think what (for example) a generic murder mystery diagram might look like, I don’t think it would be impossible.

(Image from Jon Peterson's book *The Elusive Shift*, which is highly recommended BTW)



TO KEEP TRACK OF AGENT MOVEMENTS A TOKEN CAN BE MOVED FROM BLOCK TO BLOCK.

AN AGENT CAN REMAIN ON A BLOCK AS LONG AS HE OR SHE CHOOSES.

AGENTS GET ONE ATTEMPTED PRISON BREAK ON THEIR OWN AND IF IT FAILS THEY MUST REMAIN UNTIL RESCUED.

Figure 4.1

"Schematic Diagram of Game Plan," from a draft of *Top Secret* (c. 1977). Courtesy of Merle Rasmussen.

COMMENTS E&A # 3

Clark Timmons

Very much enjoyed Four Things. I appreciate the pulp-style monsters: Unique, alien, and terrifying freaks of pure imagination. They were very different from today's catalogues of familiar creatures.

Michael Cule

I liked Aegis/the World Inside the Walls. After all you've done -- two campaigns and a TV pilot -- you must have enough material for at least a short setting guide.

Brian Rodgers

Continue to enjoy Regrettable Superheroes. Yet another sign of the creative explosion of the inter-war period.

Avram Grumer

Mothership/Black Star: I would think the advantage/disadvantage systems they use -- roll twice, take higher/lower value -- would work better in D&D 5E. In D&D you're only rolling a single, physical die (a d20), and can roll two at the same time without confusion. With 2d6 or percentile you'd have to roll them in succession or make sure they're different colors or something.

COMMENTS E&A # 4

Brian Rodgers

Your variant D&D rules: "Wisdom became Divine Favor (how much do the gods favor you)." Funny thing is, you already have an attribute that means "divine favor," it's ... Charisma! The term originally meant "divine favor"; it took on its more secular definition after Max Weber.

Patrick Riley

Thank you for Dice Corner! I'm a stats teacher so this sort of thing interests me. What software do you use for your tables?

COMMENTS E&A # 5

Okay... I don't have any. I decided to skip ahead to...

COMMENTS E & A # 6

Gabriel Roark

Bill Fitzgerald: All I remember about his cow obsession was he saw cows in a field, their ears were flapping up and down, and he yelled out "Fly away! Be free!" He was a funny kid.

Myles Corcoran

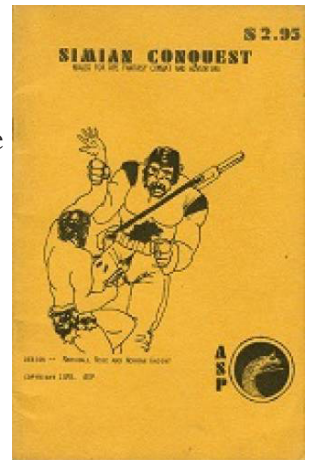
Pants of Devouring: There used to be a drawing of The Pants, with a terrified head and flailing arm peeking over the waistband. I erased it, though, for God knows what reason.

Game Preferences: I like some OSR ideas, but ultimately, I think archaic mechanics are counter-productive. Don't get me wrong: I collect old RPGs, I love learning the hobby's history, I've even played OD&D on a lark. But we've learned a lot about game mechanics since 1974 and it's silly to pretend otherwise.

Lisa Padol

Hello again! *Simian Conquest*: I believe it's one of those little digest RPGs from the mid-70s, no more than 32 pages long, supposedly designed for *Planet of the Apes*-style adventures. I doubt it's that good, but after looking for 20 years I'd love to harpoon it, mount it on my wall and complete my collection of 70s RPGs.

Oh, I don't have a problem with motivation in traditional RPGs. (Hell, in *really* traditional games the motivation is obvious: Don't die!) It's in storygames where those motivations become contradictory, where it may be better *as a story* if everyone gets slaughtered but I want my PC to live through it, for example.



Heist games: My feeling is that most bank robbers get caught, eventually. There's no need to stack the deck against PCs; just assess threats and possible complications realistically. (I remember Mickey Rourke's speech in *Body Heat*: "A hundred things can go wrong on a job. If you're a genius you can think of half of them. And you are no genius.") I'd like a game in which both *Ocean's Eleven* and *Reservoir Dogs* are possible, and you don't know which until it all goes down.

Oddly enough, I **like** *Chivalry and Sorcery*... as a sourcebook for feudalism, and for a few of its other ideas. It never worked as a game, though, and I don't see much point to a new edition.

Here's why I thought starship repair rules could be a little more complex than (say) combat:

- It takes longer, diegetically, so it's not breaking the mood if you slow the game down a little to go over mechanics
- Typically only one or two PCs are involved, so others can do different things while the repairs go on
- It shouldn't come up every.single.session.

Are these good reasons? Damn if I know.

Avram Grumer

"My teen years seem to have involved atypically low levels of sex and drug use." I think we were all lied to by our teen comedies. Very few of us lived like characters in *Porkey's*, and if we did, it was after we got money (and in my case, enough anti-depressants to socialize properly). I had a lot more fun in my 30s.

Fiasco: I could be totally off base in my assessment, because I never played it. And yes, I often have fun playing violent dingbats. I just don't want to have to engage in meta-reasoning. In that session with Father Magnum and Sneezy (I forget Josh's character), Magnum's motivation was clear: Shoot evil-doers without dying himself. Yeah, he failed, but he went down shooting. (And IIRC, Sneezy survived!)

Michael Cule

Am I a "political mapping analyst"? Got it in one, that's me! One minor benefit is that I get access to professional mapping software and poster printers. I got a giant map of my fantasy world courtesy of the New York State Senate fifteen years ago. Sadly, recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions have screwed the field up so much I can't imagine going back to it.

Joshua Kronengold

Hello again to you too! *7th Sea*: Oh my God, I remember that one. Another genre I would've loved to

explore, but I hated the execution. Maybe I judged it too harshly; aside from the sample scenario, the rules and the setting, I'm sure it was tip-top.

Your remarks about *Fiasco* -- and your examples from other storygames -- suggest I may have overgeneralized about it. I'm still skeptical, and would be more interested in a conventional RPG with a heist focus. (I'd love one with details on real-life crime techniques, even though that'd risk law-enforcement attention, Steve Jackson Games style.) Still, I ordered *Fiasco* for Xmas, and will read it more thoroughly.

I like the "Low/High Contact" distinction. Another gripe I've had about storygames is they can be high contact as hell! I remember a play example in Robin Laws's *HeroQuest* in which PCs negotiate with a high priestess. I felt most conventional RPGs would've handled this through roleplaying -- that's certainly what we did in Cthulhupunk -- but in *HeroQuest* they were hauling out the dice pools.

Blasted Heath Row

Liked, and felt a tinge of jealousy, reading about your trip to the Lake Geneva Museum. Now **there** is a place I'd love to stage a heist!

Brian Misiaszek

Hello to you too! Still impressed with the amount of detail in *The Mazzora*, and hope Sadie is OK. Right-Wing Pulps: As I've said before, I don't think vigilantism was coded as right-wing back then. That was more of a 1960s thing, a response to the liberal reforms of the period. (Certainly Communists weren't opposed to extra-judicial executions.)

Now according to Lee Server's *Danger Is My Business*, pulp author Arthur Empey was "a radical right-winger" who actually created a "blackshirts-type private army, the Hollywood Hussars," with movie star Gary Cooper. (Man, *High Noon* will never feel the same again.) He was a shitty writer, too, so ... Thumbs down!

Jim Vassilikos

Funny, I also wrote computer programs for *Traveller* in QBasic, as you did, both for character and world generation. I even had a crude random map maker for the latter. In fact I got back into RPGs in grad school because I wanted to expand world generation tables based on what I learned in college. *Traveller* comes close to the "a table for everything" ideal that you hint at, and I respect the game for that reason. (Once again, you don't *need* to use all those tables, but they're good to have if you do.)

Note that Paul Jaquays changed her name to Janelle, and some people get upset if you refer to her by the old name. I don't, because I assume you didn't know! I didn't until Zack Smith (of all people) mentioned her in a blog.

Sadly I don't think computers could ever bridge the complexity divide in tabletop RPGs. With complex rules you still have to enter a lot of variables, and typically, only some of your players can enter the info without assistance. So in practice very little time is actually saved. (I learned this the hard way during Covid!) They're still great for game prep, but not in-session.

NEXT ISSUE

I need to go grade papers, so I'll end here. Next month, more comments and recycled stuff. Take care!

Elaria – Clark B. Timmins

This continues my prehistory of last 'zine, *The Old City*. All of this has happened “in the distant past” when the city was a living political power. It’s the pre-history of an adventure site which, hopefully, will add flavor and complexity.

The kingdom of Elaria¹ is ruled from the capital of Velisaré² by a monarch, either king or queen. The crest of the capital shows a white mountain from which flows a blue waterfall that becomes the River Veyra.

The maximum extent of the kingdom includes these additional areas (see map at end of 'zine):

- **Riverlands** – fed by the River Veyra, the Riverlands are agriculturally rich. Central, settled, economically significant.
- **Northern Provinces** – either Provinces (semi-autonomous) or Territories (more governed), depending upon the level of political control over time. Sparsely settled. Home to the rebellious Hill Tribes (nomadic).
- **Outer Provinces** – semi-autonomous region with little political significance. This area maintains a distinct cultural identity.
- **Western Marches** – considered to be the very “edge of the realm” and important primarily as a buffer zone between distant power centers. Sparsely settled, little explored.
- **Bog of Xal’Nath** – a vast swampy region that has never been conquered. Maintains own culture and independent political systems, home of crocodilian race. A place of forbidden knowledge, forgotten cults, and lost magic. It is the source of *Maw of Aeons* (drug). The name means: Xal = salt; Nath = implies binding, curse, or soul, usually interpreted as meaning death.
- **Sea of Glass** – a vast area, primarily a wasteland, of volcanic origin; vast stretches of mixed obsidian and salt water. A mystical place of occasional wealth and constant danger. The *Sky Traders* periodically come out of this area, bearing exotic, expensive, and strange goods.
- **Eastern Sands** – a vast desert region that has never been conquered. Maintains own culture and semi-independent political systems; ruled by the Sand Kings and inhabited by Desert Raiders. A constant source of border skirmishing.

¹ Elaria is the Solitheran name for the kingdom. In Tharnish it is called Alarn and in Sempiternal it is called Selariah.

² Velisaré is the Solitheran name for the city. In Tharnish it is called Velsar and in Sempiternal it is called Velesariah.

- **Sapphire Hills** – a traditional battleground and desolate buffer zone between Velisaré, the Sand Kings, rebellious Hill Tribes, and the outside world. Rich in minerals, beautiful, and strategically important. Considered to be a cultural crossroads. Numerous battlefields: many consider them haunted.

The kingdom features three primary languages:

- **Tharnish** – the “common” tongue, spoken by most people most of the time. Tharnish is unusual inasmuch as it is tonal-prosodic (both pitch and cadence confer meaning), making it sound lyrical but also making it very difficult to write. Because most speakers also are illiterate, written Tharnish is quite rare.
- **Soltheran** – the language of the court, spoken by the kingdom’s elites including royals, nobles, and priests; most documents, monuments, and stonework with writing feature Soltheran.
- **Sempiternal** – the ancient priestly language used only by the priests and only in the conduct of priestly duties; it primarily is a written language rarely used in actual speech outside of rituals

The kingdom of Elaria uses two scripts:

- **Tharnic** – the basic alphabet used for both Tharnish and Soltheran. Soltheran also adds a complex system of diacritics known as *Wainstroke*. Tharnic primarily uses angles and straight lines and has a few dozen phonetic characters that are assembled into words. *Wainstroke* appears as small lines marked above or below other characters to indicate stress and pronunciation.
- **Sempiternal** – a hugely complex system of cuneiform characters and ideograms. It uses many wedge-shaped marks, as well as more complex ideograms and has thousands of characters, some of which can be used phonetically. It is fully adapted to – and only used for – writing by scratching or punching character shapes into bronze plates that are considered sacred texts.

The central, sacred texts are maintained by the priests. The texts are never removed from the temple sanctum. Occasionally, transcripts on paper are made for use outside of the temple. These transcripts almost always are translated into Soltheran. The sacred texts are very concise, and primarily relate to the complex and unpredictable calendaring system used by the kingdom – excepting significant events like a new king, new high priest, major military victory, major social change, etc. The texts are kept as codices.

The bone-pinned codices exist in a dozen volumes of cased and pinned bronze plates. Each codex covers a period of approximately 90 years of religious history, about 1100 years

in total. Collectively, they refer to themselves as “*The Starry Wisdom*”. Each codex also has an individual name. They are not sequentially numbered.

Each bronze plate is cast as a blank and then hammered into ~1mm thickness, and measures approximately eight inches high by sixteen inches wide. The surface of each plate is covered with a mix of very small cuneiform and ideogram writing totaling about 5,500 characters and representing perhaps five modern pages of typed information. The characters are made by using burins and punches and occur on only one side of each plate. The characters subsequently are infilled with dark brown lacquer.

The plates are interleaved with silk spacer pages. From 65-70 plates, each with a silk spacer, are stacked into a bronze case that is about four inches tall and measures about twelve inches high by twenty-inches wide (with ¼” thickness of walls). The binding uses four bone pins, one at each corner. To access individual pages, the plates are lifted off the pins and out of the case, one at a time. Many of the plates have engraved edges for indexing and some even have bronze tabs. Some of the plates have colored lacquer along portions of the edges, also for indexing. The plates are not sequentially numbered. The case lid is made of geometrically engraved bronze, and the entire case is held shut by a bronze sliding locking bar that passes through brackets on the front of the box.

Each cased set of plates weighs a total of about 160 pounds; about 55 pounds for the case and about 105 pounds for the plates. Most cases include some miscellaneous types of tools, including engraving styluses, hammer and chisel sets, measuring rods and compasses, punches and stamps, filing stones and rasps, tongs, and leather gloves. Each case radiates a much-faded abjuration of chronomancy, to suspend the contents in time. All the codices, collectively, represent approximately 2,500 modern pages of typed information.

The engravings are in a language named Sempiternal. It is used only in religious contexts and was not generally spoken by anyone except priests. It has no resemblance to the common languages of the time. The focus of the language is the retention of the calendaring system itself, though it also refers to major events and people. The calendaring system used includes cycles of days grouped into Kairon (also referred to as “The Divined Span”), an indeterminate period of length which is determined by augury. Each Kairon usually lasts between three and twenty days. In turn, twenty-five to sixty-five Kairon are grouped into Augurnum (also referred to as “The Great Span”), which is something roughly analogous to the concept of a year. Augurnum are named for some notable event or person, however, and not numbered. It is therefore difficult to correlate the internal dates with general historical dates. Each Augurnum contains about 517 days (though this is quite variable) and, on average, covers about one bronze plate.

The Starry Wisdom presents the history of the kingdom in three main eras:

- **The Obsidian Age**, from founding (0 year) to about 600 years. A period of kingdom building from small, humble origins to a powerful and important kingdom.
 - The government is a stable monarchy based on primogeniture
 - The social elites include royals, nobles, and priests
 - Royals and especially nobles are military leaders
 - Priests are social leaders
 - The law is divided into two parts – one for elites and one for commoners. The law generally is fair and even-handed and seeks to promote general welfare.
 - The people would be characterized as lawful good
 - Commoners are farmers, artisans, and builders.
 - Families are the basic social unit; roles are influenced by (but not proscribed by) gender
 - Clothing is simple cloths and skins, and personal adornment is with common objects of low value
 - Food consists of cereal grains, legumes, vegetables, herbs, fruits, and nuts – almost all produced locally
 - The primary religion focuses on sun worship
 - Both of the primary deities, Alm and Elm, are associated equally with the sun and, to a lesser degree, the moon and the stars
 - Augury is common and considered infallible; primarily it is derived from celestial observation, especially of stars
 - Ritual burial is observed. Elites are cremated and buried in cinerary urns around the city center; commoners are buried in fields
 - Education of royals and priests is common; education of nobles is rudimentary; education of commoners is uncommon
 - Elites typically are literate, commoners are not
 - Painting and pottery are common; sculpture is less common and is used to emphasize royalty. Dance is considered an especially significant art form.
 - Public buildings are constructed from massive cut stones, derived locally, of a chalky color, then usually painted with blues and reds. Round arches are used. Bas relief geometric pattern decorations are common.
 - Warfare with neighboring tribes and other units is regular
 - Military structure is simple and placed under the leadership of royals or, more commonly, nobles

- Most military action begins as defensive warfare and then ends in conquest
 - Throughout the period, military victory was fairly common and the kingdom expanded greatly through conquest
- Society was in transition from bronze to iron
 - Mathematics and astronomy, confined primarily to the priests, is advanced
 - Non-magical medicine and healing is rudimentary and practiced only by commoners – herbal cures are common
 - Roads are primitive, except within the city center
- Currency is primarily based on precious metals – copper and silver being common coins
 - Trade routes are local or short distance
 - Markets within the city are held weekly
 - There is little concept that “trade” can be a significant economic driver – it instead is used primarily to obtain exotic spices
- ***The Age of Stars***, from 600 years to about 900 years. A period of kingdom stability to decline, primarily through continuous small military defeats.
 - The government continues as a monarchy but there are upheavals
 - Royals consider military leadership to be beneath their status
 - The law becomes unpredictable for elites and increasingly harsh to commoners. The focus of the law shifts to property and wealth.
 - Taxation becomes increasingly burdensome and onerous
 - The people would be characterized as lawful neutral
 - There is increasing urbanization
 - Clothing becomes more refined, and personal adornment more costly
 - Food includes more meat and fish, as well as imported delicacies
 - Religion focuses increasingly on pantheism around sun worship; Alm and Elm are deemphasized
 - Ritual cremation is observed. Elites cremated remains buried in increasingly elaborate cinerary urns; commoners are cremated and usually buried in urns
 - Education of royals and priests is common; education of nobles and commoners is uncommon
 - Royals and priests are literate, nobles and commoners usually are not
 - Painting and sculpture become more common and diverse; pottery assumes many standard forms and patterns. Dance declines in significance but is still popularly enjoyed.

- Public buildings are constructed from smaller cut stones, imported, of a reddish color, with minor painted elements. Pointed arches are used. Interiors include small cut inlays, mosaic tiles, and large colored glass windows.
- Warfare with neighboring tribes and other units is nearly constant
 - Military structure is increasingly confused and determined by nobles and their ideas or tastes; the royalty seems uninterested in details
 - Throughout the period, small military defeats and setbacks are continuous and the kingdom decreases in size and power
- Society has fully converted to iron
 - Roads are improved, especially in the city
- Currency is primarily based on precious metals – copper and silver being common coins, gold being less common; royal writs of currency are used (and despised)
 - Trade routes increase in length and complexity
 - Markets within the city are held constantly
 - Traders and businessmen amass considerable wealth
- ***The Age of Wonder***, from 900 years to about 1100. A period of decline, social dissolution, population collapse, and convulsions.
 - The government continues as a monarchy that becomes totalitarian
 - Royals consider nobles as opponents to be dealt with
 - For elites, there is no law but intrigue and force. For commoners, the law always means severe punishment or death.
 - Taxation yields to outright confiscation and theft
 - Citizens become serfs or worse
 - The people would be characterized as lawful evil
 - There is urban blight. Organized crime and terror are common.
 - Clothing becomes exotic and extreme, including much nudity. Personal adornments feature body modification and extensive tattooing.
 - The rich feast on rarities; the commoners are near starvation
 - Ritualized drug use becomes pervasive
 - Religion focuses increasingly on cult worship
 - Ritual burial by cremation and cinerary urn interment becomes obsessive and legally mandated
 - Priestly influence nearly vanishes, except in the scrupulous observation of the burial customs
 - Death Priests become recognized as a separate caste

- Education for anyone is haphazard, at best
 - A few royals and some priests are literate, most people are illiterate
- The arts decline precipitously and focus nearly exclusively on exalting royalty
- Public buildings are constructed from red brick, plastered and painted inside. High-pointed arches are used. Interiors are richly decorated with bright colors, metals, and intricate ornamentation. Buildings are designed with defense in mind.
- Warfare and revolution are continuous
 - Military structure collapses and most forces are mobs or rabble
 - A well-armed and armored royal bodyguard is recruited and maintained
 - The kingdom collapses into the capital city, which itself comes under frequent siege and destruction
- Society has fully converted to iron
 - Roads and public works are no longer cared for
- Currency is unregulated and bewildering; royal writs of currency are scorned
 - Trade collapses
 - Markets collapse; black markets and barter become common
 - Anyone with wealth is a target

The Obsidian Age texts enumerate 65 kings or queens, all claiming an unbroken line of descent.

The Age of Stars texts enumerate 25 kings or queens, all claiming credible rights to the throne (most through descent).

The Age of Wonder texts enumerate 29 kings or queens, some claiming divine parentage.

Religious History of Elaria

- Sun Worship in traditional form is widely practiced from the founding.
 - The two deities, Alm and Elm, are both associated with the sun
 - Celestial augury, especially at night, is a major component
- King Elira the Pious makes Sun Worship the state religion, 80
- King Beric the Scholar has a notable split with the religious power center when he translates *The Starry Wisdom* into Tharnish. After his death he is declared a heretic and the translation is suppressed.
- Queen Soraya the Seer first uses *World Without End* to have visions, *abt.* 150
 - At this time, *World Without End* is not considered to be a religious rite

- Queen Thalia the Flamekeeper revives ancient fire rituals and founds Cult of Ashen Dawn, 225
 - At first, Cult of Ashen Dawn is a small and secret cult within the greater Sun Worship tradition. It is open only to select elites, and it promotes cremation as the only method to ensure the soul can transmigrate.
 - From this point onward, fire worship and sun worship become merged
- King Darius the Pale negotiates a trade treaty with the *Sky Traders*, which secures a reliable source of *World Without End* from 300. Its use is considered a royal prerogative.
- King Alaric II, the Younger, reforms Cult of Ashen Dawn to realign its practices with traditional Sun Worship, 310
- Cult of the Hollow Sun appears 351, preaches a wicked, distorted form of Sun Worship. It is suppressed by Queen Amina, 361.
- Queen Hana, the Flame of Dawn, reforms Sun Worship and initiates sunrise rituals, 445
- King Jorin the Flamebearer revives ancient fire rituals
- Queen Selene, the Moonbound, introduces lunar cycle augury into Cult of Ashen Dawn. The practice is considered heretical and is discontinued after her reign, 503-520.
- King Thamir III, the Vigilant, introduces ritual use of *World Without End* for royal elites
- Queen Garran II, the Ironhand, sees the first use of *Maw of Aeons* during her reign, 681-705.
 - *Maw of Aeons* is provided to non-royals as an ersatz and affordable – but efficacious – alternative to *World Without End*
- Queen Soraya II, the Dreamer, suppresses Cult of Ashen Dawn, 770, and suppresses drug use. Attempts to revive ancient forms of Sun Worship.
- King Maelis II, the Last Flame, announces Festival of Unity, promotes legitimized Cult of Ashen Dawn, 795. Use of *World Without End* becomes common among elites.
- Queen Elayne II, the Silent, sees use of *Maw of Aeons* become common during her reign, 808-827.
 - Most commoners erroneously believe *Maw of Aeons* is *World Without End*, and it is sold as such
- Queen Seraphine II, the Last Light, mandates cremation for all
- Queen Thalia II, the Ashen, outlaws *Maw of Aeons*, 873
 - *Maw of Aeons* use diminishes but does not stop

- Queen Aurelian the Divine claims divinity and sponsors mass *World Without End* rituals during her prolonged coronation, 900
 - Her coronation initiates the Age of Wonder
 - Royal use of *World Without End* prevalent from this time onward
 - Cult of Ashen Dawn becomes prominent among elites from this time onward
- King Faelan II, the Crimson, takes Cult of Ashen Dawn into new realms of depravity
- King Idran II, the Chosen, dies in battle with an army of Mawtouched, 973
- Queen Mirelle II, the Radiant Sun, introduces heavy use of *World Without End* into all aspects of religious ritual, 975
- Queen Rowan II, the Ashen, becomes obsessed with cremating all physical remains of all deceased things. She directs massive exhumations of burial grounds, etc., for cremation or re-cremation in an effort to “release spirits”, 996-1003
- King Malik III of the Desert abandons the capital for an unknown desert cult – but does not abdicate authority, 1015. This leads to a final, bitter splintering of the state religion into Death Priests, who operate the crematorium, and Priests who belong to Cult of Ashen Dawn – this schism known as the Great Fragmentation, 1016.
- King Laleh II, the Enlightened, believes transcendence can be achieved through constant use of *World Without End*; founds the Opaline Brotherhood, a cartel to control all sources of *World Without End*, 1030.
- Queen Samira IV, the Starborn, initiates nightly worship of meteors and other celestial omens, 1037-1046.
- Queen Thalia III, the Tranquil, mandates priestly use of *World Without End*, 1060
- King Sorin II, the Drowned, drowns during a mysterious religious ritual. Cult of Ashen Dawn proclaims him a martyr which sparks a civil war, 1076-1087.
- Duke Kael II, the Last, claims the throne but can’t achieve victory over a fragmented kingdom. Dies 1087.
- Queen Nyla II, the Phoenix, briefly restores some central government, 1087. This ends when she dies at the hands of rebels, 1092.
- Queen Rafiq II, the Broken, is the final claimant of the throne. She announces her apotheosis as "Ashara the Unending, She Who Burns Time, the Final Bloom, the Crown Beyond Flesh, She Who Sleeps in Smoke, the Last Light of the Dying Eye, the Queen of Endless Descent", 1092.
- From 1092 on *The Starry Wisdom* ceases to be kept.



Outer Provinces



Northern Provinces



Sapphire Hills



Western Marches



Riverlands



Velisaré



Eastern Sands



Bog of Xal'Nath



Sea of Glass

The Kingdom of Elaria and environs

Ignorable Theme for E&A Issue #7

The dumbest/silliest/craziest things the players ever did.

I don't have any entertaining examples. I have a low tolerance for players doing stupid/silly/crazy things just because they think it's funny¹ or just because they can.² So maybe these incidents didn't survive the jump to long term memory.

In my previous *D&D* campaign, the male halfling warlock of a fey patron negotiated safe passage through a harpy-controlled area by agreeing to have sexual relations with the harpy negotiator. After the deed was done, jokes about "harpy-pox" circulated among the party.

In the current campaign, the stupidest thing (so far) was Anan's player forgetting Anan could fly and instead falling 100+ feet down a dungeon shaft.

Callback to a previous Ignorable Theme

I have been listening to the second season of *Woodbine*,³ a podcast about the exploits of a paranormal detective agency and the vampires who run it. It gets me into the mood to do something with *Nightlife*.

Procedure in RPGs

Battlestations is a board game where players play the crew of a starship managing systems during a starship battle, undertaking landing missions, etc. Each player has a character and there could be roleplaying, but the scenarios never require it. We're too busy doing what the scenario demands we to bother playing a character.

D&D is exactly the same. There is nothing in the game *system* that demands roleplaying and yet, it happens. I think it's because roleplaying is part of the *D&D* culture and the *scenarios* leave space for it. Even so, it has been my experience that roleplaying tends to take a back seat once initiative is rolled, when the procedural nature of turn-based combat takes over, but once the combat is over, roleplaying starts up again. Is it just me?

¹ For the LOLs as the kids (used to?) say.

² A YOLO attitude is very easy in rpgs.

³ woodbinepod.com

I've been ruminating on this for a bit, but my comments to Avram and Lisa in this issue prompted me to expound on this.

In the rpg *Ryuutama*, there is a procedure called the Journey Check. It consists of 4 checks, taken either individually or collectively by the PCs:

- Condition: Determines everyone's Condition for that day.
- Travel: Determines the ability of each traveler to traverse the terrain without incident.
- Direction: Determines the ability of the party to find their way.
- Camping: Determines whether the party passes the night safely.

The rules explain:

Every success should prompt an in-character reaction. Every failure should set up an interesting challenge or role-play scene in the game. The GM should embellish the description of what happens, or perhaps leave it to the players to tell the group how they managed to succeed, or what occurred when they failed.

While, yes, they are a series of static, rules-based die rolls, Journey Checks should immediately prompt role-playing and potentially create new twists in the story.

They also provide a simplified example of actual play that illustrates what they mean, but I can't always tell what is said out-of-character versus in-character (what I would call roleplaying). It is quite uninspiring.

With this and other games (such as *Forged in the Dark* games), I think I keep bumping my head against a narrative framework that is intended to support a story. These load-bearing, story-centric structures block my character-centric view. When reading (or reading about) the rules, I don't know how it is supposed to play out at the table—when do I cut in to play my character?

The Whispering Vault is an extreme example where the baffling steps of conducting a Hunt—Summoning the Navigator, Dismissing the Guardian, Calling the Weavers, et al—seem more like a series of visuals that sound cool, but are they fun to play out? Are you supposed to? I love the vibe of *The Whispering Vault*, but it confounds me.

The Adventurers Guild

Have I mentioned how much I hate scheduling?

Last issue, I mentioned how I had to change my planned multi-session adventure for a one-off because I'd be missing Vrax's player for what would be the second session of that adventure. After sending out that zine, Iggy's player also had to cancel not only the next session but the whole of December because they were working at the Dickens Fair in San Francisco. Furthermore, Vrax would also miss out the first session because they (and others) were getting evicted from their makers' garage and had to scramble to move everything out. Bad news, but also good news. This meant I would have four players for a couple of sessions and I was back to the original plan. And then Eridan's player called in sick two days before the session and I was forced to cancel the session. This now puts me in a situation where I won't have two back-to-back sessions with a consistent group until January because Chayote's player will be gone for one of the December sessions.

This problem would seem to be self-inflicted because the group has 6 players.⁴ It would be easier to schedule with only 3, but small numbers have their own scheduling problems—killing the session if even one player has to drop. Also, I could play missing PCs as NPCs, but I have never liked doing that and it would be too much to ask of another player, even assuming that the missing player would allow it. I don't have copies of everyone's character sheets. The notion of having PCs phase in and out of existence based on their players' presence might be fine for some groups, but it eats at what little sense of immersion we might actually obtain despite the distractions, table talk, and game mechanics. Even if there was some form of fast travel that would allow a missing PC to catch up to the group in the next session, it wouldn't explain why a PC would leave in the middle of an adventure when the player couldn't make the next session.

My own preferences have painted me into a corner.

The upshot is that the group can never leave their base of operations—the city of Islingford-upon-Orlin—for more than one session. When they were low level—Bronze tier members of the guild—there were enough ways to justify low-level adventures in the city, countryside, and surrounding villages. But as they gain

levels and the threats increase (see my list of quests last issue), it strains credulity to have all the major events happen locally. The conceit of the rifts opening and bringing threats to their doorstep can only stretch so far. If I gave them fast-travel to remote locations (within the world or through a rift to an entirely different world), I'd lose the joy of exploration and side quests that make for a richer campaign.

We have had 26 sessions (including session 0) in 13 months, so that's not a bad run—a pretty good run by some standards.

Our Party

- **Anan:** Level 6 Copper Dragonborn Fighter (Battle Master)
- **Millie:** Level 6 Human Wizard (Abjurer)
- **Chayote:** Level 6 Rock Gnome Cleric of Hathor (Life Domain)

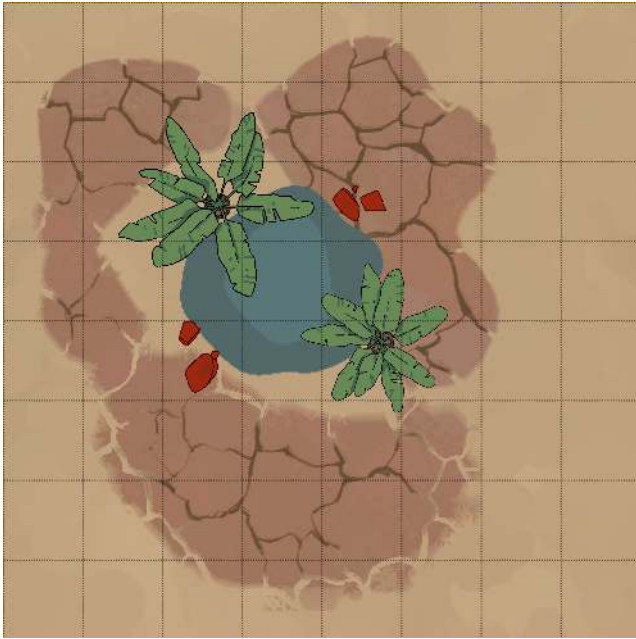
As our heroes were getting ready for their journey, twin tieflings, Millo and Ollim, met them in the guild stables with their mounts (two horses and a pony) plus a couple of pack horses. They explained that Mr. Eks Wyze (the head of the Islingford-upon-Orlin chapter of the Adventurers Guild) had arranged for them to assist the party as hirelings. This was his thanks for the party helping the city watch in the previous adventure. Plus, I knew they wouldn't pack enough supplies to cross the desert and I wanted to hand-wave any arguments about how much feed and water was needed for their horses.

Through the Desert On a Horse with a Name

The desert heat was oppressive. Just as the sun began to set on the horizon, another sun rose on the other. This clearly indicated that they were on a completely different world than the one they had left. Even with the extra water brought by the twins, Chayote and Anan were beginning to feel the effects of exhaustion. [In the rules as written, I should not have called for an exhaustion check until they had gone without water for 24 hours, but I wanted to crank up the pressure.]

They caught sight of an oasis and went off their track to reach it. They approached with some apprehension. It was a simple pool of clear water with a couple of palm-like trees and a few bare rocks. Anan knelt down and tasted the water, finding it tangy and alkaline(?) but unnaturally cool.

⁴ [Your DnD Party is Too Big](#)



Once they led the horses to water, the water surged and gurgled and the trees swayed like limbs, attacking Millie's riding horse and Anan's warhorse, Shadow. Teeth-like rocks appeared from around the pool and snatched at the horses. Millie was able to pull her horse out of reach, but Shadow's barding was unable to protect the noble steed. Shadow fell and was pulled into the pool/maw while the entire party retreated. [There was some confusion at the table about which horse was under attack, so I asked Anan's player to decide and they picked Shadow.] Anan lamented not only his mount but the gear that had been lost as well. Millie then chastised him for not using the bag of holding that she carried.

Denied their respite, they continued onward. They lost track of the hours in this realm of perpetual daylight and by the time they caught sight of their destination, Anan was suffering even worse, his dragonborn physiology overheated by the unrelenting solar exposure.

Looming off in the distance, there were darker skies, as if from thunderclouds and as they got closer, flashing of lighting could be seen. As they marched on, eventually, they saw a pyramid whose golden apex was being struck by lightning (actually, it was the emitting the lighting, a fact I retconned later).

The maps shown here were created with Dungeondraft.

Pyramid of Amun Se

The entrance to the pyramid was buried in desert sand. Fortunately, the twins had shovels to compensate for the one lost with Shadow. Though the party took shifts at digging, the stormy skies gave no relief from the heat and Anan's stamina continued to decline.⁵

Once they cleared enough sand to push open the exterior door, they entered a corridor that sloped gently downward (1). Inside, the air smelled faintly of ozone and static electricity tickled the hairs on their skin. The walls of the corridor depicted a grand procession of people and animals. A human dressed in gold finery was carried aloft toward a pyramid much like the one they had just entered.

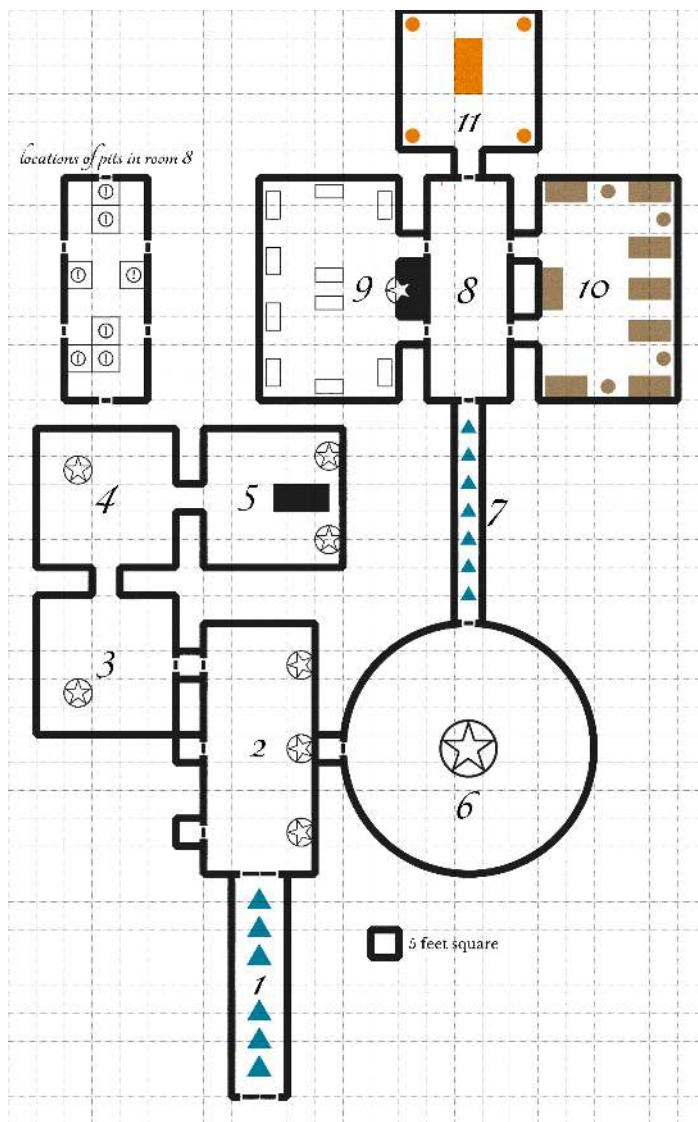
There was just enough room in the corridor to fit everyone plus the horses, so they moved everyone inside and shut the exterior door leaving just enough of a gap to get fresh air.

Throughout this structure, the floor and ceiling consist of semi-regular rectangular blocks of sandstone between 1 and 4 feet to a side. The walls are of stone blocks painted in vibrant colors depicting verdant landscapes—a stark contrast to the desolate sea of sand outside—and battles between massive armies and/or monsters. The ceiling was painted to depict a blue sky. Geometric patterns decorated the edges where walls, floors, and the ceiling met. The interior doors are slabs of stone that can be slid sideways into the wall (like a pocket door).

Once they had recovered (though Anan was still suffering some lingering effects of fatigue), they ventured into the first chamber (2). Therein they saw a long room with 3 doors on the left-hand wall and 3 statues of animal-headed humanoids representing three gods on the right; from farthest to closest: lion, falcon, and lizard. Anan bravely opened the closest door only to be met with three poisoned darts that stuck to his armor but failed to deliver their lethal payload.

Though more cautious with the second door, he nevertheless got stuck by three spears that did find purchase in his thick hide. [How D&D5e uses Constitution and Dexterity saving throws against traps seems a deliberate way to bypass high armor class.] Beyond each of these doors was nothing more than an empty space to house the traps held within.

⁵ His player had a bad day with saving throws.



Fortunately, the third door proved not to be trapped. They made their way into a series of 3 square chambers. The first displayed scenes of court and scholarly life; the painted stone statue was of a woman holding scrolls. The walls of the second room were decorated with the scenes of battle, conquest, and the subjugation of an army of lizardmen; the statue was of a male military commander. The third room housed an ornate sarcophagus flanked by two statues of women who were also depicted on the walls along with many children in scenes of domestic life.

The rim of the sarcophagus bore a warning in ancient script that Millie was able to magically decode: Cursed be those who disturb the tomb of Amun Se! Naturally, that's exactly what they did. Once they lifted the lid—too large and heavy for Anan to do it on his own despite his desire to keep Millie and Chayote (the twin hirelings remained with the mounts) safely outside the

room. Choking dust billowed out from the otherwise empty sarcophagus, but no one seemed harmed by it.

Figuring there must be a secret passage somewhere, they searched the 3 rooms but found none. Chayote had the clever—but woefully wrong—idea to lay down inside the sarcophagus while the others closed the lid. She was hoping to find a trap door but only got a secondary exposure to the dust instead.

For the most part as a GM, I try to work with players and go with their intentions rather than their actual words. I'm not going to take them literally when they are working with imperfect information. However, when they are trying to find a secret door, I really want some precise intentionality from them. After inspecting the statues in the 3 square rooms, they made their way back to the first room. They searched the north wall, the closets behind the trap doors, and everywhere else except the statues. They had discussed amongst themselves to do it, but they never told me that's what they were doing. Arg. Just as I could tell they were getting bored and/or frustrated, I gave them some non-so-subtle prodding to investigate the statues so that they could see that if you slid the middle, falcon-headed statue to one side, so did the wall behind it, revealing another exit.

The circular room beyond featured a domed roof, a large statue of Amun Se and 4 human skeletons crackling with electrical energy, streaks of lightning acting as tendons for their fleshless forms⁶ as they walked along the edge of the room. Millie cast a fireball into the room that was perfectly sized for such a spell. Anan advanced in with his glaive. Chayote invoked the power of Hathor to keep them (well, 2) at bay. Anan struck down one of the skeletons only to have it burst into ball lighting. Millie continued with her ranged magical attacks. Chayote attempted to heal Anan... only to discover that the curse of opening the tomb (and failing a saving throw against the dust) meant that Anan could not be healed!

They retreated back to the main room, shutting the doors behind them and the skeletons did not follow. Assessing their situation, Chayote was not prepared to remove the curse from Anan (or herself, as it turned out) without taking a long rest and praying to Hathor. And that is what they did. Of course, it had only been a few hours (at most) since their last long rest, so we had

⁶ Reskinned (get it?) flame skeletons.

to skip over a lot of time of the PCs just killing time until they got tired.

When they returned to the circular room, the skeletons had spread out evenly. I randomly determined where they'd be and one of them happened to be right at the door as the PCs opened it. Knowing what they were up against, the party dispatched the undead in due time.

The next corridor (7) sloped downward and the electric charge in the air intensified. The next chamber (8) looks harmless enough, but as Anan strode forward, the floor tiles gave way and he fell into a pit with spikes at the bottom. After climbing out, he wisely decided to be a bit more cautious. Through Millie's careful inspection, they were able to map out a few of the pit locations and advanced to the first door on the right.

They opened the door to find a room (10) with a number of sarcophaguses and funerary jars as well as 3 of the occupants—desicated corpses—shambling toward them. After suffering the necrotic touch from one of them, they retreated and spiked the door shut, never to enter the room again.

Across the chamber, they entered a room (9) laid out like a museum of treasures. Statues, ornaments, and household items inlaid with gold and jewels resting atop numerous plinths. In an alcove between the entrances there was a statue of a warrior watching over the place. They placed manacles on the statue's legs and placed steel marbles on the floor in front of it. Only then did they dare touch one of the treasures. Indeed the statue began to move but found itself on unstable ground. The ensuing fight was tough for the statue remained a formidable, strong opponent, but the PCs eventually prevailed and were able to collect the treasures of Amun Se.

To enter the final chamber, the party had to simultaneously pull two levers in the wall on either side of the door so as to disable the two pits in front of it. Unfortunately, Anan's player was getting a bit sloppy (they were not having a good day and complained of a headache earlier) and triggered the pit. When I declared this, there was a bit of a frustrated outburst, so I just let it slide.

They opened the door to the final resting place of Amun Se (11) and saw the room filled with lightning arcing between the gold sarcophagus, 4 canopic jars in the corners of the room, and the peak of the ceiling (and eventually out the top of the pyramid).

Scared of the lighting, Anan removed his plate armor, an act he would eventually regret. He and Millie and once with Chayote's help removed the canopic jars one-by-one and pulled them from the room where the lightning could not reach. In doing so, they suffered burns as the lightning struck them. Inside the jars, they found preserved internal organs as they suspected.

The design of the sarcophagus lid was such that simply pushing it off, as with a staff, would not work. Only by lifting it could they remove it. Anan positioned himself in the far end of the room while the ladies were at the foot. Once they had lifted the lid and placed it to one side, a glowing orb of lightning rose in the air as the corpse of Amun Se sat up.

The ball of lightning discharged in the room, striking everyone. Anun Se grasped at the unamored Anon and the dragonborn fell from the deathly wound. Millie revived him with a potion and they made a hasty retreat. Anan grabbed the now-dormant orb from the sarcophagus as Amun Se followed. The heroes took hold of the wall levers and pulled once to activate the pit. The undead pharaoh fell in and they pulled once again to trap him inside.

Once they confirmed that the orb was the anchor holding the rift to their world open, they hastily left the pyramid of Amun Se with their treasure and their lives.

Post-Session Reflections

Despite Anan's tribulations and his player's headache, the session went well. Eridan's player had family issues that forced them to cancel the morning of. Losing one-quarter of the PCs is a significant drop so I had to de-buff the stone golem and the mummies on the fly. I was able to walk the edge between too little and too much danger. Again, I don't want to kill the PCs, but I want to make their cheeks pucker, as it were.

For CR3 creatures, mummies get two rotting fist (terrible name) attacks at +5 to hit. In addition to the 1d10+3 bludgeoning and 3d6 necrotic damage, any humanoid it hits is cursed and cannot regain hit points until removed. This is much more dangerous than the two greatsword attacks (+5 to hit, 2d6+3 slashing + 1d8 radiant damage) that a CR3 knight makes, for example. I was glad the PCs avoided them.

It is now 4 days until the next game session and I only have a vague sense of what I might run.

Comments on E&A Issue #6

Roger BW

RYCT Jim, in my City of 1000 Names campaign, “drow” was a slur for the subterranean white elves.

Myles Corcoran

RYCT Lisa, I concur wholeheartedly that comments are the “lifeblood of any APA”. Contributing to an APA without engaging with it (though comments) seems to be missing the point, in my opinion.

Michael Cule

RYCT Josh, I too “dislike the trope of magic and science being incompatible.” To me, it indicates a fundamental misunderstanding of what science is. So long as magic is repeatable and predictable—like all those spells wizards use—then scientific methodology can be applied to it. Miracles, on the other hand, are unrepeating, unpredictable, and unfalsifiable—making them truly opaque to scientific inquiry.

The related trope is magic and *technology* being incompatible. This also doesn't make sense because fire, wheels, and clothing are technology. If you want to say that magic is incompatible with electricity or nuclear radiation, that's workable.

Arvran Grumer

For some reason, when I read things like, “frame scenes and narrate your interactions,” I don't know where the roleplaying (speaking in character) happens. Your writeup was good, but didn't help in this regard. (To be fair, my writeups don't capture the inter-character dialog where the roleplaying mostly happens because I don't record the sessions.)

Given that November 10th was the 50th anniversary of the sinking of the SS Edmund Fitzgerald, your line was particularly timely, if geographically misplaced.

RYCT Elf sparked an idea to use quipu for mapping dungeons. This might be something players could even try themselves. I've seen players knit and crochet at the game table, so why (k)not? :)

Advising not to use *cop voice* is similar to the general guideline that passive voice should be avoided. ;) Even so, sometimes passive voice works better to convey information smoothly than using active voice.

RYCT me, I think what myself and others have found is that the justifications created to employ character traits

is “entertaining narration” only occasionally. No narration is better than contrived, boring, or perfunctory narrations. If the primary goal is to get the bonus (whether a bonus die in *Cthulhu Dark* or a +2 in *FATE*) on every roll or to just hog table time, it can get tiresome. For the GM of a one-off convention game with unfamiliar players, the risk may outweigh any potential reward for insisting upon using the mechanic.

Joshua Kronengold

Sympathies on having to look for a new job. It is not fun.

DunDraCon and Kublacon are in hotels and have no “off time” for open gaming. The dealers' room, food services, etc. do have closing hours and there are probably (unofficial?) rules for how late an official game can start.

RYCT me, Millie learned of the hit point loss after losing it—cruel of me, but her player wasn't mad. Yes, the will and intent of lighting the candle has to come from the person providing the blood; yes, it must be fresh.

RYCT Mark, the Ranger does feel rather “Warlocky” in its focus on a specific subset of abilities. Does Barbarian also fall into this category?

RYCT Avram, there is value/entertainment in seeing how PCs navigate adventures that are not designed with them in mind. Except for paying attention to challenge rating, I don't build the adventures based on the PC's abilities (though I try to give them hooks that would appeal to the PCs, even if the players don't bite).⁷

RYCT Elf, I used to favor *Call of Cthulhu* games at cons because I thought the roleplaying was of a higher caliber, but I've been proven wrong many times. In general, I'm in the not-*D&D* camp, but am more put off by those who turn their nose up to *D&D*. I don't like the way some play *D&D*, but that's true of any system.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek

RYCT Mark, in the Ken Burns docu-series *Country Music*, Charlie Daniels said, “I went to see Itzhak Pearlman at the Opera House in Nashville, and somebody took me backstage before the show. I said, ‘Hi, Mr. Pearlman. I'm Charlie Daniels. I'm a fiddle player.’ He said, ‘We are all fiddle players.’”

⁷ Because apparently when I do, they ignore it. Yes, I'm still grumbling from last issue.

Lisa Padol

Did you find yourself running into the 16-page limit in A&E? If not, what has changed? If so, how did you resolve it then?

RYCT Avram, emotional play for me has always been an organic, emergent factor of the roleplaying without any mechanical support. Your anecdote from the *Trail of Cthulhu* game is my jam. When a game systematizes such play, I bounce off **hard**. The more process-oriented a game becomes, it feels less inviting to roleplaying (speaking in character as our characters) to me. You have a much deeper and broader experience with these games, but I don't find them inviting.

Pum

RYCT Patrick, for another example of USA financial and political wonkery, look up "Debt Ceiling."

RYCT Jim, *Twelve Monkeys* is an interesting exploration of how someone could be perceived as being insane because what they say and what they perceive as real does not comport to reality as it is generally understood. See also *Terminator 2*.

Changing perception is easy to pull off in a film since the director can change the audience's perspective (*A Beautiful Mind*, *The Sixth Sense*, *et al*) such that they don't know what is real or not. Because the GM controls the PCs' perceptions, it works well in rpgs too, though it can be overdone just as it can in other media.

Brian Rogers

I thought V&V wasn't meant to be played "on the grid" per-se but it did have rules for facing based on how the square character token was positioned.

Matt Stevens

In *Everybody Kills Each Other*, what did Steve do?

If you use a rule that a Special success on an attack requires a Special (or Critical) parry to block and that a Critical attack can only be blocked by a Critical parry, the odds are close to what you're looking for. Between combatants of 90% skill, the chance of a successful attack is 18.2%. If you use the *Call of Cthulhu* rule of Hard (1/2 skill) and Extreme (1/5 skill) successes, the chance goes up to 34.1%. You could use the CoC method and also have a Critical Success at 1/20 skill for greater variation; in this case, the chance of a damaging attack goes up slightly to 34.7%. Saying "I got a Special/Hard hit!" should maintain the action narrative.

Jim Vassilakos

RYCT Lisa, whereas I prefer multi-player games because I enjoy PC-to-PC interaction when I'm the GM. So long as the PCs have a shared purpose (we're superheroes who fight supervillains and other threats to our neighborhood/city/country/planet) and/or work for the same organization (we are officers serving onboard a starship), it's easy to justify why they stick together.

The Adventurers Guild campaign is structured such that the PCs are adventurers—it's their career. They stick together because over the course of several adventures, they found they work well together. The culture of the guild is such that adventurer parties are normal—the lone adventurer is the oddity. If a PC wanted to leave and/or if there was friction the PCs, introducing a new PC easily done through the guild.

RYCT Josh, I don't know how you'd categorize the structure of my campaign. The PCs are informed of a number of quests that are available and they pick which one they want to go on. They don't always get their first choice. I don't usually have the adventure written ahead of time. The players have not expressed to me a desire to explore activities beyond those the guild have available. But they are definitely roleplayers.

Mark A. Wilson

Congratulations on the new job. I had to attend a tradeshow shortly after starting my current job, but luckily it was only for a day and I wasn't expected to do booth duty. I mostly went to meet folks.

I rarely purchase anything at cons. Anything I want, I probably have bought already. The last time I was at GenCon, I was only really interested in closeout sales and obscure stuff. I could get anything new or contemporary from elsewhere and not worry about how I was going to get it home. The dealers' room of local cons are much, much smaller than Origins or GenCon and the last time I went hunting for something specific, I couldn't find it.

Great story of your friend and Adam West. You are a bastard... in a good way. :)

Even though this is an electronic-only APA and emojis are ubiquitous, I still prefer old-school smilies (without noses).

Firedrake's Hoard

Number 5: by Roger BW

- Blog: <https://blog.firedrake.org/>
- Gaming stuff: <https://tekeli.li/>
- RPG podcast: <https://tekeli.li/podcast/>
- Actual Play: <https://tekeli.li/whartson-hall/>
- Mastodon: <https://discordian.social/@RogerBW>
- Licence: AI0-BY-NC-SA-1.0 <https://www.humanscommons.org/>
- This zine contains no content produced by generative AI tools.



Happy Newton's Birthday to all who celebrate!
(The traditional eye-poking comes later.)

Recent Games (and other things)

Autumn has settled into winter here, if quite a warm one so far, and it's been the Codiest Time of the Year for me, with Everybody Codes¹ giving way to [Advent of Code](https://adventofcode.com/) (<https://adventofcode.com/>). Like the other, this is a programming challenge that doesn't care about what languages you use, with problems that get harder on each successive day (more or less). Advent has been going for longer (it's in year 11 now) and the problems are interestingly subtler, though I enjoy both.

Also it's that time of year when I run [The Pearle's Choice Awards](https://discussion.tekeli.li/t/pearle-s-choice-2024-2025-nominations/6547) (<https://discussion.tekeli.li/t/pearle-s-choice-2024-2025-nominations/6547>). These started on the old Shut Up and Sit Down forums, but when they shut those down the userbase moved over to mine. If you have an interest in board games, come over and have a look; you'll need to join the forum to nominate or vote, but I promise not to abuse your data while I'm in charge.

The Day After Ragnarok: We went up the coast from Sydney, looking into reports of

sea monsters off Umina Beach. Someone had apparently butchered and eaten a couple of penguins on an offshore island, and we were definitely wondering why anyone would bother when there's better food to be stolen in town. But they turned out to be not a sea monster, which I might have wrestled, but merely a detachment of Japanese Special Naval Landing Forces, whom the boss tried to talk to peacefully, and I then shot when that didn't work.

Next step was to track down what turned out to be the ophiline-enhanced *Kō-hyōteki* miniature submarine that had delivered them, and since it was in shallow water one of us donned a diving suit and jammed the propeller with iron bars. When the boat surfaced, the crewman left on board opened up with a submachine gun, and we fought back. "Oh, Simon, it's only you.



US Coast Guard, 1943

¹that I mentioned last time

When that shiny shape came up out of the water, I was looking forward to wrestling it.” This all seems to have been in aid of an observation post near Sydney Harbour.

Cried the Lady: we found a possible solution, we did the ritual... and it worked. Phew! The Rev. Frederick goes home to his peaceful retirement... until the next time. The GM/author wants us to review this before publication; I found the pacing a bit uneven (possibly because we were flailing around trying to build theories on our not terribly effective research), but I enjoyed it all.

Bayern: Group 2 will be skipping this month, but Group 1 has caught back up with them. (Do not taunt happy fun ancient alien installation. Indeed, both groups managed to rig up drones to observe the base’s restart when they were relatively far away.) As I write, they’ve both reached the end of “Cold” and they’re about to progress to “The Daughters of Atlas”, the actual exploration of the Pleiades. (Which gets rather abstract, I fear, though I have some ideas.)

Amazing Adventures: Another game with Whartson Hall, and so far we’ve only done character generation. This uses the same early *D&D* style mechanics as the same designer’s *Victorious* (Victorian superheroes, which I played a few years ago) and *Castles and Crusades* (which I haven’t played at all), but the setting is ’tween-wars pulp. I’m all about the setting, but my goodness the rules creak a bit, and not only because they’re *D&D*. For example, you can get optional nice stuff for your character like animal friendship or being an ace pilot by swapping out one of your class abilities for it—but even in our party, one class has eleven separate abilities which together make up all the neat stuff they can do, and another has just one that

covers everything. Still, a Lafayette Escadrille pilot turned private eye seems like fun, and mostly I plan to play the character and ignore the mechanics as far as possible.

A campaign idea: the *Mission Impossible* game

I first saw the 1960s-1970s series when the BBC repeated it in the 1980s, and I still think it’s a near-ideal setup for an episodic RPG.

To start with, it’s a caper show: the crew are doing essentially criminal things, often basically confidence tricks, to achieve their objectives. But to keep the audience’s sympathy, they’re doing them in what’s always confirmed as being a good cause².

While the team has great resources for preparation, they have essentially no in-mission support: they have to get themselves in and out via their own abilities, and “if you or any of your IM force are caught or killed...” In particular, they can’t take the standard short-cut of involving the police; the police may well take the side of the group’s victims, at least until all the appearances have been carefully arranged, or the team may be operating in a hostile country.

The tape scene is what people remember, and it’s a lovely televisual trick for hinting at what is to come. Not so necessary in an RPG, but perhaps a useful piece of structure even there.

But I think the core of the show’s appeal to me as an RPG template is the dossier scene. After the leader has had the briefing, he goes back to his apartment and selects the team for the mission: mostly they’re the series regulars, but sometimes there’s a guest star character with a

²See more recently *Leverage*, where the protagonists are explicitly criminals, and a lot of work has to be put into making the victims worse.

particular set of skills.³ And of course, just like the James Bond gadget scene, that skill will turn out to be vital in the plot; but unlike James Bond we're invited to believe that this was part of the plan all along.

In RPG terms, what I'd like to do is have a character for each regular player as usual, and some more "guest stars" statted up and ready for visiting players or when one of the regulars wants a break from their usual PC. Not every episode needs a guest star, but it shouldn't be unusual.⁴ Those characters of course can be almost anyone, as long as they're prepared to work for the agency occasionally and they have some specific thing that they're extremely good at.

The degree of planning should vary to suit the group's tastes: if they like improvisation or eliding the planning scenes you could go straight into the action, but actually putting a plan together can be fun too, especially if this leads to "but that would mean we'd need a pole vaulter... wait, we've got one on the books!".

I haven't actually run this. I think it works in any setting where you might plausibly have a large pool of people to draw on; my taste runs to the 1920s, but it could work with minimal modification from 1800s London to the present day, or in one of the larger fantasy cities. In an SF context you probably want a large and diverse individual planet rather than something that needs you to travel for a month to get in and out of the mission site.

³ A trapeze artist, for example.

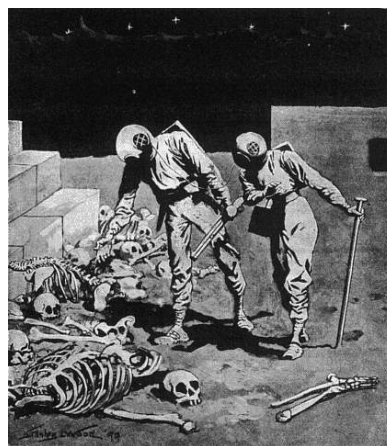
⁴ In an ideal world, this would mean a system which allowed characters to be spun up quickly, while also allowing for relatively specialised skills.

The dumbest/silliest/craziest things the players ever did

(Bearing in mind that sometimes I'm the player.)

Ed Krantz was the face of a Cyberpunk media team. He thought he was a crusading journalist who occasionally had to make a deal to get that big story aired. The rest of the team (cameraman (me), sound tech) thought he would be a corporate sellout, if only they were buying. The player also had a supreme talent for fumbling interpersonal skill rolls. "It's like *The Cook Report*, except instead of getting doors slammed in his face, he gets his face slammed in doors."

There's a Whartson Hall game from before I joined the group, "Cabin 12a and Moon 02" (from Marcus L. Rowland's *Forgotten Futures II: The Log of the Astronef*). Without excessive spoilers: at one particular moment towards the end, one of the PCs is dying of an injury, there's something another PC could do to save them... and, in the heat of the moment, the player simply doesn't think of it. Every time I listen, I can't help wondering: maybe this time they'll come up with the answer? But of course they never do.



Stanley Wood, 1900

One of my favourite *Call of Cthulhu* characters was Mzcslavcz Czaczvz, an Eastern European anarchist of no fixed accent. “You can call me Mzcslavcz. Actually, I doubt that you can, but that’s my name.” Having made it out of the Ruritanian Malenkoslovakia⁵ to 1920s London, his dedication to the cause had slipped a little and he was much more interested on pursuing *affaires* with bored daughters of the aristocracy. “How would you like to go down in history as the Mother of the Revolution?” The rest of the party didn’t think much of him, and so they left him on guard outside the spooky old house to warn them if the police showed up. After a bit there were some screams. Then there was a very long silence. Then he went back to London.

A spiritual descendant of Mzcslavcz is John Hanrahan, an Irish separatist who’s frankly much more about the blowing things up than he is about the struggle for Celtic liberation. A (randomly rolled) desperately low Appearance is clearly the result of a mishap with explosives. One great advantage for episodic games: there’s essentially no limit on where he can show up, hiding out after the latest outrage. I thought about playing him in our *Masks of Nyarlathotep* campaign, but I didn’t want to have to take half a session escaping from the frontier police every time we crossed an international border.

We Also Heard From

Comments on E&A number 6

Clark B. Timmins: I find the asymmetry of Alm and Elm fascinating. Why is it always left hand earth, right hand sky? Generations of theologians may have wrangled over this...

⁵“The goal of the Comrades of the Red Hand is to depose the corrupt and oppressive monarchy of Malenkoslovakia and to replace it with an equally corrupt and oppressive dictatorship, to be headed by me.”

How far in advance is a cremation date known? How carefully do the death priests check the field of the dead for... unofficial extras? If they’re being separated into urns afterwards, presumably there’s a fair bit of spacing in the crematorium...

Myles Corcoran: Never mind the hydrology, I have seem published adventures with great concrete dams that bow *outwards*.

“quiet as mice” — hah, it may work in the game but mice in the real world are about the noisiest creatures for their size that I’ve ever met.

Travelleresque — hmm, I am very tempted to do something like this. For Michael Cule’s *Traveller* campaign a while back, I wrote a trade generator: give it various parameters including current and next world’s UPP, and it would use the Mongoose rules to generate all the random things: berthing and fuel prices, passengers, bulk freight, speculative cargo quantities and prices, etc. That’s still up at [Planetfall](https://tekeli.li/cgi-bin/planetfall.cgi) (<https://tekeli.li/cgi-bin/planetfall.cgi>) should anyone find it useful. (Ideally, I know, you should be able to give it several “next worlds” and you could get a set of cargo and passengers for each, then decide which one would be most profitable to visit. Maybe I will write that one day.)

I’ve been sorry to see Creative Commons entirely drop the ball on AI-feeding theft. Thanks for the pointer, and I’m using an AI0 licence thish. Not that it makes any difference, since they’ll steal anything.

Re columns in general: given that we have PDFs and can zoom, I think line length is important. I read years ago that the ideal length of a line is 50% higher than the number of characters in the alphabet, but I suspect this may have been based on a small sample; at least for English, I find two columns easier to read on an A4/Letter

page than one if the text and margins are normal-sized.

RYCTM I'm increasingly finding that I will happily play in any style, but I don't like having to switch styles in haste.⁶

I find it useful to separate a "tick" (the filled box next to the skill on the character sheet) from a "check" (a roll against the skill), but since my native dialect is British English that happens pretty much automatically. Probably for utter clarity one should refer to a "skill test".

RYCT Gabriel Roark: the next bubble is quantum computing. Unlike AI, it has the potential to be actually useful; but it's *far* too early to be putting money into it unless you are a huge research organisation. The essential problem⁷ is that big institutional investors demand that tech stocks like Microsoft and Google show the same rate of growth they did ten or twenty years ago; but everyone who wants Windows or GMail *already has it*, there are no new people to sell to, and so to increase profits they need to make the same users pay more for what they get. Thus the shift from buying to renting software, and thus the push for AI in everything: because they can charge more.

RYCT Michael Cule: I've recently found copies of R J Unstead's eight-book "Pictorial History" series from the early 1970s, starting with *Invaded Island*, which I had at school. At least in the UK, they're only a few pounds each second-hand. There's no great depth here, it's a series of double-page spreads each on a particular topic, but it's a lovely starter for that topic, and lavishly illustrated; it would make a fine

⁶I have a statistical rant about Pendragon for a future *E&A*.

⁷And here I put on my economist hat; that's what my degree is in, though I've never worked as one.



John Dickson Batten, 1902

handout. While looking for these I discovered that Unstead also wrote similar treatments of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, which are some of my favourite periods for gaming.

RYCT Patrick Zoch: dragons at least follow the hoarding instinct. I've seen some fictional treatments in which each dragon finds its own sort of thing to hoard: books, for example.

RYCT Brian Misiaszek: as I write I've just read *What Moves the Dead* and realised that I really ought to reacquaint myself with *The Fall of the House of Usher* to appreciate it properly.

RYCT Joshua Kronengold: I've played in a looser version of [FUDGE on the Fly](https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/95384/fudge-on-the-fly) (<https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/95384/fudge-on-the-fly>) in which, the first time you try to use any ability, you decide where it fits into your skill structure (a +3, two +2s, etc., down to as many -2s as you like). That does at least mitigate the problem of putting lots of points into a skill you end up never using. Though with complex character games like *BRP* and *GURPS* I also tend to treat the first play session as a pilot episode: I try to make it as

representative of my intentions for the campaign as I can, and players are then welcome to tweak their characters, or indeed entirely replace them, once they've got a better idea of what play will be like.

Attronarch: RYCT Lisa Padol/5, I do much as you do when it comes to ending the session. The problem comes of course if a player misses one session but not the other; it doesn't usually break the immersion too much IME to say "oh, Bob was there all the time", or at least it's an accepted ludic convention, but if possible I like to bring people in and out with some degree of in-world plausibility.

John Redden: RYCT Michael Cule, I quite like the Mongoose *Traveller* approach, cleaned up from the original. If you have basic knowledge of a skill, you have a +0; if you have nothing, it's a -3. If you have the Jack of All Trades skill, each level raises that -3 by one point until with a maximum +3 you effectively have every skill at level 0.

RYCT Patrick Zoch: Penguin Crew represent. (I'm sorry, I am a very white boy and about as streetwise as a road-killed armadillo.)

RYCT Avram Grumer: I am inclined when running *Traveller* to regard [Traveller Map](https://travellermap.com) (<https://travellermap.com>) as a *handout*, and encourage the players to use it for their research. Sometimes it won't align with my game's reality. I guess the library data you looked up were wrong.

Gabriel Roark: I think it's rather more complicated than "serif less readable than sans". As I understand it a lot also depends on the thickness of strokes within characters, whether you're looking at print/e-ink (reflected light) or screen (emitted light), whether the user can and does invert black and white, the exact nature of

visual impairment, etc. But for the record I'll gladly supply this zine as plain text to anyone who'd like to read it in some other form.

All that said, I get a definite nostalgia hit from your choice of typeface!

Lisa Padol: RYCTM, it depends perhaps on how much supernaturalism one wants in the game; I veer to the minimal. But also I'm always aware⁸ in an investigative game, especially a modern one, of the possibility of just handing the whole thing over to the cops; obviously that's usually not in genre, but I like to have an in-world reason for not doing it too.

RYCT Heath Row: the worst layout decision I've seen was in an issue of *White Dwarf* back in the day, when an article about superheroes was printed over a background of slanting grey and red lines. I believe the author forgave them eventually.

RYCT Matt Stevens: I know this wasn't advice to me, but it's useful advice for me too. Thanks!

RYCTM: no ratings, no cameras, just us in the Australian outback.

Arguably of course a sufficiently detailed combat system can itself be considered a minigame, and I think it only isn't because of the historical tradition that combat is what an RPG *is*. Certainly in *BRP* or *GURPS*⁹, being an effective participant in a combat is a skill that a player can learn, separate from how fighty their character is. Which some players enjoy, and some don't.

Yes, Holly Black's comment is very much what I was thinking of, expressed rather better.

⁸and I know I've written repeatedly

⁹Just thinking of examples I'm most familiar with.

Re renaming skills: for *2300AD* I've printed out a list of all the skills and standard specialisations¹⁰ to use when I need to remember to ask for "Athletics (Dex)" rather than "Climbing". *Cthulhu Eternal* renames some classic *Call of Cthulhu* skills based on how they end up mostly being used (Spot Hidden becomes Awareness, Credit Rating is Social Etiquette, Psychology is Insight) and I can still take a few moments to remember.

The Resistance Table: I found it mildly confusing when I first met it (in *RuneQuest* I think) simply presented *as* a table. Then I realised "it's 50%, +5% for each point you're higher than the opposition, -5% for each point you're lower". Fine with me! Indeed, I think it could make a decent core mechanic, which would solve the *BRP* problem of everything being an average-difficulty roll unless the GM remembers.

I've enjoyed the yog-sothoth.com games, though in my recent re-listening I've been feeding them through an audio compressor first to bring the quiet parts (one player in particular) up to the volume of the louder parts.

I may have misremembered the book rules from an early edition of *Call of Cthulhu*, or this may have been a common house rule that made it into my mental canon, though if so I'm not the only person to have thought of it; several of the Whartson Hall players remembered it, though I asked the good people of yog-sothoth.com and have had no answer. Certainly my memory is that you lose Sanity, but that this doesn't trigger bouts of madness the way the normal losses do, because it's over the extended period of reading the book, not all at once. But this certainly doesn't seem to be the case in 6e or 7e.

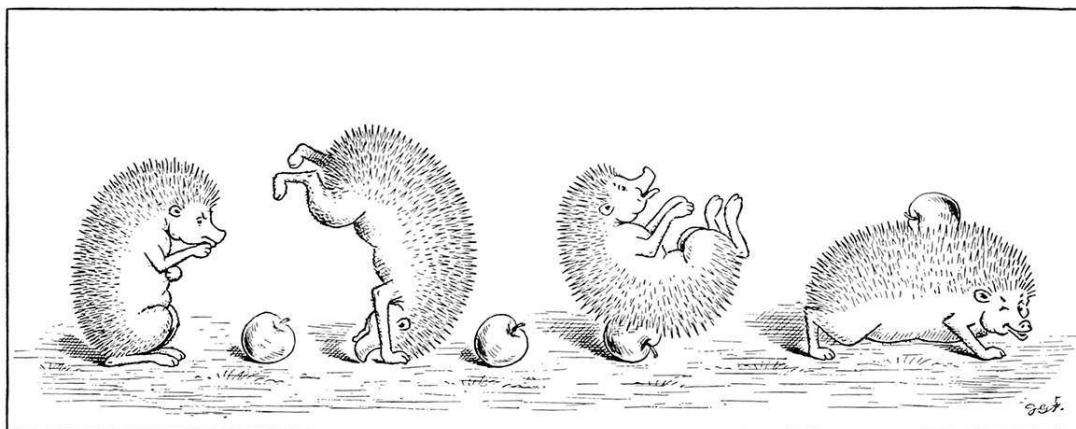
RYCT Avram Grumer: I still remember an accidentally emotional moment in a 1960s psionics campaign set in the UK. The agency that employs the PCs had been taken over in an administrative coup, and all the agents scattered. When the problem had been resolved and everyone was getting back together, two of the toughest agents (both NPCs) ran into each other:

Agent A: "So. You're still alive, then?"

Agent B¹¹: "Yeah. You?"

¹⁰Strangely, there is no such list in the book.

¹¹Carrying a box of psychic hedgehogs. Long story.



Joseph Greene Francis, 1892

I've seen games that push the talky roleplaying bit to be as mechanical as a fight or other procedural elements, such as Robin Laws' *DramaSystem*, and for me I feel as if the sort of role-playing I like to do is being squeezed out. (Of course some people love it; as always I'm talking only about my own reaction to games.)

When there are multiple social skills, I tend to ask the player what approach they're taking, and then saying (if they haven't already) "that sounds like Fast-Talk more than Charm" or whatever. So they frame their descriptions in terms of the approaches the characters are better at, and that suits me Just Fine.

Brian Rogers: re *Draw Steel*, I remember early writings about *D&D* (especially by Gygas) heavily emphasising the element of player skill: to be a good player, it was implied, you needed to be on top of the mechanics, know exactly what your abilities could do and when to use them most effectively, and so on. Which can be fun but it's also intimidating for a new or casual player, or just one who's less interested in the wargame and more in e.g. character play.

RYCTM: Hmm, I may have put things badly. I don't want the PCs necessarily to be the most important or powerful people in the world; but if the world is built essentially round a single narrative, I find it isn't a good fit for my style of role-playing to play a different one. A world with multiple important things happening is just fine; but for example Middle-Earth is so much *about* the ring quest that it starts to feel like a waste of the world to have a game set there that isn't.

Patrick Riley: it sounds, to me as an outsider, as though you are more invested in this than your players are. If the social connections allow, is it possible to have a chat

with them one on one to ask what they actually want out of the game? I am very fortunate that the groups I play with have players who like to get involved (and I try to be one myself), I suspect largely because all of us are also experienced GMs, but this is in part the product of trying other groups and leaving them when it became clear that this wasn't their style.

RYCTM: indeed, back when I played *BattleTech* it was pretty clear that custom builds could generally out-fight the book designs. Some of this seems to be the result of rule changes late in development¹²; some of it was because the book designs were built for flavour and inspired by the anime originals, so had weapons like machine guns that the mechanics made useless. Of course, in the game's standard setting, very few people get to build custom 'Mechs.

Re *Man to Man* I believe it was intended primarily as a preview of the **GURPS** combat rules (when the full book wasn't ready in time for that year's convention season), or as a stand-alone combat game. You can get experience points and improve your character, there are even some notes on campaigns (essentially a series of fights), but I suspect most of the play was one-offs. Certainly mine was.

I don't love *Call of Cthulhu* 7th edition for many reasons, but Luck is certainly one of them.

RYCT Jim Vassilakis: **GURPS Magic** has "Sense Foes", which is specifically "does this person / someone in this area have hostile intent right now?". (Not "to me", just hostile intent in general.)

¹²E.g. "ammo bomb" designs happened because in earlier drafts of the rules you had to give every heat sink its own critical slot, then later some of them got moved into the engine.

Re Wildcards Roleplaying System: I take it each player has a separate deck, and one for the GM? And I'm guessing from the Joker rule that you have a discard pile.

Avram Grumer: *Monsterhearts* appeals to me most of the *PbtA* games I've looked at. My groups aren't interested, though, and I don't think I'd want to play with strangers.

3-D *I Ching*? Presumably it works on intersecting planes...

I'm sorry to hear about *Affinity* woes. I've been hearing it recommended for years; having been burned by this sort of cash grab is one of the things that drove me to free software.

Pum: RYCT Patrick Riley: the old *DC Heroes* game had actions declared in ascending initiative order, then resolved in descending. So the thug can say "I'm going to cut the rope to drop the girl into the deathtrap", and Batman can be aware of what all the slower people are going to do, and then decide which one he's going to intervene to prevent. Probably too involved for a modern game, though.

Dylan Capel: Of course if you have wide margins like the ones you're using you can have side notes as well as footnotes, in the classic Tufte¹³ style. If you stick with Typst, the *marginalia* package can do a lot of the heavy lifting.

Patrick Zoch: RYCT Gabriel Roark: I confess I don't really see the appeal of a character funnel, but my modern gaming tends to start with deciding whom I want to play and then building and playing them. If I were using a system/setting with a higher death rate...

¹³ Author of *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*, among others

RYCT Myles Corcoran: since I love the physicality and social aspects of board games, I find that if I enjoy a game on BGA where those things aren't available I'm very likely also to enjoy it in the flesh. There are some that work particularly poorly for me, ones in which there's a lot of state to be kept track of; I played *Keyflower* in a game that offered me a new turn every day or two, and it took me longer to try to work out what was where and what my plans had been than it did to play the next turn.

Michael Cule: This is the way I like to play. I'm a little hesitant to lose myself entirely in NPCs; after all, I may have to switch between them. (One friend of mine managed to play an argument between two NPCs so effectively that several of us at the table worried there would be blows struck.)

Re *Aegis: the Institute* I like the idea of building one's own magical path, and *GURPS* certainly supports it (with, as always, a bit of work that as a committed *GURPS*-head I am probably underestimating). The details would vary depending on the mechanics you wanted, but the ability to do this might well be a reason why this *is* the Best Magical School.¹⁴

I went to quite a few of those Games Days and similar in the early 1980s; we may have been at some of the same ones. Mostly they seemed to be for selling, but I remember a certain amount of meeting people and generally babbling about games.

RYCT John Redden: yes, I did know that. Similarly on a much lower level: "Mrs X, this is Miss Y". *Why* do I know that? I have no idea.

RYCT Elf: what if I tell you that I know people who have adopted Clippy as a symbol of

¹⁴ Separately from all the networking with future minor deities, obviously.

resistance to data scraping and AI-in-everything? More about that [here](https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/cultures/clippy-pfp-movement-change-your-profile-picture-to-clippy) (https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/cultures/clippy-pfp-movement-change-your-profile-picture-to-clippy).

Jim Eckman: Baden-Powell: I would expect them to have “safe” wilderness for visitors and more challenging wilderness for their own training and recreation. One big city/port, otherwise smaller dispersed settlements. (And for whimsy, some of it has been terraformed into the *Outdoor Survival* map that was recommended as a wilderness map for early *D&D*.)

Brian Christopher Misiaszek: I’m enjoying the adventure, but so far it feels largely on rails, with only a few opportunities for PCs to affect the course of events. Which I can see, for the horror feel, but...

Joshua Kronengold: RYCT Matt Stevens: I’ve played a fine *Fiasco* with Michael supervising, run one that didn’t take off at all (Michael not present), and got very confused (with Michael again) by the second edition which seems to want to squash everything down to cards, then sell you more cards every time

you want to tell a new story. The absolute-value thing just confounds me.

I think “low contact” very much describes the way I run **GURPS**: the vast majority of the time I’m just asking for a skill roll, if that, and very occasionally we’ll do something mechanically complicated like having a fight.

Indeed, I think if Mongoose *Traveller* had pushed *everything* over to bonus/penalty dice it would have caused less upset. Time for some numerical analysis!¹⁵ Columns are the number of penalty/bonus dice added to the core 2d6 roll, rows are the target value, cells are the percentage chance of getting that value or higher. So to add a bonus die to a roll, move one cell right; to add a +1, move one cell up.

Looking at a standard success chance of 8+ (41.7% on two dice alone), a single bonus die (68.1%) is equivalent to nearly +2 (72.2%), two (82.6%) is about +3 (83.3%), three (90.6%) is about +4 (91.7%), and it’s not wildly off on the downside either. So what this tells me is that my

¹⁵I didn’t generate this in Typst, but wrote a Rust program to do a cartesian product of individual die values then select the highest and lowest dice in each roll.

	5↓	4↓	3↓	2↓	1↓	0	1↑	2↑	3↑	4↑	5↑
2	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
3	67.0	73.7	80.4	86.8	92.6	97.2	99.5	99.9	100.0	100.0	100.0
4	38.2	46.7	56.6	68.0	80.1	91.7	98.1	99.6	99.9	100.0	100.0
5	17.9	25.1	34.8	47.8	64.4	83.3	94.9	98.5	99.5	99.8	100.0
6	7.8	12.3	19.4	30.6	47.7	72.2	89.4	96.0	98.5	99.4	99.8
7	2.8	5.1	9.4	17.4	31.9	58.3	80.6	91.0	95.8	98.0	99.1
8	0.9	2.0	4.2	9.0	19.4	41.7	68.1	82.6	90.6	94.9	97.2
9	0.2	0.6	1.5	4.0	10.6	27.8	52.3	69.4	80.6	87.7	92.2
10	0.0	0.2	0.5	1.5	5.1	16.7	35.6	52.2	65.2	74.9	82.1
11	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.4	1.9	8.3	19.9	32.0	43.4	53.3	61.8
12	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.5	2.8	7.4	13.2	19.6	26.3	33.0

intuition of “a bonus die maps to about +1” isn’t entirely wrong in normal PC sorts of range. What the bonus die does give you is no absolute guarantee of success or failure, however good or bad the odds.

As you say, 2d6 is a pretty blunt instrument; I don’t think it’s just familiarity that leaves me feeling happier with **GURPS** 3d6 or *BRP*’s d%.

More generally, I think many game designers have not done the maths beyond “this makes success a bit more likely”. This is especially true of dice pool systems. As a GM I want to know how hard the challenges I’m setting for my PCs are, and the game book may not be reliable. When a friend ran *It Came From Beneath the Sea* in 2024, which uses pools of d10s, I assembled a probability table for him so that he could decide on reasonable difficulty numbers to set, and we all felt that this would have been much simpler if characters had simply had percentage skills¹⁶. I still remember original *World of Darkness* with its chances of a fumble on a complex task *rising* with higher skill, and something like that just breaks the enjoyment of a game for me.

RYCTM: parsing out bookmarks from an existing PDF is the thing that is proving Very Hard in my APA-tools suite. I may need to step beyond the PDF: :API2 Perl module.

RYCT Elf: for a short time I was buying a set of dice for each campaign I played in or ran. I was particularly happy with the Chessex swirly red and blue d6s for the **GURPS Torg** game. But many games don’t really have appropriate dice available, and I have some dodecahedral d6-twice (with pips) that I mostly use for **GURPS** now because they roll easily.

¹⁶I’m impressed with *Outgunned*, a recent Bundle of Holding offer, because while it’s a dice pool system there’s a table of probabilities right there in the rules.

I would argue that *Gumshoe* steps back from being “a game” in an unusual way: there isn’t a *Gumshoe* Core Book you can buy, and what you get instead is the system already tweaked for an individual setting. Which I think is a good thing: starting from the idea of a universal system like *Hero* or **GURPS**, it can do most of the same things, but it’s easier to get to grips with, at the cost of entirely giving up character portability between campaigns—which in my experience was never a huge thing anyway. If someone wants to write a *Gumshoe Mausritter* they don’t have to worry about how to scale mice against time agents or occult investigators, they can just use the rules at the single scale for which they’re designed.

Another potential problem with **GURPS**: a character initially built on X points but with Y points of accumulated experience spent on stuff as the campaign went on will generally be much less effective than a character built *ab initio* on X+Y points, because if a game is challenging there’s always some little demand to improve your abilities and it’s hard to save up for the big, but potentially more cost-effective, stuff. When I bring a new PC into an ongoing game, I usually give them as many points as the lowest-rated other PC¹⁷.

RYCT Jim Vassilakos: Graham Walmsley’s *Stealing Cthulhu* has some good suggestions on how to use Lovecraftian beasties but in a different context so that it’s less immediately obvious that oh, we’re near the sea, it’ll be Deep Ones again. But I tend to feel overall that the idea of a consistent Lovecraftian world is about as sensible as ditto a consistent *Doctor Who* world: the good scriptwriters there mostly invented an entirely new monster that fit the

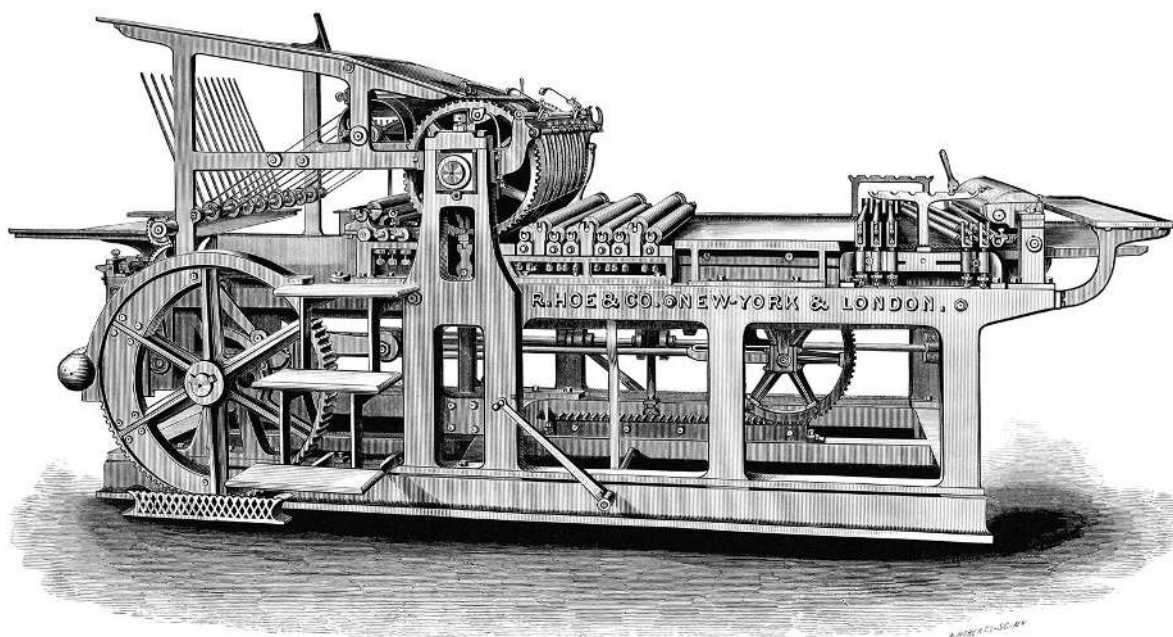
¹⁷I rule that you don’t get points if you miss a session, so totals diverge.

story they were writing, rather than bringing back something that had been seen before (that was usually a *diktat* from above, or Terry Nation who somehow had ownership of the Daleks). I found it very noticeable a few years ago when I watched the whole of the original series¹⁸ that many of the later Dalek and especially Cybermen stories were clearly ones that could have been, and in some cases were, written for any old monster, and then had the popular one slotted in, which removes much of the *point* of those monsters as storytelling devices. Cybermen are *about* you becoming like them, not march march zap zap; Deep Ones are *about* race mixing and genetic decay, not being by the coast. Better if one can to come up with something entirely new that fits the subject of the adventure.

¹⁸Yes, yes, all of it that survives.

Jim Vassilakos: RYCTM, I have a perverse desire not to use computers *at the table*; I spend much of my life working with computers. Of course, now that I play almost entirely online I'm having to stretch the definition of "use computers", but as I wrote lastish the videoconference substrate I mostly use for gaming is largely free of assistant tools like maps and dice rollers. I'm sitting at a table and my friends are visible *over there*, which is relatively close to my in-person gaming experience.

RYCT Avram Grumer, I run some solo boardgame competitions on BoardGameGeek (each month there's a setup for solo play, you do the best you can and send me your score). Many, many people send their scores in only at the last moment, which doesn't give me time to do much if there's a technical problem...



PATENT LITHOGRAPHIC POWER PRESS.

Unknown artist, 1881

Twisting the Rope #7

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

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

I Close My Mouth. Slowly, Slowly, Love

I was on a tilt-table X-ray machine this morning for a barium swallow test. With my recent gastric issues, this test was to look at the esophagus, stomach, and small intestine for any abnormalities. I was surprised that the barium drink used as a contrast medium wasn't unpleasant at all. All the horror stories of barium drinks/meals I'd heard before made it sound horrendous but it was essentially a flavourless, thick, chalky drink.

Nothing out of the ordinary was found, but there may be a pouch in the small intestine. I'll hear from the consultant in the New Year with any conclusions.

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

I am not much of a convention goer. I am sufficiently introverted that I find "joining in" occasionally stressful, and while I love playing games with new people, I'm more comfortable with people I know I'll see again.

This goes double for LARPs at conventions. I played in a Glorantha freeform at one of the Convulsion conventions¹ in the UK and was quickly taken out of play when acting as Ken Rolston's sidekick, who promptly engineered a confrontation and had to flee the conclave or whatever it was. As his aide, I fled too and was out of play pretty early. I probably could have wrangled a different outcome, or asked to take up a spare character, but I wasn't enthused enough to push.

Mutterings

The staff tabletop games group recently picked up several new games, including the guess-what-others-think party game, *Wavelength*; the extra-long title card game, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring – Trick-Taking Game*; and the new Spiel de Jahres winner, *Bomb Busters* by Hisashi Hayashi.

Wavelength is a team game where one team member gives a clue based on a more/less sort of card, and the others in their team try to guess how far left or right on the big plastic dial the clue is pointing to. Cards are things like "sexy Pokemon" vs "unsexy Pokemon" (my first card drawn), hot or cold, democracy vs dictatorship, and so on. It's not a deep game with much strategy, but a fun party game. It incorporates a clever mechanic so that the other team gets to say if the guessing team is left or right of the

¹ The [University of Sog City Conference](#) one in 1994, I believe.

mark and score a point that way, which keeps both teams interested even when it's not their round.

Shortening the title, *The Fellowship* card game is a cooperative game, similar to *The Crew* or *The Crew: Mission Deep Sea*, and uses the same core idea. Each player has a goal each round, determined by their choice of character, which changes each round, and must play their cards to win (or lose) the required tricks. The deck is beautifully illustrated, and consists of many characters and five numbered suits (Hills, Forest, Mountains, Shadow, and Rings) of cards numbered 1 to 8, except for the Rings which are number 1 to 4. The highest card of the suit lead wins the trick, except the 1 Ring wins any trick it's played in², but can't be played until someone else plays a ring on another trick. The game comes with several different chapters (sets of characters and goals) and is designed to be played in order, much like the journey of the Fellowship in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Finally, *Bomb Busters* is another cooperative game of restricted information, themed around a team defusing a bomb. Everyone has a series of random wires (represented by tall cardboard markers in sets of four of each number from 1 to 12) and arranges them in ascending number order on their stand so they are only visible to that player. They then add a token to identify the value of one of their wires to all the other players. Players then take turns to call out a number matching one of their wires, while pointing at an unrevealed wire in another player's rack. If the two wires match, they are successfully "cut" and revealed. If the wires don't match, the timer clock is moved one tick closer to an explosion, and the passive player reveals the wrong wire and its value is thereafter visible to everyone. *Bomb Busters* is a clever, cooperative logic puzzle and I've really enjoyed the games we've played, which only scratch the surface of the 66 challenge missions in the box.

Kriegsmesser - Landau Before the War

Back in 2022 I ran a campaign of *Kriegsmesser*³, 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)

Alfonzo Meemo, pragmatic graverobber (Marie)

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

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

Session 8

² But Frodo must always win the hand with the One Ring or fail his task.

³ <https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/357104/kriegsmesser> and <https://gregor-vuga.itch.io/kriegsmesser>

Udo lays it on thick with Sforbeck, describing a dangerous woman attacker breaking into Alfonzo's home, chasing them in the street and worse. Sforbeck reluctantly calls for a deputy and visits Alfonzo's house and takes custody of Urzula Breitbandt. No one thinks to search her or her lodgings for the coded orders, so Sforbeck remains ignorant of that twist.

At the Landau fortifications, Jaroslav examines the site before talking to Jan van der Gulvert, the artillerist. Van der Gulvert is happy to talk and reveals republican sympathies, as well as a utopian bent, as he describes the Landau defences as a mirror of heavenly order protecting the people of Landau from Imperial aggression. Jaroslav examines the plans over the artillerist's shoulder and notices that he has a thin, transparent cloth with additional diagrams overlaid on the working plans. Van der Gulvert spots Jaroslav's interest and folds the cloth away, but the artist reassures him that the designs are artistically pleasing. This mollifies the Dutchman, who lets drop that he knows Urzula Breitbandt, a labour contractor from Antwerp.

Back at the graveyard, one of Alfonzo's urchins knocks at the door to alert him to a grave robbery. Someone has stolen a body from Alfonzo's graveyard. The gravedigger is outraged, as body snatching is his preserve and he doesn't like competition. Worse still, the missing body is that of Corporal Falsbender. Franzis is angry and demands they act.

After some asking around, Alfonzo turns up a witness who saw two figures making off with a large sack in the direction of the Golden Cock. The group spread out around the inn to question locals. Lazaro finds another witness who points the finger at Nikolaus Metzner's house, saying that he saw the body snatchers bring the corpse to the rear of the surgeon's house.

The gang visits Metzner's townhouse but he is not at home. Nosing around the back of the property, Lazaro distracts the guard dog as Franzis and Alfonzo sneak in. They find no sign of Falsbender's body in the ground floor of the house, and so move on to explore the cellar. In the half-light they find a series of stained barrels. Alfonzo unhappily opens one to reveal a decapitated head floating in vinegar. The two discover a room with a mortuary table and various disturbing instruments when suddenly the cellar doors slam shut, plunging them into darkness.

Outside, a huge man appeared and locked Franzis and Alfonzo in the cellar. He stumbles towards Lazaro and Udo at the rear gate. The guard dog cowers in fear before running out into the street. The enormous brute mumbles a threat and lunges for Lazaro.

In the cellar, Franzis throws his weight against the doors, straining to break out of the darkness. The stout bar holds, but the door frame does not, and Franzis throws open the doors with a bang. The noise distracts the huge man, and Udo and Lazaro make themselves scarce, running from the gate in different directions.

Alfonzo and Franzis face off against the towering fellow. He is surprisingly fast and snatches Alfonzo's pry bar from the gravedigger and swings it at Franzis with a bellow, who dances out of his reach while drawing his sword. The fine Italian blade doesn't seem

to faze the brute. Franzis worries that he might have to kill the man to defend his friends, but Udo steps up with a prayer and calls out in a strong, steady voice. The brute drops to his knees, penitent and ashamed of his violence. He gazes at the initiate with worshipful eyes, hanging on the divine's every word. With a bowed head, he kisses Udo's robe and promises to sin no more.

They ask the simple man a few questions and discover that Doctor Metzner left shortly after breakfast. Franzis completes his search of the premises and is shaken by what he does find but uncovers no sign of Falsbender's body. Where has the doctor taken it?

Session 9

At Metzner's house the group discusses what to do about Simon the simpleton and the guard dog. Lazaro takes ownership of the dog, being unwilling to leave it behind in the charnel house. Udo offers Simon a choice of a new career: labourer for Mother Sarah in Hammelbass, or porter for the housekeeper on Sausage Street. Simon opts for Mother Sarah, and Udo takes his leave of the group with the giant man in tow. Before they depart, Simon tells them that his former employer, Metzner, left early this morning with a barrel on his carriage to visit his friend Thomas Ferber.

Lazaro, Alfonso and Franzis head for Ferber's townhouse, meeting Jaroslav on the way. Jaroslav knows of Ferber, and identifies him as another well-to-do burgher and merchant, ascending through the ranks of Landau society.

At the Ferber residence ("No hawkers, panhandlers, graverobbers, starving artists or would-be duelists") the four are briefly delayed by a stout wall and gate. Franzis distracts the gardener as Alfonso shins up and over the wall. The graverobber noses about, looking for the missing body of Corporal Falsbender. He finds Metzner and Ferber in a well-lit room at the back of the house, overlooking the garden. There, on a mortuary table, is the body of the corporal. The two gentlemen are discussing a curious tattoo on the corporal's shoulders. They are startled by the sudden appearance of Alfonso, who barges in through the French windows to grab the body, upbraiding the thieves in the strongest terms as he does so, before leaving at speed.

Back round the front of the house, Lazaro hears Alfonso's alarm and slips past the gardener, still deep in conversation with Franzis. The carriage driver runs to Metzner's carriage, standing idle at the front steps, and 'borrows' the pair of horses and their vehicle. Alfonso chucks the body into the back of the carriage and quickly follows it.

They sweep from the driveway, as Franzis and Jaroslav just manage to get the gates open in time, and leap aboard the clattering transport as Lazaro steers them away from the Ferber house.

On the way across the city, Jaroslav attempts to copy the tattoo from the dead man's shoulders but the rutted streets and the rattling carriage render his copy impressionistic at best. Lazaro returns the crew to Alfonso's home by the graveyard and then drives off to return the carriage to Metzner's house. Horse stealing is a serious crime after all.

As he returns on foot, he spies Balthazar Rumbold sitting with a young lady of negotiable virtue, both enjoying a drink of chocolate. Chocolate! How can a post rider afford such luxuries? Lazaro stays a while, watching from across the street, and converses with a passing gossip. The chocolate may be stolen, he suggests, as rumour has it a delivery from Spain destined for the heiress Laurene Hiller has gone astray on the roads. No one is safe on the roads it seems.

In Hammelhass, Udo introduces Simon to Mother Sarah. Both seem happy with the arrangement and Simon is put to work as Sarah's help and as bodyguard for the girls of the parish.

Session 10

Jaroslav tells the group of his conversation with van der Gulvert and his odd ideas of geometric utopia. Alfonzo suggests that it might be worth tracking down the Antwerp labourers van der Gulvert mentioned as connected to Urzula Breitbandt.

Returning from Hammelhass, Udo passes a riot in progress, as the poor of Landau protest an increased grain tax. A fire breaks out and Udo stops to offer assistance to some injured men. He treats a man trampled by a horse and helps get him home to his family. Udo leaves a small quantity of coins with the relatives to help with the man's recovery.

Jaroslav, in the meantime, goes looking for Martin Richter, as that man left a note for the artist to arrange a meeting. Jaroslav finds Richter by the river-side docks working as a labourer. The poor fellow has come down in the world from his position as printer's apprentice. After introductions, Richter reveals a wooden printing block he kept back from Ridolfini when his master's print shop was raided and boarded up.

The wooden print block has a missing piece that matches the fragment Alfonzo retrieved from Klepper, the dead lawyer. Richter confirms that Klepper was a client of his master, Cavalcanti, who was to print copies of the diagram carved into the wooden block.

"It's the Death Star plans." someone opines.

Elsewhere, Piet Nachtmann contacts Lazaro the carriage driver with a job offer. He has a barrel of expensive wine to deliver to the Hiller estate outside the city. Moreover, he will be accompanying Nachtmann's niece and her chaperone to a ball at the Hiller estate. Lazaro takes the job and asks Franzis to accompany him as muscle. Who knows if the roads are safe?

At Alfonzo's house, a member of Sforbeck's guard knocks on the door. He was sent by Captain Sforbeck to inform Alfonzo and Udo that the woman, Urzula Breitbandt, has been released. Two rich gentlemen, one an Italian, paid for her release.

After a closer examination of the printing block, Jaroslav confirms to his satisfaction that the artillery diagram depicted corresponds with the architectural drawings he saw on van der Gulvert's drawing board, and together they outline a fatal weakness in the Landau fortifications at the site of the Tomb of Gaius, Son of Gaius.

The next day, Udo returns to the injured man's home to check on him. He appears to be healing well. The man's brother takes Udo aside and warns him that the authorities are looking for the ringleaders of the rioters. The cleric would be safer not associating with this family, he warns.

Alfonzo and Franzis re-bury Corporal Falsbender in a new plot and Udo says some words over the grave, all the while the two worry about Urzula, once again at large.

Back at the fortifications site, Jaroslav asks about the Dutch labourers and is given two names, Anders Fetter and Dirk Bobbler. They are overseers at the marshalling yard and not well liked by the local workmen.

Alfonzo's network of urchins pays dividends again when one of the street children alerts the gravedigger of a sighting of Urzula. She, Weimer, and Miglioresi were seen meeting van der Gulvert at the Rathaus in the centre of Landau. Franzis, Udo and Alfonzo quickly make their way to the Rathaus to spy on the Dutch woman and her conspirators. By the time they arrive, van der Gulvert and Urzula have left, but the observers are surprised to see Nikolaus Metzner at the table with Weimer and Miglioresi. What is the connection between the corpse-meddling surgeon and the conspirators?

A Solo Traveller-adjacent Game

The conclusion (on a cliff-hanger) of the solo Traveller-esque game I ran for myself with a simple roll-and-replace d100 target number to give me ups and downs in play. We join the crew of the *Trip Hazard* as they make ready to depart Brass Station to complete a job at a nearby automated orbital factory to make some cash to replenish their depleted credits.

Orbital Factory Dual Green

With Oona informed and remaining on the station, the rest of the crew undock the *Trip Hazard* and make the short journey to the location of the automated factory. On a slow approach Ding takes the time to scan the factory carefully. He distrusts the salaryman's assurances that the factory is uninhabited.

Question: Does Ding find signs of anyone onboard the dormant factory? Roll 66. Yes, plus an event. I decide that in addition to the looters on board the station's security system is still active and may pose a threat. New target = 66.

The residual heat of a shuttle engine stands out against the cold black in an infra-red scan. The factory station has visitors, and recently. A microwave and radio frequency scan reveals that the station security system is operative and warns the *Trip Hazard* away without proper authorisation.

Ding uses the security codes provided by the patron, hoping that much of his story is correct and the ship comes to rest against an airlock.

Question: Can they board safely and undetected? Roll 82. No. The looters have detected their approach and have a couple of men at the airlock. New target = 82.

A brief gunfight follows as Ding and crew board.

Question: Does Ding's crew avoid casualties? Roll 88. No and an event. New target = 88.

They immobilise or drive off the opposition but not before Sahah Bouri takes a hit. He's unable to walk and is immobilised. However, he props himself next to a comms terminal and gets access to the station systems with a combination of the access codes provided by the salaryman and his own skills.

Question: Does Bouri's hacking allow Ding and Djabir to get to the data cores undetected? Roll 51. Yes! New target = 51.

"I'm okay," Sahah says through gritted teeth. "I can access station systems from here and should be able to divert station security from tracking you. I can't do much about the other intruders though, so be careful."

Ding treats Sahah with first aid while Djabir watches for new threats. Satisfied that Sahah won't expire in their absence, Ding takes his engineer's offer and heads off with Djabir through the flickering emergency lights. They follow the route indicated by Sahah over the comms, narrowly avoiding a firefight between station security robots and the vacsuit clad intruders. They skirt the conflict and stay hidden.

The two men reach the primary computing node access and Djabir sets to work extracting the memory cores.

Question: Are they detected extracting the cores? Roll 39. No. New target = 39.

Djabir works feverishly but carefully and soon has the two cores extracted and safely packed away. Ding signals to leave in a hurry and they make haste back to the airlock to rendezvous with Sahah.

Question: Are they reunited? Roll 87. No. New target = 87.

The Missing Engineer

"Shit and stars!" Ding curses as he scans the comms console and airlock. There is no sign of Sahah. Was he captured? Did he crawl away under his own power? Are there any clues to his location?

[Aside: Here I resorted to another solo RPG mechanic, taken from Recluse, a game by Graven Utterance (Oliver N) at <https://gravenutterance.itch.io/recluse>. As there were several questions all together I rolled for a single resolution with 2d6, resulting in no clues but a misapprehension in the original question. He's not missing, but hidden.]

As they look for their missing comrade, the sound of mag-boots on deckplates echo in the corridor alerting Ding and Djabir to approaching intruders. They quickly cram

themselves into one of the emergency excursion suit lockers to hide, and are nearly shot by Sahah, also hiding. "Damn, captain, I nearly shot you!" Ding hisses for quiet as the three men fit uncomfortably in the crowded space. The footsteps grow louder and they hear muffled voices in the comms room outside.

Question: Are they detected? Roll 62. No. New target = 62.

The three crew members hold their breath anxiously, alert to every sound beyond the locker door. Eventually the noises from the intruders recedes and Ding risks peeking out?

Question: Are they alone? Roll 100. No and event! New target = 100.

When they emerge from the locker they find a second locker door ajar as a young girl scuttles from it to hide behind a console pedestal. Ding grabs her and whispers. "We're in a fix, just like you. If we all cooperate we might just get out of here." The girl nods, frightened dark eyes in a youthful face.

"I'm Philip Ding, captain of the *Trip Hazard*. You are?"

"Dong Li," she replies in a whisper.

"All right, do you have a vacc suit? We may have to blow the outer door if it's sealed by station security."

The girl nods and slips free of Ding's hand to climb back into her locker. She emerges with a slightly too large excursion suit and begins donning the suit.

Djabir checks Sahah's injuries again. Has the earlier treatment stabilised him?

Question: Can Sahah walk unaided? Roll 03. Yes! New target = 03.

Whether it's the medical antibiotic/sealant or the dose of stimulant from the first aid kit, Sahah is able to walk and reseals his vacc suit with patches over the bullet hole. Djabir mutters about stim and haram under his breath, but he's pleased to see his friend up and moving.

Li, now in her excursion suit, watches Ding closely as he cycles through the airlock control menus.

Question: Can he operate the airlock from here? Roll 37. No. New target = 37.

"It's as I feared," says Ding. We'll have to use the manual airlock to get out and our ship is mated to the automatic lock. That means a trip across the hull to the secondary access."

The group hurries to check and cross-check their suits and seals. Ding notes with satisfaction that Dong Li knows her way around an excursion suit. His double check turns up nothing to remark on.

Out the Airlock

“Time to be moving. All together.” Ding gathers the group by the subsidiary manual airlock and gestures for Sahah to work the mechanism as he and Djabir provide the muscle to crank the inner door open. Crowded into the emergency airlock, they wait as the crank closes the inner door and registers the seal. With more effort they operate the outer door and exit the factory station.

The outer door opens beside the automatic airlock, clamped tight to their ship. The cold jewelled stars are sharp and bright except where the bulk of the station blots out the sky. Scant running lights and helmet lamps provide a little illumination and throw dark shadows all about.

The group moves forward gingerly, slowly climbing over the airlock and clamps on the outside of the *Trip Hazard*. Inverted from their previous perspective they progress along the ship's exterior. The helmet lamps show hand and foot holds, gratefully grabbed, as each spacer is acutely aware that lacking tethers a missed hold might spell a one way trip to a slow isolated death.

Ding leads the team with anxious caution. Speed and precision vie for the upper hand.

Question: Do they reach the airlock without incident? Roll 38. No, but almost. New target = 38.

The exertions prove too much for the injured Sahah, whose wound opens during the scramble across the hull. Ding hears the med-alarm ring on the command circuit and turns to see Sahah sag as blood loss blurs his vision. His grip on a hand-hold loosens.

Question: Can anyone grab Sahah before he loses contact with the ship? Roll 20. Yes. New target = 20.

Bravely, the diminutive Dong Li grabs at Sahah's harness and pulls him towards her as she braces her boot under a foot-hold. She wraps an arm around the fainting man while her other hand grips the ship's hull with grim strength.

With renewed urgency, Ding punches in the access code for the airlock. It cycles agonisingly slowly but then slides open. Djabir enters, ready to receive Sahah as Ding manoeuvres the unconscious man through the lock.

Moments later all four people are huddled on the floor of the airlock, grateful for the pull of artificial gravity and the hiss of the ship's atmosphere filling the lock. As pressure is equalised, they remove their suits as quickly as possible and hurry with Sahah to the medbay.

Ding hesitates. They really need to get out of the vicinity of the station. They are a sitting duck clamped to the station, but Sahah needs medical attention and Djabir should be at the bridge to get the ship moving promptly.

Question: Does Sahah need further medical attention? Roll 98. Nope! New target = 98.

The engineer is stable. The readouts on the medbay indicate he's sleeping. Ding applies an emergency plasma pack to the sleeping man to help him recoup the lost blood volume, and leaves the man with Dong Li to keep a watch.

Ding runs to the bridge and gets a report from Djabir. He orders the release of the ship's clamps and takes the helm to manoeuvre the vessel away from the factory station.

Question: Can they escape without further incident? Roll 45. No⁴. New target = 45.

An Unwelcome Gift

The sound of the clamps decoupling rings through the Trip Hazard, and the hum of the thrusters mounts as Ding slews the ship up and away from the station before pointing the ship's nose into the black and flatlining the thrust. Without Sahah in engineering, Ding can only push the ship's systems so far.

The sensors read a nearby radar ping. The intruders' shuttle has also launched from the station as it assumes a pursuit vector. Recklessly the other ship launches a missile. This close to the station the explosion could be catastrophic.

Ding swears and pushes the Trip Hazard past its safety limits. Djabir ejects sand and chaff to confuse the incoming missile.

Question: Does it work? Roll 07. Yes! New target = 07.

The missile is on a ballistic trajectory until it achieves a lock. This close there's little time for its more sophisticated electronics to come into play. The sleek barracuda-like shape of the weapon accelerates past the ship, but their trouble isn't over yet.

Question: Do they have time to accelerate away from the missile? Roll 40. No. New target = 40.

The manoeuvre thrusters whine at an improbable pitch as the Trip Hazard accelerates at its limit, jinking furiously as Ding attempts to keep them out of the missile's active sensor cone. To no avail. Gradually the missile's vector changes as it sweeps the sky for a target before it angles towards the fleeing ship like a predator sensing prey. Target lock acquired!

FIN

Observations

Clearly the simple roll and replace mechanic produces a certain swinginess in play. Knowing the next target might also distort the kind of questions the solo-player asks next, gaming the system to get a good result on a high target, or to burn off a low target

⁴ In play I forgot to update the target number to 98 from Sahah's medical check. I only spotted it during the write-up. You're getting genuine, unfiltered gaming here, folks.

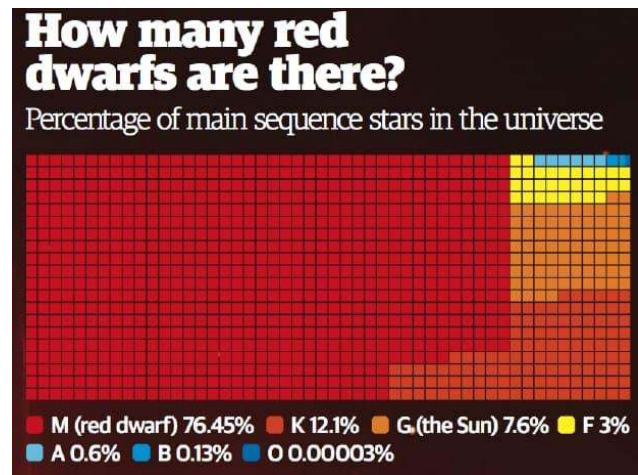
with an inconsequential or inverted question. As with most solo games a certain degree of honesty is required to keep the play interesting. Like a regular GM I would occasionally spend more time – and more rolls – resolving a scene that grabbed my attention. Conversely I would also resolve scenes with a single roll, if that felt right.

That said, I enjoyed the experiment. There is a temptation to add mechanics or complicate resolution here and there, but I think the simple mechanics work well for what I need. I felt there was real jeopardy in some of the rolls. Additionally, the random events and twists on a result of doubles helps inject uncertainty as well and I grew to welcome the result of doubles for the added chaos. The roll of 100 that introduced Dong Li was not something I would have likely added myself without the random event prompt, for example.

If I were to add a mechanic it might be to grant a bonus to a roll that falls within a character's established skill set. A small number of character tags would be sufficient, and would allow me a combination of personality traits, skills and backgrounds to flesh out a character.

Not every roll or event leads somewhere. Just as in regular RPG play with multiple players some plot hooks are dropped or ignored. I don't know Oona's theft of the artifact from the cargo bay would ever come up again, given the direction the play went, but it's there for later if needed.

Oh, for those more astronomically minded, the die roll for stellar type in the previous installment was wildly inaccurate. Less than 5% of observed stars are F, A, B or O type⁵. I should have rolled a d20 with stellar type = 1-16 M-type, 17-18 K-type, 19 G-type, and on a 20 pick a F-type. Reroll the 20 and if it comes up 20 again choose A- or B-type to taste. However, there is something to be said for biasing the outcomes towards stars with habitable systems and M-type dwarfs are not expected to be particularly hospitable to life, with both a narrow Goldilocks zone and frequent flares.



⁵ Diagram taken from <https://futurism.com/red-dwarfs-the-curious-stars-that-can-live-10-trillion-years> - Used without permission.

Comments on E&A #6

General comments: I'm torn between single and double column layout. I felt my last "Twisting the Rope" was pushing legibility with the smaller font size and two columns.

As discussed, for most of us a single column works better for reading on a screen, particularly a smaller screen like a tablet or phone. However for ease of reading I much prefer a line length of 60-70 characters maximum, which means either wide margins or a large point size for the typeface. Both choices limit the amount I can include in a given zine, which may be a bonus for some readers.

For example at the current margins (2.58cm) and point size (11-pt) I get about 76 characters to a line, like so:

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz0123456789abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz0123456789abcd
efghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz0123456789

Changing that to 12-pt gets 70 characters to a line, but at the cost of going over the page limit by a page and a half..

A rough check of E&A #6 comes in at about 124,000 words, excluding the front matter, which is equivalent to something like a 400 page paperback novel, if the Internet is to be believed. That's a lot to get through in a month, even without other reading commitments.

In short (hah!) we are a wordy bunch and two columns lets us get more in per issue, particularly if we want to stay under the 16 page limit. I am in favour of the 16 page limit nonetheless. There's too much to read in a single issue per month as it is, and longer is not always better⁶. Well done to anyone who read and commented on every contribution. It is a big ask.

Anyway, that's a roundabout way of saying, no mice-capades this month, as I ran out of space and oomph. You'll have to make do with the Landau campaign and the solo Traveller-adjacent write-ups.

Brian Rogers: I'm glad the play went well, and I loved the Hufflepuff cookies. Fuck JKR.

Well done also to your daughter for the production of *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812*.

Draw Steel doesn't sound like my sort of game. I never really cottoned to miniatures and grids in the 1980s and I certainly am not going to start now. It does sound like some of the game mechanics are worth lifting to use elsewhere though.

⁶ As the Bishop said to the Actress.

Re Iron Skull: This month's *Regrettable Superhero* doesn't disappoint, and your Robot into Bionics cheese is the sort of V&V abuse I've come to love from your write-ups. A lot of pulp heroes lead with their chins, but this guy leads with his head!

The *Regrettable Superheroes* led me to Public Domain Super Heroes⁷, a gold mine of oddballs and curiosities from the Golden Age of Comics.

RYCT me: Aye, let 2026 be a great improvement on 2025.

The repeated beatings became a regular thing in the *Kriegsmesser* game. As we ignored the optional rules for toughness (HP) and the like, it was mostly negotiated outcomes from combat, and roleplaying any injuries received.

Thanks for your earlier *Dungeon Crawler Carl* book recommendation. I've now read the first five in the series and am in the middle of the sixth.

Roger BW: RYCT me re *Kriegsmesser*: The *Warhammer Fantasy* feel is deliberate in the original rules and in my intent with the game. It's essentially *Troika* crossed with *Blades in the Dark* meets *WFRP*, while a small, vicious dog bites your leg.

Re *Bayern* and stutterwarp engine relaxation: somewhere between a Wigner effect fire and a bad day with an armed nuke, I guess. The boxed edition does sound chock-full from your description.

Erica Frank (Elf): Your list of itch.io bundles looks very similar to mine. *Wanderhome* appeals to me, but with the still-ongoing *Mausritter* game, anything we play next will probably not involve talking animals.

I am (as is obvious from the solo Traveller-esque write-up this and lastish) all in favour of solo game write-ups.

Michael Cule: Re T. Kingfisher: her horror is remarkable and unsettling, but not despairing, which I like. This month I borrowed the audiobook of *Hemlock and Silver* from the public library in Cork and really enjoyed it, even though it took me ages to listen to. I think I'll stick to reading in future. The descriptions of the otherworldly in the novel are gripping.

Re threats to children in fiction: It's often used as a cheap threat or demonstration of the villain's nastiness, and I hate it as much as the girlfriend in the refrigerator trope⁸.

RYCT Brian Misiaszek re Parathethys: One man's ancient horror beneath our feet is another man's renewable resource for Thethys-burgers, obviously. "They taste great and the mutations are rare!"

My name is still Cor-cor-an, not Coc-oran.

⁷ https://pdsh.fandom.com/wiki/Public_Domain_Super_Heroes

⁸ This did at least inspire Catherynne Valente to write *The Refrigerator Monologues*, which I loved.

Heath Row: The dice offerings at Gary Gygax's grave are sweet and poignant. Thanks for the photos of the cemetery and the TSR exhibit in the museum.

Patrick Zoch: Your analysis of the XP/gold issue with *AD&D* reminds me why I dislike counting XP and by extension the whole treasure=XP concept. It works for some tables, obviously, but I haven't the patience with it any more.

Pum: I'm looking forward to Dublin Worldcon in 2029 too! Thanks for best wishes for improved health.

Re notes on character sheet: For my last few campaigns I've had a shared spreadsheet in Google Docs with the PCs on one tab, NPC names and descriptions on another tab, and sundries on a third. My players still routinely forget NPC names, to the extent that in the *Kriegsmesser* campaign a new character was introduced called Vincenzo simply because one of my players kept misremembering another PC's name.

Avram Grumer: Re Gabe's character talking like an anime cat-girl: Choose in haste, regret at leisure. *Dream Askew* sounds interesting and challenging. GM-less games don't always click for my group, but I might pitch it for a short run.

Interesting also that you recognize your tendency to play reactive characters and are taking steps to be more direct and involved. I love to have a player like that in a group.

Re the fan-made *Offworlders* stuff I found: I think it was mostly from the Discord. There's a channel called *offworlders-workshop* that has lots of fan-made add-ons. The AI character that one of the players chose in my *Offworlders* game came from there, as did the Android I think. I can share the document of character types I gave to my players if you like.

RYCT to Joshua Kronengold re 20' by 20' Room: I miss that blog.

Brian Misiaszek: I'm delighted to hear of Lauren's results and hope she has a great time at University of Toronto. It's also great to hear that Sadie is doing well and hope she is well recovered from her surgeries.

RYCT Roger BW re Chaosium's third-party publishing policies: I've never understood why Chaosium have been so restrictive.

Re 24" monitors in portrait mode: A recent upgrade saw all the members of the Data Centre team at work getting 34" monitors, so I'm planning to reuse one of the 24" monitors as a portrait document reader too.

Re phosphenes flashes and sensory effects from Mythos creatures: If you haven't read Peter Watt's novel, *Blindsight*, I'd recommend it. The alien creatures in the book can detect and respond to human nervous impulses, and move swiftly during our saccades, seeming to teleport when we're not aware of them.

When I rub my eyes I see complex geometric and tessellating patterns. My retinal ganglia are obviously Escher fans. I've had a couple of scintillating scotoma episodes too and it can be terrifying if you don't know what's happening.

Lisa Padol: Re zine length with comments only: I'd prefer a zine with comments and no write-ups over a zine with write-ups and no comments. I understand the urge to shrug and do nothing. Faced with a novel-length APA some skimming I'm certain to skim some zines if not all, and that feels like I'm less engaged.

RYCT me re *Cthulhu Eternal*: I didn't spot the Bundle of Holding offer. *Cthulhu Eternal* sounds interesting, but I've too many games and not enough time or attention span for the ones I've already got, particularly BRP-derived games. I was a huge fan of *Runequest* in the 1980s but I don't think D100/BRP games fit my needs now.

Thanks for the info on *Swords of the Serpentine*. It does seem like the most refined set of the Gumshoe mechanics.

RYCT Joshua Kronengold about "our minds not being as under our control as we think". Agreed. I remember in 2007 I had a parathyroidectomy to remove an overactive parathyroid gland that was the root cause of kidney stones due to elevated PT hormone raising my calcium levels. In the ward the night after the surgery I woke at about 2 am fully convinced I was going to die. A morbid, oppressive fear took hold of me, almost like a physical presence, and I had a panic attack. When the attending physician turned up she explained that during the surgery the *thyroid* gland was often moved out of the way and that sometimes caused a dose of thyroid hormone to flood the bloodstream, which can have the effect of panic attack and sense of impending doom. Never before or since have I been so acutely aware of my body as a biochemical machine, and my state of mind as something to be tweaked or manipulated.

Joshua Kronengold: Good luck with the job hunt. It can't be fun to leave a place you've worked over 20 years at.

Re Amber arts and crafts: Yes, in the beginning it was prompted by character point avarice, but some players just enjoyed the creativity. I still have an incomplete suit of trumps somewhere in the attic.

I like the sound of *Swords of the Serpentine*. A short (general) skill lists appeals to me, and I did enjoy Kevin Kulp's *Timewatch*, even though I've never got to play it.

The "Hit Dice as recovery" mechanic in *D&D* 5th Ed doesn't bother me as a mechanic, but I still get confused by the name. While it's rare in the extreme that I'd play 5th Ed, I like mechanics that democratize healing for all PCs, if only because it lets my Cleric characters use spells for more interesting things.

RYCT Michael Cule re *Everway*: I loved that game when it came out and never got to play it as much as I would have liked, but I agree that the magic system in particular needed work, or at least a heap more examples. I do like the new edition Fortune Deck, but I have

to admit I haven't been able to read all the way through the two volumes (all 780+ pages of them!)

Re the lion in King Arthur's bedroom: Another bloody allegory, no doubt. Mythic Britain was lousy with allegories⁹.

Jim Vassilakos & Timothy Collinson: I loved Jennell Jaquays's *Central Casting* books, even if I found some of the identity politics encoded in the 'dark side' traits repellent. She later had a change of heart about that part of the books, as I understand it.

I'm glad the Bucephalus joke got a laugh.

Everyone else: SAEBNC.

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⁹ See Nathan Pyle's cartoon here: <https://www.facebook.com/nathanwpyle2/posts/1348780106617107/>



THE DRAGON'S BEARD

JANUARY 2026

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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.



BEFORE LEEROY JENKINS

Before Leeroy Jenkins, there was my son. Granted, he was a child, barely seven years old, playing his first game of Dungeons and Dragons. His oldest sister, only a few years older than him, had been playing for a year or so, and he so wanted to join in on the game. While my daughter had approached the game in a creative and thoughtful manner, my son played a character of bold action and suffered consequences unforeseen to his young mind.

We were playing Dungeons and Dragons 3.5 edition, and I was running the Fury of the Forge as the DM for my kids. My daughter was playing a wizard and my son was playing a fighter. They had managed to sneak up the entry stairs without detection. However, as soon as they reached the door, the orcs noticed them and started attacking. My kids managed to dispatch a few of the guard before making their way inside. But once inside, they found themselves under attack from orcs on the opposite side of a large rift. My son's fighter had no ranged weapons and felt helpless against the orcs armed with crossbows. Seeing the rope bridge spanning the rift, he decided to charge across.

Calmly, I asked if he was sure, but my mind was in a panic over what he was suggesting. It would be hard enough to navigate with all his armor, but under fire, his fighter was going to have to rely on some acrobatics/dexterity checks to make it across without falling. He reaffirmed his decision. He was going to take the fight to the orcs. I allowed him to make the attempt, fairly certain that he would not be successful in his roll. I had planned to allow his failure to cause him to stop at the ledge, thus saving him from starting across the treacherous rope bridge. He rolled his dice, with penalties for all his armor. When the dice came to a stop, my son let out a whoop! My face, on the other hand, blanched.

His success carried his heavily armored fighter across the rope bridge over the rift under crossbow fire from orcs on the other side. But his movement only carried him halfway. His miraculous luck doomed him. Dodging the

attacks of the orcs, my son fighter eagerly rolled his second check, itching to enjoin the fight with the orcs and make for a safer passage for his sister's wizard. The roll was a horrendous failure. Not only could he not move, the roll was so bad that he risked falling. He next roll was to avoid falling. When the "1" appeared on the dice, never mind the penalties, my son and I stared in silence at each other, hesitating to acknowledge the doomed fate of the roll.

"Can I go back?" he asked.

"No. Your character falls."

"How far?"

I started collecting the d6 to roll damage.

"I'm o.k. I have lots of hit points."

He did. Maybe he will get lucky again. But I could see his worry as I kept collecting more d6 to roll. (I had to go into my loaner bag of dice to get enough to roll once).

Twenty d6 bounced across the table. Not nearly enough revealed a 1.

He was understandably upset and we took a break for the night. As we talked about the event, it became apparent that he was not only upset for losing his character, he was concerned that he would not be able to play anymore.

Of course he could still play. We'll just roll another character.

"I want to play a monk this time. It's going to be his brother seeking revenge."

Of course he is. We had him awaiting as a captive just on the other side of the rift for his sister's wizard to discover.

Despite the tragic start to his D&D playing days, he always played more aggressively and impulsively than his siblings. If bold action was ever needed in a game, rest assured that my oldest son would be the one to do it. He was mindful about what his actions would do to the group. Just as his charge across the rope bridge was an effort to help his sister fight against orcs on the other side, his actions were intended as contribution to the group's mission. His bold actions did not always lead to chaos and self-destruction. It just as often led to phenomenal success. Though he did go through many characters, not one was named Leeroy.



SHORES OF THE AZURE SEA

This month marks the beginning of my new campaign in Greyhawk. All but one of the players have played with me before. It's been ten years since we played together, so they were excited to hear about the new campaign. So excited, that the group ballooned to 7 players, which is a bit crowded, but I'll make it work.

We will be playing on Fantasy Grounds Unity, especially now that it is a free platform. Discord will be our voice channel. Most the players are in two different states and time zones, though I will have one playing from South Korea.

The Ghosts of Saltmarsh will serve as the core adventure publication I will use to frame the campaign. This has a strong nostalgia feel for me as I ran the *Sinister Secret of Saltmarsh* for my first steady D&D group back in High School in the early 80's. It will be the first adventure I run for the group.

While the *Sinister Secret of Saltmarsh* has remained relatively unchanged in *The Ghosts of Saltmarsh*, the newer publication has provided more details about Saltmarsh that the original U-series left up to the DM. I found it to be a welcomed change. I liked that it provided some background options for player characters to make them more connected to the town of Saltmarsh. It is, after all, going to be there base of operations. *The Ghosts of Saltmarsh* describes some key members of town, provides a map, and identifies a political conflict between three factions in town. This helps flesh out the town in a way that the original U-series simply omitted. Unfortunately, I find some details in the new publication either lacking or inconsistent, so I will have to make some adjustments.

I love the Saltmarsh map in *The Ghosts of Saltmarsh*. Mike Schley does wonderful work with maps. However, it seems too sparsely built. U1 Saltmarsh had a population of 2,000. The Ghost's Saltmarsh increases the population to 5,000. The map of Saltmarsh only has about 100 buildings. Even with half the population scattered in nearby fields and marshlands, 20 people are not crammed into each building on the map.

The political factions make for an dynamic that could be interesting to portray to the players as they interact with the NPCs. The sympathies of the party will certainly influence how the town folks respond to the party. Keoland's growing interest in the village could help explain its growing size, but it is not clear how other than thwarting the Sea Princes

influence (which is not detailed except in possible illicit trade) or supporting the new mining operations (to the tune of about 200 miners, mostly dwarves). While the town council members are identified by faction, the same can not be said for the rest of the citizens. The two primary factions appear simple in their desires for the town, they are complex because both good and evil have reasons to support both factions, and both good and evil NPCs can be found to support each faction. However, the Scarlet Brotherhood is described as the one that is truly the most evil and destructive of the factions. Unfortunately, only the key members are identified. Which other townsfolk would support the Scarlet Brotherhood and why are not provided. Given both good and evil already supporting both other factions, it is hard to see how any other than a evil foreigner would support the Scarlet Brotherhood.

The only legitimate industry in Saltmarsh appears to be fishing, which hardly seems to support more than doubling in size. The trade delegation from Luz seems to come a long way just for fish, and there does not seem to be any industry that supports preserving fish well enough to make such a long voyage to arrive safe for consumption weeks later. — no smokehouse, brining, pickling, ice house, or even magical preservation in the village. The illicit trades of smuggling and trafficking are more likely to account for the towns growth, but little is explained beyond a mention in the book.

Lastly, all the other maps in *The Ghosts of Saltmarsh* reflect the traditional maps in the U-series. Blueprint style maps of blue and white. They are clean and elegant and have a visual beauty of their own. But they do not evoke a sense of the environment, mood, or theme. They are too sterile looking for a medium that leverages vibrant color and occasional animations.

A big solution comes in the Expanded Saltmarsh products by u/GrnHrtBrwnThmb on reddit. First, it is a bigger map just as beautiful as the original by Schley and in the same art style. It also more than triples the number of buildings in Saltmarsh and creates several different neighborhoods for the growing town.

GrnHrtBrwnThmb provides a key for over 150 buildings in the expanded Saltmarsh, providing seven additional wealthy merchant families and their industries that fuel the economy of Saltmarsh. One of the things I really like about GrnHrtBrwnThmb's expanded Saltmarsh is the details he provides to his keyed buildings. While names of citizens are rarely provided, there are plenty of random NPC name generators available to fill that gap. In addition to Good and Services available at each business, encounter options are frequently cited, including

the source and location online (usually on reddit from other reddit contributors). For major merchant families, the source of their wealth is explained, which is usually tied to several buildings and industries in town. GrnHrtBrwnThmb really fleshed out a full size city more indicative of the 5000 population (or more) with a full complement of business and industry ranging from agricultural to manufacturing to services. The only thing missing is faction identification of the families and industries.

Using GrnHrtBrwnThmb's Expanded Saltmarsh map and key as a start, I made modifications to fit my style and campaign. Since I have a non-gunpowder era campaign, I removed the fireworks and pinata store. I also do not have coffee-like drinks, so I removed the Arabica family name and trades, as well as the cothana concept and trades. Cothana was GrnHrtBrwnThmb's creation of a combined coffee bean and cotton product. Likewise, a couple of cafe's also had to be redesigned. Cothana was an interesting idea but an ill fit for my game. It just felt like too much of an anachronism for the game, which I acknowledge is a petty thing to think about a fantasy game. In its place, I added a cheese industry. I also added a locksmith and a ropemaker (which seemed oddly missing). Logging was another wealth industry added, to support the ship making, repairs, and continued growth of the town. Additionally, smokehouses, brining, and pickling businesses were added, as well as additional coopers for support shipping and trade. One of the mining industries is the salt mine, creating a lucrative salt trade and cheaper salting for preservatives for food and fish leaving Saltmarsh for distant ports. Another anachronism in GrnHrtBrwnThmb's expanded Saltmarsh was the labeling of several large buildings as apartments. The expanded Saltmarsh includes several guild buildings which also provides some lodging for guild members. This accounts for the many marines and mariners in town, so they probably do not need an apartment complex. The miners might be housed in one of the apartments, as a sort of industrial tenement owned by the mining company. The town and landscape does not seem crowded enough to justify apartments. As a pseudo-medieval England fishing town, apartments would not exist as stand-alone buildings like we see today in America. Instead, they would be additional flats built on top of businesses in the lower floors, but that is not how the apartments are described. For some, I've added small shops for the industries in town. One building supports the various fish shops selling daily catches (which makes the upper flats smelly and cheap). I still have to make some adjustments on the other apartments, but I doubt it will even be of notice to the players.

I have some more adjustments to do to make the Saltmarsh fit my campaign concept better, but it is a big town and I will sort it out as time permits. It will be the players base of operation throughout the campaign. I could not have done it without GrnHrtBrwnThmb's hard work. I built the expanded Saltmarsh into Fantasy Grounds format, and it is ready to go.

For map upgrades, Canvas Quest has recreated every map from *The Ghosts of Saltmarsh* in full color. He has done tons of maps for many D&D adventures, mostly for Foundry VTT and Roll20. Many maps are available for free. Membership can get access to multi-layer and variation maps and more. I have found the conversion to Fantasy Grounds relatively easy, but it does require some coding work as only the art image is portable. Nonetheless, I think it has been worth the effort and I think my players will enjoy it.

For the campaign, I customized the Fantasy Grounds theme to reflect the nautical theme of Saltmarsh. The background is from the *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* cover. The menus are recolored in sea hues of blue and sea green. I redesigned the dice tower to be a lighthouse, which lights up when the dice are dropped in. I'm very happy with out they turned out.



Lastly, I created a standard template for all the NPC images. *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* has lots of lovely artwork to help convey the theme and mood of the adventures, but it is lacking on pictures of many key NPCs that the players will encounter. Some of the portraits that are provided are NPCs that the players might never encounter. Most of the key NPCs they will encounter have no art provided in the publication. Some of the descriptions of NPCs are so specific that it is challenging to find matching art. I stuck with providing art for the key and expected recurring NPCs. If the players get attached to someone unexpectedly (which will undoubtedly happen), I'll create an art card for the NPC. I'm happy with by character art template and think it conveys the nautical theme centered on Saltmarsh well.

I am looking forward to starting the new game.



BAND OF BROTHERS

I finally finished my first platoon of WWII US Airborne Infantry for Bolt Action. These are from the Band of Brothers starter kit for Bolt Action by Warlord Games. Warlord Games figures are a heroic 28mm scale, or 1/56 scale. They tend to be a bit thicker for their size; that helps with the durability and visual detail, though it makes for a mismatch with other models in the same scale.

My goal is to eventually have a full company of US Airborne Soldiers to represent Easy Company, 2nd Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), better known as the Band of Brothers, and wargame scenarios from their landing on D-Day through Market Garden. I'd like to add the Battle of the Bulge, too, but those would be winter scenarios and more miniatures to buy and paint (so those will have to be a future project if at all).

I also want to consolidate all the warpaint soldiers into a single demolition unit of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) popularly known as the Filthy Thirteen. I only need thirteen of them, so they should be easy to complete.

I have another box of WWII US Airborne Infantry to fill out the company with more soldiers, supporting artillery and mortars, and a bazooka team. I also have some Regular US Infantry and tanks waiting to be assembled to round out the force. But I need to get some German units painted first so I can get a game of fully painted miniatures on the table. I have a German Panzer Grenadier units next in line for painting, followed by some German support vehicles and a Stug III assault gun. Some German Fallschirmjager (airborne)

soldiers and Waffen SS will be next.

My son intends to work on a Soviet Union army, mostly because he thinks their tanks look "derpy." It is a lot of painting ahead of us, but we look forward to it. It is a hobby we enjoy together. Our paint stations are right next to each other.





COMMENTS ON #6

Jim Vassilakos – RYCT Avram Grumer, Re: Deadlines. I found your submission chart fascinating. Personally, I hate being up against a deadline, but I've also found that deadlines are great motivators to actually get something done. Each month, right after I submit my zine, I have grand plans to start early on the next zine, especially if I decided to pull a subject from the previous submission to work on it longer for the next issue. However, I have rarely, if ever, turned my zine in more than a week early. I consider it timely submission if it is turned in two days before the deadline.

Throughout my careers, I've had many deadlines to meet and many deadlines to establish. Deadlines were a funny thing on the job. The bosses would establish a date for a project to be completed, but then they would pester me about progress, which is understandable, but annoying. Worst was when they would ask for the project early, not because a deadline changes – I completely understood how those could change – but because they wanted it early so they could be sure it was done on time. When balancing numerous projects, all with their own deadlines, some projects simply were not started until close to the deadline. The closer to the deadlines, the higher the priority of work. Generally, I allocated just enough time before a deadline that was needed to complete a project.

It is reasonable to assume that this may be a holdover from my school day procrastination habits – why do it now when there is always the last minute. I generally try to do better work than that, but the fact of the matter was that there were always other projects to be working on and they were being completed at the last minute it seemed. Unlike most students, I hate extensions on a project. To me, all that meant was that the new deadline was now going complete with the deadlines of other projects. They would start to pile up. It was best to just complete project when they were due.

At West Point, there is a tradition for a particularly onerous research paper every cadet had to complete in their junior year. The core subject of Introduction to International Relations (or Social Sciences) required a research paper that was a significant portion of a cadet's grade in the class. Deadline for the paper for all instructors in the course were standardized by date and time: 1600 hours. While there was always a few cadets who turned their assignment in during class, most waited until after class to print, package and deliver their paper to the instructor's office. Instructors placed bins outside their office to collect student

papers. The telltale looks of a cadet delivering their paper would start after lunch – a purposeful walk towards the academic hall, carrying no books, holding only a single document folder thick with a hopefully well-researched paper. By 3pm, things started to get interesting. The flow of cadets delivering their papers increased, and the pomp and circumstance - in mock celebration of the quality their paper - grew more outrageous. Cadets wore costumes and created elaborate displays for the delivery of their papers. It was a parade especially for the delivery of the SOSH paper, with every other cadet lining the route to the academic offices cheering on the cadets delivering their papers. Some seemed to make a big display of how close to the deadline they could deliver the paper, which was a risky move. At 1600 exactly, the professors, collected their boxes of submitted papers and replaced it with another box labeled – “Late. Minus one Letter Grade.” At 1700, a new box replaced it with the labeled “Late. Minus **TWO** Letter Grades.” If any paper was still outstanding at 1800 (6pm), it was docked Three Letter Grades and was a certain failure. Late submissions were rare but did happen.

As a supervisor, my planning mantra for deadlines was to set them for the time and date I wanted them. Projects would not be submitted any sooner – project workers wanted to do a good job. If I wanted to see its progress, I would assign additional deadlines and expectations. I learned to press my bosses about their deadline expectations. It was more important to know when they wanted to see the projects, not when they needed them. They almost always meant the former instead of the latter.

I've always marveled at the work that Lee Gold, and now Jim, assigns themselves in the production of the APA. While I could adjust my workflow to suit my scheduling needs (for example, I'm turning this zine in early so I will be free from the task while the rest of my family is visiting). Unfortunately for Jim, the day he ALWAYS has to work the zine is the 22nd. On some days, he might have a free schedule to edit, compile, format, and publish right away. On other days, the burdens of other obligations (like, say, a full day at his place of employment) competes for his time to complete the APA in a timely manner. It is hard work and a massive responsibility undertaken with deadline of expectation from the readers with no compensation.

The best I can say is that I am eternally grateful for the work that Jim does for the Ever & Anon, and “Worry not, Jim. My zine will be in your inbox by the time you start working on the APA.”

John Redden



Reddened Stars number 5
(E ka hoku o ula`ula `ole)

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

Web sites:
johnredden.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

We completed the first season of Foundation. We enjoyed it. The plan is to take in season two and three later.

We watched the first segment of Stranger Things. Excellent.

I continued reading Children of Time by Tsaikovsky. This book one of three. I will have finished book one by the time this zine is published. Can he design aliens!

Sum Comments

I didn't say much about Conventions last issue. You know I don't get on an airplane to attend a convention. And you've heard about my sad loss of HawaiiCon on the Big Island. The best cons I can remember were in the early 1980s, when OrcCon took place near Disneyland in Orange County. I was introduced to Runequest, a fellow that worked for the movie industry showed up with tremendous props for Traveller.

There have been comments on the size of E&A. My solution is rapid read unless I want to dwell on something.

Clark Timmins, excellent city design. I especially liked the graphic.

Myles Corcoran, I can't think of any specific media that has influenced game content. The exceptions are my own science fiction novels and the Eagles song Hotel California, which I wrote up for A&E a while back. // I continue to enjoy Mausritter.

Attronarch, thank you. I'll look for the Altanis writeup next issue.

Gabriel Roark, I read E&A on my Iphone, but it is a pain in the butt. I guess my touch is deficient. It brings up a translation dialog at random times and sometimes goes back to the beginning of the zine for an unknown reason. It's probably me.

Lisa Padol, perhaps you should write all comments for one issue and all adventure writeups in the next.// Thank you for the examples of emotional play. Of course, I have never played any of the games you mentioned.// Surprisingly I enjoyed Game of Thrones. And it certainly was medieval. // A Renaissance setting? Hmm. The resurrection of culture in Italy comes to mind. I didn't particularly like Lee's last chocolate adventure in England, but played anyway.// My son, wife and granddaughter are planning a Mouse Guard LARP in a forest/hill/grass park somewhere north of Santa Rosa. It is at least a three mile spread. This is all their doing. I can't play. I'll sit on log and hear the story later. Note, there are animals in the park, since this is out in the country side. Hopefully there isn't a mountain lion.

Brian Rogers, congrats on charity work.// I don't know *Draw Steel*.

Roger West, I haven't tried Typst. I use Libre Office running on Ubuntu. Maybe I should give it a shot.// I'll be doing a limited number of board games with my sons family soon.

Patrick Riley, I hope the upcoming conventions treat you well with fun and amusement.// I like the quest breakdown.// Nice dissection of Wild Cards.

Avram Grumur, what are deets?// Nice jar of eyeballs and a revolver.// I enjoy Warren Zevon, sometimes we play his songs in one of our bands. *I wish I could meet his tailor.*// *snicker at HNN*.

Paul Holman, we will see Rocky Horror at the Aloha Theater Oct 2026 (again). There is a very active crowd that attends.

Mark Wilson, for my job at Matrix Consultants, I was required to attend a sequence in Los Vegas. One of the better parts was taking a shuttle outside of the strip to have service on my vehicle at the time. It was a chance to see local housing. I was amused walking up the strip and collecting *hooker*

trading cards.

Matt Stevens, I would have no problem rolling a D1000 using the app on my smart phone.

Dylan Capel, read and enjoyed. As I mentioned earlier in this zine, so far LibreOffice on Ubuntu for my lap top works just fine. I could not write a zine on my Iphone.

Erica Frank, a token driven game... interesting. I'm not sure what MDZS is.

Patrick Zoch, did you receive pay later for the furlough? Thank you for the enlightenment on *Daddy Rolled a 1*.

Michael Cule, it's perfectly okay to blow your own trumpet.// I wonder if QUESTWORLDS is an actual game system?// *snicker* at Kryptonians and humans making babies.

Heath Row, the Dungeons and Dragons trip report is excellent.

Jim Eckman, RAH, AN ??// ITL ?

Brian Misiaszek, Hubana Horror is a campaign master piece. I like the suggestions for the player characters.

Joshua Kronengold, laid off after 24 years with the same company? Ouch! I gave up software engineering in 2013. All the people I know are now retired with one exception. I checked the company, humaxa.com, which is ran by my bonus daughter since she is the CEO, but right now they are not hiring. When I voluntarily or via necessity had to look for a job two factors always helped. The first is design methodology. In my case, after 1991, it was Object Oriented Design and especially design patterns. The second was leadership background, whether a group manager or project lead or senior developer. In all the companies I worked for Perl was a adjunct scripting language. I used Perl from time to time with discreet object defined by the *bless* key word instead of many loops and regular expressions. Good luck on AI. The very last job I had I was using rule based AI. If I hear of anything I will send email.// I saved the Farm to Taber URL. The Trump admin has designated agriculture in Hawai`i with growing non-essential crops. This means no support. Coffee grown here is the *only* state that grows coffee. Then due insane economic policies, the complaint is centered around the high price of coffee. I could go on a long rant about this. We can't ship avocados, bananas and other produce to the mainland USA, but Mexico, central and south America can. Go figure.// POT and NOT. I believe I understand but I'm not sure.

Plankwell Campaign, Captain, stick with Kaz.

Jargon Zen

The mind falls upon a place
The place falls upon a mind
The collision hides, reveals the reality.

Humor

What do you call a wreath made up entirely of one hundred dollar bills?
A wreath of Franklins.

A Little Beauty

A December sunset.



OVERLORD'S ANNALS

ATTRONARCH, THE EXALTED OVERLORD OF UNCONTESTED VASTLANDS

VOLUME 5 · ISSUE 1 · JANUARY 2026

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 deal with spiders, crypts, and kings.

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 91

Adventurers

Tarkus the Promising, cleric level 2. Follower of Bachontoi, God of Red Wisdom.

Beorg the Gravedigger, fighter level 1. Inspired to adventure after burying several adventurers.

Darius, cleric level 3. Follower of Dacron, God of Craftsmen.

Rorik, fighter level 3. A fighter.

Flowerbloom 8th, Earthday

"The farm should be up ahead." Fabio announced.

The adventurers met with him yesterday evening at the behest of Imrael Senior. Ever since they had a falling out with Pilter family, they've worked on getting Imrael's patronage. Well, the opportunity came knocking on the doors yesterday morning.

Apparently, Imrael's spider farm was raided in a night attack. Since the adventurers approached him several times, he thought this would be a fertile opportunity to prove their worth.

Fabrio the Ranger met adventurers yesterday at the Castle of the Wode. There they interrogated Trin, a farmer who escaped during the night raid.

"It was horrible! Creatures blacker than the night, with ivory white fangs and claws! Oh the screams! I jumped out of the window and fled as quickly as I could!"

The party wanted to know more about the lay of the land, buildings, and most importantly, where was antidote held in case of any spider bites.

"Lay low. We will take the lead."

Darius, Rorik, Tarkus, and Beorg approached the farm from the south side. Fabio and his three men-at-arms stayed few hundred yards away, observing the party.

A 500 feet chasm covered with wood planks split the farm in half. To the left were laborers' dormitories, supervisor's home, dinning hall, and the dissection house. To the right various sheds for processing spider webs into silk, and warehouses for produced goods.

The sun was up, and the farm was deathly quiet.

Or at least was, until Rorik spooked a horse in the stable.

Poor animal was tied so tightly it ground its ankles to the bone. Fighter managed to calm it down, only to notice the grisly sight in the adjoining pen—a beheaded pony.

Tarkus and Beorg investigated the largest house, that of the supervisor. All rooms were thoroughly ransacked. Pillows were cut open, drawers turned upside down, and chests smashed open.

"Hey, what's all that commotion! I thought you weren't some band of amateurs!" Fabio whispered through clenched teeth to Darius.

"It's all cool. All under control."

Party moved to adjoining building. This one was a simple timber construction with three windows. The latter were nothing but an opening covered with thick wool blanket.

Bunk beds and cots were arranged along the west wall, all with broken footlockers. There were some blood stains on the floor.

"Where are these guys going?"

Adventurers spotted Fabio and his team sneaking on the other side of the chasm, approaching the south-most building to the east.

"Let's keep moving."

Next building was similar, but smaller. The quartet arranged themselves in front of the door, and then burst in.

An obese man, matching the supervisor's description provided to them earlier, lied on the floor, bloodied and bruised. He was flanked by two ebony black, child-sized creatures.

Monsters had lanky white hair, long crooked noses, and elongated ears. One was dressed in a flame-red robe, while the other had some sort of leather jerkin and black cloth mask.

Tarkus and Rorik charged in, only to be checked by few more monsters that were by the side.

Bloody skirmish ensued.

Adventurers cut down three creatures, but not before they them-self had suffered few blows.

Robed one weaved its hands and screamed incomprehensible profanities.

Beorg and Darius, whom were still on the outside, had witnessed house go through horrific metamorphosis.

Timber shook and grew long, dark hairs. Out of its windows came long, hairy legs. The building became rounder and rounder until it transformed into a ball of darkness. A nature defying arachnid writhed in front of them!

Whilst that transpired, Tarkus and Rorik gave chase to fleeing monsters. Alas, little buggers were too quick!

But one made a mistake, and ran straight past Darius, and to the large dinning hall. Cleric caught up with it, and subsequently beat it to a bloody pulp as it banged on the wide double-doors, screaming.

"Take care of the foreman!" one of the adventurers instructed Fabrio and his crew.

Darius wondered how come everyone is unphased by the spider-house and enter and exit it so effortlessly.

Rorik gave chase after the masked creature. He jumped through south window, turned west, and after the monster.

Chase led him north, towards the largest building—the dinning hall. The monster jumped through the window, poked out, and waved at the fighter to come right in.

Unbeknownst to him, other party members, reinforced by Fabrio and his crew, burst into the dinning hall.

A dozen or so farmers knelt some twenty feet ahead of them. Behind them a line of four monsters, short-bows at the ready.

"GET DOWN! DOWN AT ONCE!"

Darius roared as he charged at the monsters.

Alas, the farmers were too scared, too slow, and too confused to react in time, forcing the cleric to wade through them.

Archers discharged a volley.

Darius was unhurt.

Four farmers slumped, dead.

Beorg and Tarkus each tried to circumvent the human-shield, only to be checked by a pack of hidden creatures on each side.

Although heavily outnumbered, the adventurers had an asset on their side.

Sun.

Monsters couldn't see well in the bright light, and often had to turn their head as they'd attack.

This resulted in very few of their blows connecting.

Brave Rorik came through the back window, where he faced the robed and masked duo. He gave them hell, wounding both, but slaying neither.

Another volley.

Another group of dead farmers.

But Darius closed the distance, and begun smashing the archers. Beorg and Tarkus killed the critters by the entrance, one by one.

Seeing how this is going, the robed and masked monster decided to flee once more.

The former managed to jump out the window before Rorik body-blocked it.

The latter had no choice but to go for the main entrance—wide double doors, stacked with corpses of its brethren.

It evaded Rorik's stab with ease; and same with swing from Darius; and then it ran straight into the polearm braced by Tarkus the Promising.

Few other pathetic survivors fled into the broad daylight, covering their eyes as they cowered and cried.

And so they fled north, towards the Midnight Goddess hills.

But even in daylight they were too fast for the heavily armoured adventurers.

Two more were downed by slings and arrows, while remaining two escaped.

"Thank you...thank you!" cried Ulayah Reyn, the farm supervisor.

"Thank you for saving my farm! Thank you for saving my lovely daughter!" he cried with gratitude, not asking too much about an arrow sticking out of his, similarly built, sobbing daughter.

He briefly explained that they were attacked and subdued two days ago.

Since then the monsters had been looting the buildings, and torturing him for information about secretly stashed treasure.

"They had thrown six farmers into the spider pit... Would you be so kind to go down and get them out for me? It's terribly difficult to find good workers in these trying times... I'd happily pay you ten gold coins per saved one..."

Our party of do-gooders immediately went down into thirty feet deep chasm.

It was dank, pitch black, and completely webbed.

The party climbed back up.

"Oh, such is life in Wilderlands. You can't save them all!"

Following a quick breather, they escorted Ulayah and surviving farmers to Castle of the Wode.

"Thank you. It isn't much, but it is from heart."

He gave twenty gold coins to each adventurer.

"Now I have to hire some new folk. We have to rebuild!"

Flowerbloom 10th, Spiritday

"Thank you for looking into it. Ulayah manages the farm well."

Imrael congratulated the party. He took a long pause.

"From what you've shared, it sounds like these creatures might return. I don't want that to happen. Tell me, could you track them down? And end them? Could you do that for me?"

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 92

Adventurers

Darius, cleric level 3. Follower of Dacron, God of Craftsmen.

Rorik, fighter level 3. A fighter.

Tarkus the Promising, cleric level 2. Follower of Bachontoi, God of Red Wisdom.

Beorg the Gravedigger, fighter level 1. Inspired to adventure after burying several adventurers.

Flowerbloom 15th, Spiritday

"I made a mistake."

Dubalan of Midway sobbed to adventurers. Beads of sweat rolled down his puffy cheeks.

"The word of the great wealth you had recovered from the crypt spread like wildfire. And I agreed to lead some of the locals to it. They went missing! Oh, it's all my fault!"

"Common folk shouldn't go adventuring. It can be dangerous." one of the adventurers said stoically.

It didn't take long for constable Wershaw to find the party and join the discussion. "I want to know what exactly did you find in that crypt! Spare no details!"

He listened with worried face. "You will join me to Lord Kyle and tell him that. He will judge accordingly."

"Listen, we want to go to the crypt first to find these people. They might still be alive."

Dubalan wept, while Wershaw agreed. It's been nearly a month since they went missing.

"Tell us more about them. How many? How do they look?"

"Three men, Oridus, Dardabus, and Cephantides. Two women, Timile and Mavaid. They are all young and strong, with mighty limbs and healthy gait."

Flowerbloom 16th, Airday

"That's Oridus."

Wershaw yelled from above.

The party had just descended down the shaft leading into the crypt and that's where they found a young man, broken and crushed under a pile of rocks. From the looks of it, a stone slab collapsed under his weight, and the man plunged to his death.

Rorik and Tarkus took the front line, with Darius and Beorg taking the second rank. Tia and Tailltala, two fresh women-at-arms recruited at Hara, acted as the rearguard.

"Stop."

First chamber, the one with eight tombs they've plundered before, was not empty. A dozen or so skeletons were sitting around the fireplace, gazing into the purple flame. Two human figures lay in front of them.

Adventurers turned half, and smashed other half. These skeletons looked charred, with splintered bones and burn marks all over.

Tia retched at the sight. A young man and woman, faces of frozen terror, with broken limbs, torn skins, and exposed insides.

"Let's get them out. They should be buried properly."

"Isn't that what we got hired help for?"

Hired help did not jump at the opportunity to carry horrifically disfigured corpses.

"Fine, we'll do it. . ."

"Watch out!"

A mere moments latter east doors flung open, revealing a familiar abomination. A mound of acidic, pulsating organs, ten feet wide; splashing and squirming and slowly rolling towards the party.

Weapons were drawn; stabs and slashes delivered; weapon tips and edges melted away and monster was reduced to nothing but a collection of hacked organs.

"These are Cephantides and Timile." Wershaw identified the poor souls.

The party continued their exploration, opting for west doors. That lead them into a thirty by thirty foot chamber with two sealed doorways, and an open one to north.

The chamber was littered with scrolls, torn books, and writing paraphernalia. Whatever they touched would immediately crumble into dust.

Sealed doorways had text in auld common above them. The south one read "Scripter Morminoa," while west one said "Court Arcanist Feraldi."

"Let's move on. We have to find the remaining folks."

"Or their remains." was left unsaid.

North chamber was longer, and even more perplexing.

Three columns of altars ran along the long side, a dozen in each line. Atop each altar was a matching holy symbol and scripture. Tarkus and Darius did not recognise many of the symbols. Perhaps they were of forgotten deities or some barbaric ones that only the locals knew. Darius did find one dedicated to Dacron. He spent time to pray and tend to it thereafter.

Sealed doorway to the west read "Bishop Pormqui," and sealed one to the north read "Avetrix the Zealot." Corridor to the east was wider, and so were the doors.

They opened into a large circular chamber, some sixty feet in a diameter. It was dominated by a well spewing purple haze that covered the floor.

Beorg the Brave was the first to step into it. He used his polearm to test the ground before making any step. Others lined behind him and followed.

Clerics felt like they've entered a place of death.

Round chamber had three exits: the west, which they came from; east, which looked very similar to the one they came from; and north, which was narrower and turned right at weird angle.

"Let's check east side first. It might loop back."

A smell of rot assailed them the moment they forced their way in. The chamber floor was stained with ancient, dry blood.

Nasty meat hooks reflected their torchlight. A young woman hanged on one in the middle of the room. Her eyes were gouged out, and her entrails were prostrated underneath her.

At least two dozen hooks were visible. They hung from chains, that in turn hung from holes on the ceiling. No anchor point was visible. Hooks were hanging at various heights, with some as low as to touch the ground and some as high as if they were poking straight out of the ceiling.

"This must be Mavaid."

"I really don't feel like getting hooked."

"Let's check the other corridor and then we can figure out how to recover her."

Purple fog continued down the north corridor. Turning to it, the party ran into four skeletons, which they immediately turned and forced to flee.

Moving on, they entered into a massive chamber, where all walls were dominated by small wall crypts. Some

were broken, but most were still sealed. Sounds of flesh thumping against stone could be heard coming from within many of them.

"This must be the source of our skeletons..."

The party followed the right wall for a brief moment. They encountered an archway leading into a narrow tunnel, barely three feet wide. Forming a single file, they marched on.

"What..."

Three wide stairs led to an dais atop which an altar depicting pulsating a person laying down before the red sun glowed gently. Dais had a large red sun painted on it.

Tarkus took a step towards it.

His mind was vacated, and he found himself in a vast black space, a disembodied entity floating around.

An endless mass of men laid prostrated facing an impossibly large, blood-red sun.

Tarkus felt the urge to join them.

He stepped off the stairs and informed the party to move on.

Ten feet wide archway to the north led down another corridor. This one was sufficiently wide to resume in their standard marching order.

It was a long corridor. More worryingly, the further they went, the deeper they went into the fog. Was it a descent?

"Look ahead!"

A plated figure blocked their way. It raised its greatsword and marched towards the party. The warriors clashed against it, barely evading the swing of sharpened steel slab. Clerics' attempts at turning had proven most impotent.

Darius cast Light on the creature's great-helm, turning it into a ferocious lighthouse. The plated warrior roared and smashed it sword against the ground, creating tremendous noise.

"Behind!"

A horde of skeletons stretching as far as the light blocked their retreat. Clerics had to turn around and face their unrelenting assault.

Skeletons were easy to parry and block. But there was something attacking them below knees; something in the mist! They could feel something ramming them, followed by burning sensation.

Warriors quickly finished the lighthouse, and then swapped with the clerics. Whilst moving forward, they stomped heavily, crushing whatever might've been in the fog.

Through superior tactics, armour, and long reaching weapons, the party fought their way back, smashing a great deal of skeletons.

"How about we head back?"

"The last person is surely in the final room. Right?"

"Let's get back, rest, and then we return."

And so the party backtracked into the red sun room, then down a narrow corridor—which was not the same as the one they came in through—and then ran straight into a gibbering ghost which made some of them lose their minds.

From then on it was an insane flurry of activity. First they chased the screaming ghost, only to find their weapons cut straight through its incorporeal form. Then they heard numerous sounds of stone seals breaking. Then they turned on each other, trying to subdue that one guy who still wanted to fight. And then an army of undead appeared at the edges of their light. So they all sprinted towards the exit.

"We will bury the dead in Midway!" they said to Wershaw, panting. "And return to seek others a bit later!"

Beorg had a slightly saddened facial expression.

"We will continue to explore this crypt, but my heart is no longer in it. I thought I would be slaying dragons and performing feats of derring-do such as the bards sing of.

Instead, I find myself killing those who have already been killed before."

Such were the thoughts of Beorg the Gravedigger.

Will the party ever recover Dardabus and Mavaid?

Or will they let them rot in the ancient crypt?

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 93

Adventurers

Tarkus the Promising, cleric level 2. Follower of Bachontoi, God of Red Wisdom.

Beorg the Gravedigger, fighter level 2. Inspired to adventure after burying several adventurers.

Hagar the Hearer, dwarf level 4. Imagine Conan as dwarf.

Ambros, cleric level 4. Follower of Aniu, Lord of Time.

Bob the Dwarf, dwarf level 2. Midget with big beard in search of an adventure.

Pandora, thief level 2. Seeking to build a new life.

Sweetrain 1st, Airday

Having completely recovered from coming back to life, Hagar led the party consisting of himself, Ambros, Bob the Dwarf, and Pandora to Midway. There they were to meet with Tarkus and Beorg, and proceed back to the crypt they cracked open a month or so ago.

But something else weighted heavy on Hagar's mind. As he was resting in the adventurers' townhouse in Hara, he received slightly disturbing letter from Zenon:

Dear Hagar the Hearer,

first, I'd like to extend my sincere congratulations for another chance at life. It isn't often that our Lady of the Sea grants her immense gift to us.

Secondly, I have to share with great regret, but little surprise, that such a chance did not go unnoticed by people of Hara. We have accepted no less than seven, yes, seven, different contracts to restore you to your previous state.

Thirdly, as you know from our previous interaction, by the decree of our Holy Queen, everyone is given a chance to buy back their life. Rest assured that even just one of the rumoured mithral bars you might have will be sufficient to ensure none of my people come close to you.

*With love,
Zenon Coke
Headmaster of the Assassins' Guild*

Hagar dealt with Zenon before and was well aware that these were no idle threats. He also knew that Master Assassin is a man of word, and if he was paid as negotiated, then he would be safe. Either way, adventurers met in Midway, donated 100 gold coins to families of deceased locals who went into the crypt after the party, and then went to seek the remaining two corpses.

In reality, the party operated under the assumption that this was actually the crypt of "wrongfully imprisoned king" that spoke to Mavis the Magnificent in her dream. If that is true, and they managed to release him, then one third of Hagar's revival debt would've been repaid.

And so, on this sunny day, the adventures returned to the crypt.

Tarkus and Beorg took the lead, since they were the ones who delved furthest. They went into the antechamber with purple-fire and eight plundered sarcophagi, turned left into the chamber covered with ancient parchment, then north into the chamber with three dozen altars, then right into the round chamber with fog-spitting well.

From there they went left, and into the large chamber with countless wall crypts, then right through narrow corridor, and then left—giving the Red Sun altar a wide berth—into the wider corridor where they were opposed by an undead knight. Two dwarves confirmed what Tarkus and Beorg theorised about in the last expedition: the floor sloped down.

Onwards they inched for half an hour before reaching a junction. Up ahead were obsidian black double doors. They were sucking in the purple fog. To the right were marble white doors. They were repulsing the purple fog, keeping it at bay some five feet. Stairs leading up were to the left.

Inspecting doors led up to a whole bunch of nothing. Listening checks revealed nothing. Pulling and pushing on the doors made no difference. And the dwarves really tried!

"We need a Magic-User with Knock!" Tarkus the Wise announced.

"Let's check the stairs."

Oh, what a sight!

Going up, the party found themselves on a twenty feet wide landing, opening up in a long corridor—swinging pendulums and scythes as far as the eye can see! Observing them revealed pattern to the madness.

One by one, adventurers slowly advanced.

Step. Stop. Step. Stop. Duck. Step. Stop. Jump. Duck. Step. Stop.

And so it went for an hour!

Adventurers made it to the other side intact. There they were welcomed by another landing, and stone doors, similar to the ones they've opened earlier in the crypt. The dwarves forced them open. Corridor turned and then opened up in a large room with a narrow bridge going into darkness.

The “bridge” were simple stone slabs standing on equidistantly spaced columns. Floor looked to be some ten feet below. It had a weird shimmer to it. Ten feet pole was used to touch it. It sizzled and melted away.

“A transparent pool of acid!”

“The bridge looks unreliable. How about we hammer some iron pitons to the side of the wall and then stretch the rope to the other side? Then we can shimmy across.”

Pandora, whom was both the lightest and least armoured, agreed with the plan. Bob handed her over the Wolfhammer, and others gave her rope. The thief carefully moved forward for around seventy feet. Then the bridge turned right for another twenty feet, terminating at the wall.

Master Thief she is, Pandora found the poorly concealed stone doors. She forced them open, and the doors slammed shut behind her.

Everybody on the other side exhaled.

Hagar ran over the bridge, followed by Ambros. In addition to having some meat on the bones, both were also wearing metal armour.

Dwarf heard the stone pillar let out a little cry before snapping. This gave him sufficient time to jump and throw himself on intact portion of the bridge.

Ambros had no such luck. As the column underneath him collapsed, the cleric lost footing and fell straight into the acid bath. He felt his skin slowly bubbling.

Using the remains of his ten-foot pole, he pushed himself upwards to avoid submersion. But his chainshirt was pulling him down. . .

Hagar and Bob grabbed the rope, each on opposing side, and begun to shake it up and down, hoping to lower it enough for Ambros to grab it.

The cleric found himself in a world of pain as he desperately reached upwards, again and again. The ledge was mere five feet above him. . .

Snap!

His wooden pole gave in, and Ambros sunk like a sack of rocks. Unwilling to go down so easily, he endured and pushed off the ground with all his might. By now the acid has eaten into his chain links, allowing him to shed the armour.

Tarkus jumped forward, landing on his belly. He pushed forth his polearm, yelling “Grab!”

Ambros broke the surface, and managed to grab the falling polearm. Then he sunk into the liquid, oriented the polearm upwards, used the blunt side to vault himself up, and then swung the hook side just above the rope—his final attempt at life!

Success! He hooked the rope, and climbed up the polearm. Tarkus grabbed his arms, and pulled him to safety. The cleric was badly burnt, but alive.

Hagar had to drop the rope, and jump once more as bridge continued to collapse. Landing with a thud only made things worse, and another column broke down. Again, the dwarf was quick enough to jump onwards, landing on the solid portion hanging in front of the secret doors.

Holding the rope, he forced the doors open. Then he tensed the rope hard enough so it formed a straight line from the pitons to behind the closed stone doors. Now the rope was taut enough for adventurers to cross the acid pool, one by one.

Whilst this was happening, Pandora explored narrow passageways she found herself in. Dead ends, corridors going in circles, weird twists and turns. . . Half an hour later she heard noises and Hagar shouting.

Once the party was reunited they explored the labyrinthine corridors. It took them an hour or longer, difficult to say, but torches were counted, before they stumbled upon gilded double doors. Plaque next to them read:

*Here lies king thrice cursed
for treason, torpor, and
triviality*

Hagar took the lead, and opened the doors.

The air was stale, and thick layer of dust undisturbed for centuries caked everything.

“I enter here King, to release you of your curse! So I have been sent by the High Priestess of Poseidon himself!”

Dwarf loudly announced.

Silence.

Right wall was lined by four sizeable stone sarcophagi.

Left side of the chamber was elevated, with broad stairs leading to it. Atop it, on a dais, rested a magnificent stone sarcophagus, fifteen feet long and ten feet wide. It was adorned by splendid motifs and plenty of gilded lining.

Everyone but Tarkus and Beorg climbed the stairs and begun investigating the gilded tomb. The duo opted to stand on stairs and watch guard. They faced four stone sarcophagi and the doors. You never know where the danger might come from!

Hagar repeated himself, only to be countered with silence once more. Ambros explored the tomb, finding nothing much. Pandora couldn't find any way to open the tomb—it was sealed, and would most likely have to be broken open.

Bob, thin on patience, knocked on the tomb and asked

“Hello, anybody home?”

The tomb exploded open, hitting all around it with debris.

Huge skeleton wearing gold crown and necklace emerged. It swung a large two-handed battle axe with amazing ease.

“We are here to help—” Hagar's word fell on deaf ears, as attested by the skeleton king attempting to cleave him in half.

Beorg ran up and joined the fray. Skeleton king swung all around, hitting many adventurers every round. Hagar the Hearer got hit, thrice, but took it all like a champ.

Ambros, the unarmoured tried to turn the king. It did not work. Bob and Pandora's attack attempts were failures at best.

“Watch!”

Two stone sarcophagi broke open, and a heavily armoured figure exited each. Tarkus took a stand in the center of stairs, preventing their advance. Undead guards swung with great might, but failed to strike the cleric. Remaining two tombs exploded as well, and two new guardians joined the fray.

“Agh—”

Bob was sent to the ground by the relentless king. Hagar bled, but consistently chipped away portions of the undead monarch. Beorg rarely hit, but whenever his poleaxe connected it did good damage. Pandora was split in half, top to bottom; dead on the spot. Ambros retreated, for he had no armour and no weapon to fight.

He jumped off the balcony and on the floor. Then he snuck up to the southernmost broken tomb and searched it for weapons. Alas, only pieces of the stone lid! Would he dare to use it against the raging undead?

“Bachontoi, give me wisdom!”

Tarkus parried and blocked; dodged and evaded; swung back and countered. Little did he know Bachontoi already gave him wisdom.

How else would Tarkus know which exact spot to choose to prevent the advance of four undead guards? Now it was up to the cleric to hold them back.

As his fellow adventurers fought the king, Tarkus checked the advance of king's guard. Ambros jumped from behind one of the guards' broken tomb, and yelled holy words. Much to his and Tarkus's joy, two of the guards cowered and turned to retreat.

Alas, joy was short-lived, for one of the guards' strikes passed through Tarkus's defence. It drove the sword deep into the cleric. Tarkus stepped back, still defiant, but half-way to his doom.

With Pandora and Bob down, Hagar and Beorg faced the king's rage alone. The skeleton swung its battleaxe. The duo ducked and dodged. Finally, Hagar drove his magic spear through the skeleton's eye socket. The king let out a voiceless yowl and crumbled to dust. His guards followed suit, leaving nothing but empty armour behind.

As the dust settled, clerics administered healing spells. In the rubble of king's tomb, Hagar noticed a set of stairs leading down. . .

IN NEXT ISSUE

Salvation of the thrice cursed king.

Another adaptation by José Roberto Torero and Marcus Aurelius Pimenta is *As belas adormecidas e algumas acordadas*¹ (2016) (“Sleeping Beauties and Some Awake”, in free translation) (2017). An interactive reinterpretation of *Sleeping Beauty*, in this story the reader makes decisions about how the story continues, sometimes deciding Beauty's actions, sometimes what will happen in the narrative itself. The illustrations are by Mariana Massarani.

A king and queen live happily ever after. Their daughter is born, a child so beautiful that she is named “Beauty”. A grand celebration is held, and Beauty's parents invite everyone (other princes and princesses, ogres, gnomes, elves, fairies, dwarves, giants, and ordinary people), but they forget the forest witch. She finds out and crashes the party, casting a spell that will cause Beauty to sleep forever from the moment she turns 15. While everyone is desperate, the fairy decides to help with one of three “solutions” chosen by the reader: “giant solution,” “hairy solution,” and “solution you already know.” The first two choices result in quick endings, while the last one leads Beauty to explore the castle until she turns 15 (her father forbade her from leaving to avoid encountering the sorceress) and enters a room she has never seen before, where the sorceress herself is dressed as a spinner. The witch's plan is to prick Beauty's finger, which will cause her to sleep forever.

Upon encountering the witch/spinner room, the narrative now offers four possibilities: the witch pricks “Beauty's big toe,” “the finger with calluses from working so hard,” “no finger” (Beauty discovers the deception and breaks the witch's loom), or “the usual finger of the usual person.” Only with the last option does the narrative continue, as all other choices make Beauty successful in avoiding her cruel fate, the witch fleeing on her green dragon.

With the last option chosen, Belle and everyone in the kingdom fall asleep forever. Here, it is up to the reader to choose one of six options about who will wake up Sleeping Beauty: “no one,” “a worm collector,” “a very hot-headed guy,” “a singing prince,” “an alien,” or “someone you know well.” And here ends the last fork in the book, with everyone seeing Beauty overcome the curse.

In addition to maintaining a formidable standard of creativity and humor, *As belas adormecidas e algumas acordadas* stands out from other interactive fiction by Torero and Pimenta in that it allows the reader to end the narrative in various ways, sooner or later, which was not the case in the others, where after a few forks in the road, the end was reached. A good book to show readers that decisions DO matter!

COMMENTS #5

COWMAN BALONEY FACE: Unfortunately, you're right. Interactive Portuguese-language productions are rarely released in English. Maybe one day...

JOHN REDDEN, GABRIEL ROARK, JIM ECKMAN: Thank you very much!

BRIAN CHRISTOPHER MISIASZEK: No problem, you've already been a great help! Thank you very much ☺

LISA PADOL: [about “*The 33 Little Pigs*”] Actually, there are 33 pigs (all different from each other) that can generate 1,331 different stories. Even so, 33 pigs make a beautiful mess! [about “*João and Maria*”] I agree! That's where the authors' creativity comes in, adapting/reinterpreting the original text so it's not just a mere reproduction of it.

JIM VASSILAKOS & TIMOTHY COLLINSON: We have the first Brazilian science fiction RPG available for free download, Millenia RPG: <https://bibliotecaelfica.org/category/millenia/>. Unfortunately, it's only in Portuguese.

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

The PHOENIX NEST



BUILDING MY LEGACY: More about the City

Here are a few things I have told the players about Aegis the City.

It is currently Year of the City 5025 and Year 903 of the Ninth Expansion.

There is now a policy of forbidding immigration to the City since the Ninth Expansion. The border and custom guards like to push the limits of their powers.

The Institute replaced the old Mages Guild which fell apart in scandal during the Eight Expansion. It has expanded from the old Mages Quarter to take over a large part of the buildings on the other side of the road in the Third Expansion, including some rather posh town houses that now form residences for students.

The Institute has a book called THE BOOK OF TEN THOUSAND STUPID QUESTIONS which will turn to the answer of a question spoken to it. It is considered either a great

**A zine for EVER & ANON 7 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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honour or a great misfortune to come up with a question it cannot answer.

As an example, here is Question Four Hundred and Sixty Eight

WHY CAN'T YOU JUST MAGIC THE INFORMATION INTO OUR MINDS?

This would in fact be possible. I could copy the spells, the theory and the practices I know directly into your brain. However, you would not in any real sense exist any longer. You cannot separate items of knowledge from the matrix of memory and of personality. Consider those of you who play sports for example. Can you take the knowledge of how to play the game from the places and times where you learned the needed skills? Can you sift out your memories of the games you won and loss, your opponents and team-mates? To transfer such skills to another person's brain would risk overlaying large parts of their identity with yours. Magnificent though the thought of an entire classroom of copies of me might be it would not answer the needs of the Institute.

Note that it would be possible for me to copy the knowledge from someone's mind and carefully take just what I wanted. But I am a skilled and experienced sorcerer, something you will not be for some time if ever.

Offensive or irresponsible behaviour in students will lead to Demerits. Three Demerits in an academic year will lead to your status at the Institute being reviewed.

One PC has set a new record for getting the first Demerit of the Year by talking during the Principal's welcoming speech at the Inaugural Feast.¹

There will be more of this as I find out from the players what I need to think about to make the world consistent and fun.

THE WAY OF THE WORLD

I'm still not on the body-shrinking injections. I got to the next stage, my GP's diabetic specialist has had a chat with me and added the necessary bits and bobs to my list of regular medication (already approaching the length of THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH) but advised me to not start the course of treatment until after the holidays.

Taking something which has a one in ten thousand chance of causing acute pancreatitis (which is, I understand, very painful) the week of Christmas and just before a four day doctor's strike seemed unwise to her. I'll let you know how it goes.

Christmas will be me and my cat at home, as usual then off to Brighton for a day with my assembled family, back home for the one day Winterval game for the Wednesday night group. Then off to Stockport for Stabcon on the 2nd of Jan.

¹ THE PLAIN PEOPLE OF E&E: No prize for guessing whose character that was? ME: None at all.

Then, finally, I can start sticking needles in my tender flesh.

CUNNING PLANS AND OVER-REACHING AMBITIONS

The new GURPS game has had its first three sessions and is entertaining people. I am looking forward to more developments in the New Year and you'll hear about it when the writeups of the Lunar Campaign comes to an end. My one-off for Winterval² and Stabcon will be a DR WHO ADVENTURES IN TIME AND SPACE about a mysterious Icebreaker.

I decided that the Second Edition of DWAIT&S isn't something I want to use for a campaign but is just about the right level of crunch for a one-off.

GLAMOUR DAYS AND NIGHTS

Player Characters:

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

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

Drak as JARATHIR another YT initiate with a Big Sword.

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

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

Non Player Characters In this Episode

VISHI: A High Llama riding pygmy by origin and a slave in Vostor's family since he was five. Sent to keep an eye on the Young Master

² The day long session my Wednesday group organises to compensate for the horror of not gaming at Christmas and New Year.

and not let him put his foot in the politics. Too late for that, as it turns out.

TENATOS: The dodgy second hand goods dealer from across the way.

FALERIA AGGARIA: The beautiful Red-Haired daughter of their landlord, the Senator.

KRISHNAN: The Illuminated gentleman who lives on the fifth floor.

UREUS THE VALUED: A male trollkin rent collector.

DORL: A female trollkin kitchen maid.

Various neighbours, little old ladies and shady fellows with clubs and swords.

LOVE AMONG THE TROLLKIN ³

Graham had been away the previous week so I abstracted a quick side adventure for Vostor. He had been approached by the dodgy furniture seller from across the way.

TENATOS: I notice the high ranking officer of the Grey Guards is hanging around your place a lot. Is he likely to be doing that for the near future? I'm asking for a friend.

VOSTOR: What's in it for me?

TENATOS: I know you're a gentleman who likes a bit of... action.

VOSTOR: I do!

TENATOS: I may be able to take you to places around the city where you can get a little action.

VOSTOR: Yes, he's⁴ likely to be hanging around.

TENATOS: I shall make appropriate arrangements then.

They arranged for Vostor to pass messages via the furniture store on the ground floor and his wife Mammela

In return Vostor received a primer on illegal and exciting gambling opportunities in capital, from dice games to bear baiting and illegal chariot chasing in the streets. He went to it with a Passion.

GM: Some people try to keep their problem under control

GRAHAM: It's not a problem while I've got the money

DRAK: It's not a problem till he starts losing.

Which he didn't. The rest of them didn't see him until the next morning. Their officer had taken himself off to battle the hordes of the Bureaucracy with a muttered "Don't get yourselves into too much trouble" after which Vostor rolled in, clearly having had a good night out. He wasn't sure how he ended up in the bed he ended up in but he was happy about it.

When he turned up Vishi was serving the others breakfast.

JARATHIR: What is the porridge of the day, Vishi?

VISHI: Oat and barley, sir. I trust you had a good day master?

KEANUS I hope you appreciate your manservant?

VOSTOR: You want to appreciate him, go right ahead.

VISHI: If I might suggest sir, you are in need of a shave. There are no more mentions in the news or the announcements⁵ of anything to do with the events in the south. Nor the rumoured events in the East. But I noted that the forthcoming events which were scheduling the Emperor's Succession Day Parade for this week are now scheduling it for next week.

JARATHIR Can't rush the Emperor.

VISHI: I should probably mention that the lady across the way is still upset that her grandfather seems to have vanished.

KEANUS Wasn't us.

JARATHIR: That wasn't what you said to us. There was nothing about him going missing.

³ 13 August 2025 My Birthday!

⁴ Meaning Chief Overseer Pharnastes

⁵ News is in official writing posted daily on the walls. Announcements are made by public criers on street corners.

VISHI: Ah, well he did not return yesterday. She is worrying about him. I did remark, sir, that I saw him yesterday morning...

VOSTOR: Who's been missing for several days...

VISHI: No sir.

VOSTOR: I'm confused.

VISHI: Yes sir. You are. Well spotted. He was last seen by me in the company of the illuminated gentleman who lives on the fifth floor. They were walking arm in arm and when he spotted the police gentleman coming into the building he skedaddled sir.

VOSTOR: Ah, skedaddled.

JARATHIR It seems that everybody wants to avoid the police chap except us.

They briefed Vostor on their Temple-of-Love-Invading and Slaying-of-Chaos-Creatures session while he was away. He just said that he had a good night and they would probably feel disgusted by more details.

At which point Vishi announced a visitor, the Senator's daughter Faleria Aggaria

VOSTOR: He's not in. (*Meaning Eshan the officer*)

FALERIA AGGARIA : Damn. Are you available?

VOSTOR: Could you clarify?

JARATHIR We're under instruction not to get into too much trouble...

FALERIA: Well, if you could possibly help me, I'd be willing to pay money.

SANDENE If we didn't help her our boss might be a bit upset.

She explained that Ureus the Valued, the trollkin 'rent collection officer' who had handled their getting settled in this nice (if crowded) room had vanished. He had failed to turn up to a meeting at my father's estate. He was a free trollkin (which surprised Jarathir) and trusted by the Senator to handle his business. "A perfectly responsible civilized person," she called him which made his absence all the more worrying.

VOSTOR: Is he anybody's grandfather?

FALERIA: (*Puzzled*) As far as I know he's

never mated. I have been round to his office in one of our other buildings. It has been left in disorder.

She had not approached the Guard in this matter. "Everything in the capital is controlled by some faction or other. The Guard has an agenda, usually that of the Danfive Xaron cult. Which is not my father's agenda. My father is a Senator, a person of importance. I would call my father in: he is a sagacious person. But there currently debates in the Senate about how to advise the Emperor about recent developments and he is not likely to be free for some time."

Hence her need for someone to find the missing rent collector and if possible, retrieve him. He lived above his office. She hadn't looked there: she didn't have keys.

FALERIA: I will pay each of you one gold Wheel for the investigation and another one for the successful recovery of our associate.

VOSTOR: You see: you're enthusiastic now.

FALERIA: I think you'll find he's boggled.

JARATHIR I'm still getting used to how money is treated in the capital.

FALERIA: You mustn't take me as any sort of guide. My family is of Senatorial rank and filthy rich.

FALERIA: Do you understand the word 'confidential'? 'Discretion'?

VOSTOR: I understand them. It's the officer you need to worry about.

They debunked to another insula, also owned by her family.

FALERIA: All of this street and that one over there were part of our farmlands when we were farmers and the Goddess was establishing the city.

There was an office on the ground floor belonging to Ureus The Valued. The lock had been. Inside the office, scrolls and ledgers were piled up on the walls. And also pulled off their piles and scattered on the floor.

VOSTOR: None of us can read.

JARATHIR Speak for yourself. I'm quite happy with the officer believing I can't.

FALERIA: The scrolls are mostly contracts. The ledgers are records of rent paid, going back decades.

Jarathir was surprised that he lived that long though he admitted he only assumed that about the lifespan of trollkin because they were so small. Faleria pointed out that the Mostali were small and could live forever.

There was no sign of a struggle but plenty of sign of someone messily searching through the desk and the ledgers. Books and scrolls had been pulled down from shelves and left lying on the floor.

They searched the office and Sandene was the one who found an envelope lying on the ground. It had a wax seal which had been broken. Faleria looked at the seal and turned slightly pale. "Why are they getting involved? That is the seal of the Eel-Aariash clan. My father is a powerful person but not as powerful as the Eel-Aariash." Several of the group recognised the clan name of the Lunar Heroine Jar-Eel The Razoress, a demi-goddess who had a great deal to do with the expansion of the Empire in the past hundred years.

GM: You may have seen her in the distance as she passed through Dragon Pass on her way to slaughter barbarians.

GRAHAM: Glad I'm not a barbarian.

The letter was addressed to Ureus but there was no letter within. Faleria didn't recognise the handwriting.

Vostor looked around and checked the stove. There was a pot on top of it, still slightly warm of some sort of tea. The stove itself was slightly warm but there was no sign of a burnt letter.

There was a set of stairs inside the office which led up to the apartment on the floor above: Jarathir went up to the top of the steps that led to his living quarters. The door was locked and there was no response to a knock.

They decided to climb up to the balcony of the living quarters via the front of the building. The few curious stares were assuaged by the landlord's daughter saying: "Nothing to be alarmed about. It's just a survey."

Sandene got a hoist up to the balcony from Jarathir and found that there was no key on the inside of the apartment. Jarathir came up when a rope was lowered to him.

The room had not been ransacked. It looked like it had been slept in recently. There were a pair of bowls showing the remnants of some gruel with raisins in it. The bed was new compared to the rest of the furnishings and larger than one person would need.

Faleria disavowed any knowledge of a wife or other bed companion. There was a small shrine in one corner to Deezola, the member of the Seven Mothers most associated with Darkness. There was no sign of the letter that had come in the sealed envelope but there were several letters in a drawer. No envelopes but they were written in Darktongue. No one in the group could read that but Faleria thought it might be the same hand as on the envelope.

There were no personal items to indicate a second person was living there. *(GM: What would a trollkin's toothbrush look like?).* There were two towels. *(PUM: It's normally one towel per regiment.)*

They then decided to try to Charm information out of the neighbours. None of them were nearly as good at that as the Officer.

RANDOM NEIGHBOUR: Yes, I've seen him about. Charming little fella if a bit strict with the rent.

One of the more gossipy ladies said that she had seen him with another trollkin. She thought it was a girl trollkin but said it was a little difficult to tell. "She was dressed up pretty fine. She spent a few days here which is overnight for them. She wasn't here the past couple of days that I noticed."

She allowed she heard someone moving things around in the office last night. "I didn't like to complain. Just before dawn it was."

Vostor said that the letter could have been anything that caused him to leave, taking the letter with him. A breakup note, a kidnapper's threat...

Checking the interior of the office again they found marks that indicated that whoever had pulled the books and scrolls down from the shelves had claws. Which indicated that someone other than Ureas (who had small and rather puny claws) had done it.

Dark Trolls had larger claws. It could be a troll.

Asked about the Eel-Aariash having any relationship with trolls, Faleria averred that there was none she had heard of. Most of their political capital was involved with Sor-Eel being Governor of Prax and ruler of Pavis.

When it was pointed out that Sor-Eel might have acquired a female trollkin slave out there in the wilds of Prax, Faleria said she would see what she could find out.

"Go and get yourselves something for lunch. You've done a good morning's work."

And after lunch she returned to them.

FALERIA: I met up with my great-aunt. And that is a sacrifice for a valued retainer. She says, yes the Eel-Aarish have a trollkin kitchen maid. ... Ureas has a lot of knowledge of my family. I suspect that someone is trying to extract it now.

VOSTOR: Forgive my ignorance...

FALERIA: I constantly do.

VOSTOR: If you had a kitchen maid and a bunch of people from the army wanted to interview them how would you react? Because I'm absolutely certain us turning up, banging on the door and asking for an interview....

JARATHIR My lady this is very much not our area of expertise. We could storm their house and kidnap the kitchen maid. Not necessarily the best solution.

She conceded the point.

SANDENE We were asked not to get ourselves into trouble.

JARATHIR Too much trouble was the specific wording.

KEANUS Laying siege to a noble house...

VOSTOR: Four of us?

She conceded the point again and reminded them the Eel-Aariash had a demi-goddess in the family.

Jarathir proposed going and asking the neighbours if they had seen a male trollkin in the area, perhaps calling on someone in the Eel-Aariash estate.

There were people in the area with nothing better than to do than chatter to them. There was a little old lady, full of gossip, more than willing to tell them all the hot-goss about her super posh neighbours including the time Jar-Eel split an intruder in two.

She had indeed seen a trollkin servant who went out in a buggy with another servant to shop at the Night Market in the City. She hadn't seen another trollkin in the area. "Polite little thing."

There was some disrespect towards the GM when he mentioned the illustration of a female trollkin in a bonnet on a cart he had somewhere.

GRAHAM: Mike, you don't have to mention everything that goes through your head.

DRAK: Pollyana trollkin, sounds like a pin-up to me.

ALAN: "Little Troll on the Prairie"

LITTLE OLD LADY: She comes out most evenings and heads into town.

They resolved to approach her at sunset.

They met up with her at the Night Market, believing that stopping the buggy might cause offence to her owners/employers. Vostor proved to have unexpected reserves of Charm which extended even to trollkin. Her name turned out

to be Dorl. (I have no idea where that came from.)

DORL: Ureus. Yes I know him.

JARATHIR When did you last see him?

DORL: Not last night. Not the night before that. The night before that.

JARATHIR You wouldn't know where he might have gone if he had gone missing?

DORL: What?!! He's gone missing?

VOSTOR: Did you send him a letter last night?

DORL: No. I have sent him letters in the past.

JARATHIR Do you use the house seal when you send them?

They showed her the envelope

DORL: I use that sort of envelope. I wouldn't dream of using the House seal.

JARATHIR Is that your writing?

DORL: No. That's troll writing. But it's not my writing.

SANDENE Would Ureus come to your aid if he thought you were in trouble?

DORL: *(She went a darker shade of grey which seemed to be a blush.)* We are fond of each other.

They asked her if they could send her a message once they had found Ureas. They could, she said, hand a message in at the gatehouse to the estate.

Asked if she had noticed anything strange or strained in his behaviour⁶ she said "Oh. I said there was no troll in our household. There was a troll working for the engineers repairing the fountain in my lord's garden. He seemed very friendly. He did not treat me the way trollkin are normally treated by trolls. He didn't look at me as if he wanted to eat me. We chatted about how different life is in the capital. I may have told him about my relationship. I didn't mention him by name..."

VOSTOR: There are very few trollkin in the city.

DORL: I talked about where Ureus and I met. I may have oh dear. I may have put him in danger.

She called over the driver and he provided the address of the company just outside the city walls.

When they got there, the night guard (not a troll as it happens) confided that they used to have a troll working for them but he didn't want to take permanent employment. He had taken his leave informally by not turning up for work about two weeks ago.

His name, the guard thought, was Krug. "Or something like that."

Jarathir was pessimistic about their chances of finding one troll in the City.

The GM told them that he thought there was an obvious way to proceed then announced he would go to the loo and told them they had till he came back to figure out what it was. He did not get to go to the loo until they had kvetched, figured out what he meant and then kvetched again.

DRAK: This is going to be one of those things that you think are perfectly obvious but you've never mentioned to us.

GM: Have you read the rules? Then you potentially know this.

DRAK: If you're thinking we could pray for it none of us has Meditation worth speaking of.

Why he thought that Meditation was needed I don't know. Drak has a tendency to assume that things aren't going to work. I can't tell you if I've taught him it by my GMing. By the time he'd read the spell and noted the lack of Meditation needed for it he'd come up with the objection that it needed a temple to one's god to cast it in.

⁶ VOSTOR: She's probably got a better Insight: Troll than we have. SANDENE She's probably got a better Insight Human than we have.

GM: You are a member of the cult of the Seven Mothers. You are in the capital of the Lunar Empire. Temples will not be a problem.

He then accused me of favouring replies to Divination that were either ludicrously incomprehensible or "Results are obscure: ask again later".

It was not until then I managed to rise to my feet (with a loud "Owww!" as my feet complained about not having moved for an hour and a half) and head to the loo. Their lucky my bladder didn't burst.

When I got back, they had (after a lot of waffling and general conversation) accepted that Divination was the way to go, that Yanafal Tarnils was more likely to have a temple in Glamour than Humakt (that being the wide range of cults available to them) and that "Where can we find Ureus The Valued?" was the question that they wanted to ask.

And the answer they got was: "In the garden of the Deceiver, in the hidden paths of illumination that lead to Deezola's Temple."

(The last part of that may have been contradicted by something that happened later. Or maybe it wasn't. My memory isn't clear. We will have to wait until I get to the recording of that session.)

JARATHIR Well, I know where that is. I have no idea how to get there...

Then he resolved to go back to their lodgings and talk to the Illuminate on the floor above them, the one who had not 'skedaddled'.

The Illuminate (whose name was Krishnan) was In.

JARATHIR I have a rather strange request. The Gardens, the Sevenfold Gardens of Enlightenment. I know there are paths that lead to a temple there...

KRISHNAN: There are if you know how to find them.

JARATHIR Do you know the secret of finding them?

KRISHNAN: It's a secret you have to find within yourself but I can give you hints. You may not be unchanged by...

JARATHIR I've been charged to find someone and God has said that's where they are.

He came downstairs to find both the group fully armoured and Faleria who was terrified when he asked if she would be coming. Jarathir reassured her and asked if she could provide a token that would identify them to Ureas. It was a heraldic medallion of her house.

They set off, Illuminate in tow. When they got to the park he augmented Jarathir's Meditation skill with one of his skills, doing guided meditation. Sort of.

It was just enough to succeed and Krishnan told the others to hold hands and let Jarathir guide them. (He had also just gained another percent in his Illumination chance.)

Though it looked like they were walking through bramble and paw-paws. Possibly poisonous paw-paws.

Drak kvetched when I made him (as the leader) roll Stealth for the whole party. He failed... But then the enemy rolled 99 on their Listen roll.

They emerged into a clearing and heard the sound of a low voice talking very menacingly (they couldn't understand the language but the tone communicated a lot). ⁷

In the middle of the clearing tied up to a bush, was Ureus The Valued. Someone had been performing improvised surgery on his toes. He was surrounded by a whole passle of humans and no sign of even a single troll.

The passle was not a hassle because they had the drop on the interrogators.

The men were carrying clubs except for the leader who was carrying a greatsword.

⁷ GRAHAM: That Jason Statham in TROLLBALL.

To summarise the fight:

The soldiers fell upon them like wolves on the sheepfold and great was the slaughter.⁸

The 'men' turned into trolls when wounded unto death.

None of them succeeded in a DI roll at the point of death.

Keanus was struck blind (temporarily) by a Rune Spell.

When they untied Ureus he tried to bite them but apologised when he realised who they were.

UREUS: Ah, the gentlemen from the fourth floor! I'm afraid that my toes have been entirely ruined.

The Heal spell Jarathir put in first was more use than his attempt at using First Aid on a trollkin.

Jarathir used his Meditation (Inspired by his Moon Rune) to open the path back to reality. His tendency towards Illumination increased again. Vostor took the heads of the trolls for evidence.

JARATHIR Do you always carry a sack for heads?

VOSTOR: It's for looting!

Sandene found some money on them. Each of them had some sort of metallic device around their necks, marked with the Illusion rune amongst others. These had burst on their deaths. They took those too. And the Great Sword which was worth a few bob. And a bloodstained notebook.

As they left the clearing SANDENE turned back and saw that the grass was eating the corpses.

Faleria was delighted to see them. Ureus said that the trolls were trying to gather information about her. Which made Faleria thoughtful. She looked at the amulets. "I think these are

sorcerous designs from Spol. The dark Queen of Spol appears to be interested in me. That's very, very worrying."

She gave them their money and thanked them again.

The notebook in Darktongue, now slightly blood stained could be read by Ureus and it showed notes on their investigation into him, their draughts for the letter they sent him. They had said that Dorl was in danger and to come to the place where the couple had first met, which was the park.

What puzzled them all was what they were searching the office for.

UREUS: I hope they were bored to death.

KEANUS You know you're going to have to work out which one is missing.

Ureus looked appalled at the thought.

I don't think we ever established what the point of the search of the office was. I had a clear idea of what the trolls were trying to find out for the Dark Queen.... A hint may be found in the pages of LIFE OF MOONSON.

GM: And that night you get another chance to achieve Illumination. I know it's not the Sacred Time but these things are changeable.

Jarathir did dream of the liminal space that night but didn't at that point become Illuminated.

KRISHNAN: You will learn more when you get to the centre.

DISTRACTIONS:

MARTIN: Are you illuminated?

GM: No just slightly lit up.

I had been for a nice birthday lunch with my brother and sister-in-law.

⁸ *GM: They're rubbish at defending this lot.*

Whether the Empire had any equivalent of commedia del Arte. *DRAK: We're bronze age supposedly. That's medieval. GM: You're bronze age and there are airships flying overhead.*

*GM: I will bear in mind your apprehension of how things work and ignore it.*⁹

Then we got onto windmills. And a diversion onto American politics.

Penguins compared to Trolls. Trolls compared to penguins. A cry of *tekeli-li!*

The sex life of Jar-Eel the Razoress and how fatal it can be.

GRAHAM: There are two things you should know about Jar-Eel The Razoress. The first is that she was a character played by Greg Stafford's girlfriend. The second is irrelevant.

Graham and I were in the first run of LIFE OF MOONSON, a LARP I have borrowed characters from for this campaign.

The Gloranthan Wiki's lack of attribution for updates or indeed any way you can tell how recently anything has been updated.. (*DRAK: Orlanth is noted for throwing elephants...*)

IGGY'S THEME: THEN THERE WAS THE TIME...

You know, I don't really collect this sort of story. And they fade from my memory when I don't write them down. Actually, they fade from my memory even when I *do* write them down.

The story I remember most from my Wednesday night group is when Graham had his character propose giving the Ice Dragon a child to persuade her to stop wreaking vengeance in their direction. This worked both at the proposal stage, the transmutation stage and the conception. She remains a background character in my Yrth games as does her offspring who is

having an adolescent affair with the Emperor's half-demon half-sister.

The story about my Monday night group is when they solved a difficulty with the DRACULA DOSSIER by carefully copying the original manuscript of the novel and then destroying it which (I decided) destroyed the enchantment that was convincing people that the whole affair was just an Irish stage manager's flight of fancy.

So, on the evidence of these two examples the best way to stick something in my memory is to do something that changes the course of the campaign and gives me lots of new ideas about what I can do with the world.

COMMENTARIAT ON E&A 6

CLARK B. TIMMINS: I've recently picked up a map-making game called POLIS by Joshua Fox that builds up the history and current state of a city. I'll give it a review if I ever find anyone to play it with. // I think Aegis probably has no graveyards. Bodies can always be catapulted into the All Consuming Dust outside the walls. Some families cremate their dead and recycle the cremains in gardens and orchards. // Ah, population! Working out something convincing for my most unlikely city is going to be a strain. // Ah, essences and substances and where they proceed from. In an effort not to introduce a mind bending conundrum like the Trinity, the Six of Aegis are all individuals though they all emerge from the roles that humans play in a typical family structure. It is unclear to me (just now: it may become clear later) whether they emerged from the collapse of the world which they are working on saving from the Dust, or are quillipoth surviving from the previous cycle. // Thank you for the help in getting my own ideas lined up.

MYLES COCORAN: I can't decide if I hate 'People & Culture' more or less than 'Human Resources'. HR or P&C.... Hmm. What was wrong with 'Personnel'? // The MAUSRITTER

⁹ TPPoE&A: It's that t-shirt you bought isn't it? The one saying: I'M NOT ARGUNIG: I'M JUST EXPLAINING

WHY I'M RIGHT. ME: Could be. A noble statement of a noble truth.

campaign that Jenny requested fell apart after one session. I think the fault was mine: I managed to run the introductory scenario with the blessed cheesemakers with the Wednesday night group but got a TPK twice in one scenario when I tried it with the people it was intended for. I think my inability to absorb new game systems may partly be blamed and partly my inability to scale to the scale of mice. I'm now looking for a better substitute system and setting for three people. // And yes, the encumbrance system was fiddly even when seated around a table. We kept running into things we had to improvise counters for to make matters worse. //RYCT Erika Frank: I think I identify most with a sedentary middle aged dragon sitting on his hoard. Scarlet, the longest running dragon NPC in my Yrth games is probably an authorial self-insert, with an added sex life, a piece of pure wish fulfilment fantasy. Perhaps that's a

possible IgTheme: what fantasy or sf species do you think of yourself as? // I think 'And also fuck AI' could become the 'Carthage must be destroyed' of our time. **RYCT**

PATRICK RILEY: A Columbo model for BRINDLEWOOD BAY or something like it creates pre-game prep for the GM something I like to keep to a minimum. But I could see someone coming up with a game on that basis. //

RYCT Joshua Kronengold: I really enjoyed Niven back in the day but in the harsh light of the current day I find his political and social values nearly as disturbing as I found Jerry Pournelle's at the time. // I think a pool of unassigned points to put into skills you suddenly discover are vital is a good idea but even the most improvisational and seat of the pants character generation (which I think was one of the options in HEROQUEST) needs to say "This character has XXX as their central defining trait."

ATTRONARCH: RYCT Avram Grumer:

Re reporting players' dialogue verbatim. I deliberately don't. I hear a lot of rapid fire dialogue and when it's really good (and they don't talk over one another) I put it all in my initial writeup. And then I go through it again

when I transfer it from oTranscribe¹⁰ to Word and I take out what doesn't look interesting or funny in the cold light of day. I'll shorten rambling sentences and remove repetition. I'm doing my best to make my players look good and take out the points where I'm talking too much.

JOHN REDDEN: MOUSE GUARD

LARPing? Oh my ears and whiskers! The costuming opportunities! Are there pictures?

RYCT Me: Thing is, in practice I don't find GURPS too complex. I have got down pat the practice of focussing on just the core mechanics the game is going to need when laying things out for players (in the new game it's the magic rules) and let the rest of the system just lie in the background until needed. But newbies (if I ever see such mythical beasts) tend to be frightened of the complexity. Where did 'cross training' come from?

GABRIEL ROARK: I use Bookman Old Style for section titles and contributor names because I like a bit of a fancy flourish and Times New Roman for the bulk of the text. Both at size 11. That's what I find easiest to read but I'm willing to take guidance if anyone finds what I'm doing strains their eyes or makes them not want to start my contribution. I do agree that expecting readability on a phone is... a bit optimistic. I will read Kindle books on my phone but that provides software to adjust font size and layout to the particular device.

LISA PADOL: RYCT ROGER

BELL_WEST: Ah, you are the sort of player to make an aging GURPS GM's heart beat faster! Unfortunately, I have a pack of experienced know-it-alls. // **RYCT ERICA L. FRANK:** I think an rpg based on any Chalker book but especially THE WELL OF SOULS sequence would need a structure something like ECLIPSE PHASE, where your characters have a core self that changes body with the flick of a switch. Of course, any Chalker game runs into issues of non consensual mental changes as well. // **RYCT Me:** It was indeed the Dragonrise seen from hundreds of kilometres away. // On

¹⁰ Which I think Lisa put me onto. Thanks Lisa!

help for getting the Telluric stuff out of the mix. No, I'm good. If I ever run it again I will know where I have to be careful or I'll trip over it. I think editing the text of DRACULA UNREDACTED might be a bit of complication which would be ideal but not practical. // **RYCT PATRICK RILEY:** I wonder if there's an igTheme in What To Do When They Kill The Big Boss. My best answer is: Their Deputy Takes Over And Is Even Worse. **RYCT Avram Grumer:** Does a generalised Perception skill (rather than distinct abilities for sight, hearing and all the rest) better reflect super detectives like Holmes? I sort of feel it does. You can still have pluses and minuses for particular senses: GURPS does this easily. Is there a reason for d100/BRP based systems to be different here?

ROGER BELL WEST: Re Jitsi et al. I really appreciate the simple reliability of this. The only disadvantage (and the only reason I miss having access to Zoom which we used to use on Rob's Club account and Deborah's work account) is the automatic recording. I couldn't manage the splicing you do for our podcast recordings let alone the prospect of doing it with five or six voices. I have a second monitor which I normally only power up when I'm GMing but it does make searching game rules easier. **NOTE TO SELF:** Use it more. // Re Convention GMs: Yes, you are picky. So am I if not to the same extent. I have an unreliable mental list of GMs who I don't want to spend more time with, thank you. But I am still willing to invest a few hours trying a game of a system I've been interested in. **RYCT : JIM VASSILAKOS:** EMPIRE OF THE PETAL THRONE and HARN turned 'alignment specific languages' into 'secret languages used by certain temples' in 1975 and 1983. You'd think DnD would have given up on the idea by now.

MARK A WILSON: Congratulations on the new job! May you prosper. // Is that John Barrowman's Mick Jagger impersonation?

MATT STEVENS: Your tale of 75th level DnD reminds of the time back in the early eighties I passed by a table at the local games club and overheard the teenaged GM addressing his players: "All right, last week you killed Satan. What do you want to do now?"

JIM ECKMAN: Is the planetary motto of Baden-Powell "Be Prepared"? There's something to be said for starting the description of a planet with what their culture is based on rather than how many moons it has and what its atmosphere is like.

BRIAN C MISIASZEK: Congratulation to Lauren and best wishes and hope for Sadie.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: Good luck finding a new employer who will appreciate your True Worth! // A new (to me) Shaenon Garrity comic? Oooh! Thank you! // You do seem to get a weirder variety of cons in the US. However, I bet some of the Scandinavian cons are even weirder. **RYCT Mark Nemeth:** Have you ever come across a good story reason for the PCs to have healing magic (or some other advantage) and the opposition to have none? "Because the good gods won't heal the evil people..." Weill, that works but I think it has unpleasant undertones. **RYCT Me:** Both EVERWAY and AMBER were 'GM-interpretation' heavy but I felt EVERWAY gave the GM more to work with. // Sandrene's Sleeplessness is something she acquired from her cult. It makes very little difference but made the character more defined. I might have pushed against it in the Magical College game. They already have numerous ways to get a better than average education. // The Event is the Dragon Rise, long written about as a future event in KING OF SARTAR and now in the past of the current main campaign. KING OF DRAGON PASS is about the Founding of Sartar.

MY LAST WORD IS: BARMKIN. May you always have one to take refuge in when the Reivers come. ¹¹

¹¹ TPPoE&A: He's been sticking his nose into A DICTIONARY OF CHIVALRY by Grant Uden which he picked up on the recommendation of the Blessed

Steve Jackson. There's likely to be a lot more like this, we're warning ye. ME: I'll postpone commenting on Plankwell till next time, I think

Ronin Engineer for Ever & Anon #7

by Jim Eckman,
Mountain View, CA
alarum@roninengineer.com

IRL

Holidays and club activities, art and model railroading.

IgTheme

Haven't been to a game convention for a while, if there's enough space and its not too noisy I'm OK nowadays. When I was younger, I was up all night, and a bit of a maniac.

Reviews

Bushido: Role Playing Adventure in Samurai Japan by Robert N. Charrette and Paul R. Hume

A cinematic roleplaying game of feudal Japan and one of my favorite games. I ran a couple of normal campaigns for several years with 3-7 people that showed on a regular basis. I also ran it weekly on Tuesday? for about a year as the open shop game at Balboa Game Company. This had an insane number of players, usually 20 or so, but sometimes creeping up to almost 40. Show up on time and play as a character, latecomers helped with running the monsters, which was not a trivial undertaking, there were a couple of battles with 200+ figures on the field.

I would call Bushido, published in 1979, an early third generation OSR game. It had a detailed tactical combat system that at first read looks insanely complex, characters can have one to three actions per turn, there's individual initiative, a fair number of potential adjustments to the to hit numbers, lots of different actions, etc. To make up for this the AC system is dead simple, 0 = no armor 1+ armor, skin, whatever, there were no weapon adjustments based on AC, so nothing like the Greyhawk silliness in D&D.

In practice combat is easy, initiative is rated 1 through 40 and is a fixed number based on character stats, I make up a table with all of the characters actions at the start of game. Ex.

- 40 Sado
- 30 Yuri
- 20 Sado
- 16 Yaji
- 8 Yaji

When a combat starts, while encounter is being set up, the players can discuss among themselves how to handle things. I allow for at least five minutes, because when combat starts if I call for a player and they aren't ready, I skip them. Starting up, Sado is asked what he is doing, we move and resolve

combat if needed, the first combat round is the busiest as everyone is moving to contact and the AC of their opponents is unknown, and there are actions that can only be used when the character is out of enemy contact. So in practice the combat is fairly clean so long as you are organized about it.

Another interesting feature of Bushido. It has two different types of experience points One is the standard kill points and its awarded to the character that struck the final blow. The other is called an on or honor point, and is awarded for various actions and you need both to advance, unless you're a ninja.

Since you need both types to advance it's possible that you have enough points of one kind to advance but not enough of the other type. Also you can lose honor points you can loose a level if you're not careful. Typical ways of gaining honor, first to fight, protecting your lord, proudly proclaim yourself, etc. Losing it can happen by cowardice, disloyalty, etc.

It is based heavily on chanbara films, like Seven Samurai.

Reactions to Issue #6

Old City – Clark B. Timmins A good idea, everyone can use another mysterious city. Well you be fleshing this out more?

Twisting the Rope #6 – Myles Corcoran I hope you can fix your sleep, I've had some therapy for insomnia and it helped. I like your new solo Traveller game. RYCT: The extra players usually ran the low level rabble, so trashing the party was not in the cards. Also agree at 185 pages, its tough to take a deep look at everything.

Overlord's Annals (v4n10) – Attronarch RAEBNC

Reddened Stars #4 – John Redden RYCT On Earth, empires do follow rise and decline with periods between defaulting to fuedualism.

Bugbears & Ballyhoo #44 – Gabriel Roark I like your new layout and font choice.

An Unlooked For Zine #5 – Lisa Padol Yes, GR = Goodreads, One of the Petal Throne game systems has a module for growing up, and back in the dark ages I think there were others. Not a common feature. Kipler? Re: Art and rulebooks, I find the 5e books difficult to use and read, the tiny page numbers in low contrast colors are impossible for these old eyes. Somebody failed basic graphic design at school. Which is a TSR tradition seems like.

Denizens of the Library #5 – Brian Rogers LOL, the Iron Skull does reek of the Molding Age of comics. Looking through the Chinese history entries in Wikipedia will give you a basic overview. Hex flowers are awesome!

Firedrake's Hoard #4 – Roger Bell_West 63

Quasipseudoludognostication #6 – Patrick Riley The EPT childhood is like a very short Traveller PC generation that tweaks the character a bit. ex. Jock or nerd mixed with some changes to PC. Nice mini-game, I like the idea of using cards for randomizers.

Going to be Ad-Libbed #4 – Avram Grumer Using X cards and the like is an excellent practice.

Age of Menace #243 – Brian Christopher Misiaszek The art show was excellent, we also had a luncheon that was amazing. Yes, figure 1 is from The Zero Stone.

Traveller PBEM: Plankwell, Ch 51 – Vassilakos, Collinson, and Rader Re: Sandbox/Scripted and Roll/Roleplay, I almost always run campaigns as sandbox, but characters may get caught up in a scripted sub-adventure as a consequence of their actions. One of my early Bushido campaigns was all over the grid, there was opportunity for sandbox adventures but since many characters were retainers, there were times they had to go on missions. Because there was a tendency to lose characters, raise dead wasn't available, there is a serious critical system, etc. I gave karma points for well played death scenes. The group was very mixed, power players, role players along with rank newbies.

Bushido is an odd duckling of a game, it has experience points but it also has honor points. Both are required to advance in levels, but honor points can be lost for dishonorable actions, cowardice, disrespecting superiors, disobeying orders and all of the cinematic ways of otherwise messing up. There were social rank differences in the party, it had some interesting consequences.

Next issue

Thoughts on Traveller and other SF

Next page Alien Ruins



Attacks of Opportunity

Issue 6, Dylan Capel

Reading

Tower Dungeon Vol. 1

Tower Dungeon is a manga that I'd only previously seen translated online (potentially pirated but really well done). Now there is an American edition that can be imported into the UK (ah, sweet tariffs). The physical format is much smaller than I'd expected being much more inline with the Japanese book formats than the big single panels which is how I tend to read digital comics.

The story is set in a massive floating tower where some mysterious entity has killed the king and kidnapped the princess and is trying to climb the tower to complete some arcane ritual. The royal guard have been tasked with saving her but after suffering a profound defeat at the claws of the horrors within the call goes out for reinforcements from the nearby villages.

This is where our point of view character, Yuva, gets involved. He's an incredibly strong peasant with a heart of gold who lives with his grandparents and sister. He volunteers for the task to avoid the social awkwardness of the village elders asking or telling him. He also wants adventure in his quiet way.

The village scenes introduce us to some of the visual tricks of perspective and the motif of characters occupying perilous locations on pillars and roofs. Yuva's natural dexterity in clambering around the ancient buildings of his village will come up again in the perils of the tower.

Yuva is assigned labouring work and his diligent moving of huge boulders is noticed by the soldiers sent on a last-ditch attempt to defeat the creature that is blocking their progress within the tower. His co-option into the mission is literally a consequence of the soldiers unwillingness to carry heavy barrels of salt rather than a manifestation of Yuva's virtues.

Of course once into the mysterious tower Yuva's bravery and heroism is revealed as he saves the day and the soldier's lives causing them to co-opt him properly into their company and generally earning their respect. Now, after a bit of politics that results in only a tiny rearguard being left to try and rescue the princess the story can begin properly.

A few things that stood out for me (beyond the excellent artwork). On his first trip into the dungeon the group recover a clump of rare mushrooms growing from an ancient corpse that have remarkable healing powers. Initially I felt this was a really interesting way of having non-monetary rewards that are valuable enough to want to risk your life for. Something unique to the supernatural environment.

However the mushrooms become a bit of a get out of jail free card where characters that seem to have suffered terrible injuries or have even died are quickly revived by the magical powers of the mushrooms alchemic preparation. Just as with resurrection magic if you take the peril out of death then you need to inject into the story some other way.

The monsters of the tower are mostly undead, either defined skeleton warriors or featureless spawn. A mucousy slime with Gieger organic influences to its form transforms into a skeleton as soon as the death blow is delivered. The piece de resistance is a dragon cut in half that breathes fire emphasising the impossibility of any natural cause for such an ability. More terrifying for being impossible.

The art style is very much East meets West with the dragon having multiple eyes and the soldiers wearing Renaissance plate with *Dark Souls* styling. Magicians feel *Final Fantasy* in their dress.

I have the second book as a pre-Christmas treat to look forward to.

Blackwing

I grabbed this from the library on a whim and it's been easy going fun so far. It starts off as a fantasy blackpowder Western and is now shifting into a bit of noir-style electro steampunk.

It feels quite similar to *The Malice* with an invasion of implacable monsters driven by inhuman leaders that has been thwarted at hideous environmental cost and a continual battle against complacency, corruption and coercion. A cadre of inhuman demigods is all that stands between the enemy and the collapse of the character's society.

The monsters are quite interesting as so far apart from the grunts which seem to be tough zombies the common theme is mind-altering powers including telepathic control memory searching and empathic seduction. With the gunpowder weapons available if you can get the drop on a monster there is a chance to kill it with a single shot. However if they get the drop on you then you cannot muster the will to resist.

The book also does a good job of giving the monsters distinctive traits like a particular smell or always being children so that there are distinct tells for the characters to pick up on. In an early chapter a footprint smaller than an adult's causes a controlled panic in the grizzly veterans as they fear that a creature may be near but lack of sight lines means their position is vulnerable.

Sometimes when the story is leaning into Western or Noir tropes of a drunk troubled protagonist who has seen too much the writing becomes dull but the mixture of conspiracy and grimdark threat is sufficient to keep reading.

Forgotten Realms

I am not a fan of the setting but I snuck a look at the new book and was interested in the way a few of the classic areas, especially Calimsham, is represented and now I'd like to read it but I don't really have any intention of playing a 5e game so I'm wondering whether it will be cheap second-hand at some point.

I'm not a *Forgotten Realms* nostalgic, for the most part it has reminded me of a fantasy theme park but Judd Karlman has been doing some character kits for *Cairn* based on the setting and it re-sparked my interest. The kits make sensible use of the many culture and customisation options that plagued the setting books. Obviously I love the Baldurs Gate computer games too and as such how can I resist the **Child of Candlekeep** archetype?

The alternate cover for the book is quite striking and abstracted in style which makes the more conventional interior art all the more disappointing. Maybe there's a market for not just alternate covers but entire alternate art sets.

Speculative Whiteness

I've only just started reading this essay but in the first few pages an American far-righter has found their fascist epiphany in *Warhammer 40K* and has made an unironic comparison between the aliens besetting the fictional autocracy and the "Satanic" forces of the culture wars.

I've always known that *Warhammer* was a bit fashy and that alt-right people seemed obsessed with trying to review bomb geek films with non-white actors but this essay is giving me an entire framework for thinking about why people do these things and what they hope to achieve by it.

The depressing thing is that at its core it is just racism, nothing more. Racism being smuggled in wherever it can find a foothold.

Playing

I had a delight from the *Maze Rats* freeform magic system in a recent game: *The Altar of Wine* is guaranteed to provide the perfect ending to any adventure and get the party started during it...

The 52 in 25 challenge

I've gone back and checked my stats for the year and it looks like I played around 42 different game systems this year. Not terrible but quite a way short of the challenge number.

I think the biggest reason (apart from doing less gaming in the early Spring) was choosing to repeat games when I could have tried to do something different.

I quite like these challenges but I think this one was a bit of a push and probably the target was a little bit too high in that you would have pushed to complete it rather than it influencing the activity that you would have already been doing to be less conservative.

My main repeat offenders were *The Electrum Archive*, *MiniBX*, *Hello Wizard I have a problem* and *Psychodungeon*.

Vaesen

I had a good game of *Vaesen* which is a game where I think I have to pick my GM and find something interesting in the character to really enjoy. I do enjoy it more than the average *Call to Cthulhu* (CoC) game that gets offered though as I think it plays a standard horror scenario better than something that doesn't really have anything to do with the Lovecraftian ethos.

One thing that I found enjoyable as a player was to portray someone who genuinely believes in the supernatural but is still a modern person by the standards of the era. Other people in the world might scorn that character as superstitious or pagan but it is a recognised belief in the world.

I think if you try the same thing in CoC you either ruin the rationalist vibe that is a lot of source material ("This can't be!") or you confuse the other players by being "mad" while you still have lots of sanity.

Sanity as inventory

I read quite an interesting idea (somewhat ruined by the fact that *Imgur* is no longer available in the UK so none of the illustrations of the idea worked) that used the concept of the mind being an inventory that initially is populated by positive feelings and relationships and then when traumatic or supernatural things happen they need to be added to the inventory, displacing the current contents. Supernatural elements might have rules that they cannot be removed or even moved when initially placed. They might also have quite awkward inefficient shapes.

Regular negative feelings and thoughts can be moved around and potentially removed through treatment, time or be replaced by new positive ideas.

I feel this reflects some of the way that mental health often feels by using an already familiar mechanism and then giving it a bit of Tetris twist for the unnatural. It is definitely something I'd like to try in the future.

Going out

The word for world

I had a chance to visit this exhibition of Ursula le Guin's maps, sketches and landscape drawings. Her maps are quite stark and it is the *Earthsea* archipelago that feels the most magical as it is a record of her own exploration of the world as much as our guide to her stories.

The exhibit was in London's Architecture Association which I was not previously aware of but which did a nice job of intersecting culture and architecture. The curators of the exhibition had the maps transferred in white ink to blue cloth to echo the idea of architectural plans and then arranged the strips of cloth like banners to create the sensation of moving around a forest.

Dragonmeet

London's major roleplaying convention has moved the EdExcel centre, a large convention space in the East London former docks space. This is the same location as the wargames convention Salute. It had filled every available space in the Hammersmith Novotel, its previous home.

Traders said that generally they thought the event was better for them but with changes in what was popular that they haven't been able to rationalise. People liked the wider aisles between stalls when wandering around. I thought the gaming space was a bit better but I didn't participate in the organised games which were in another area and were seemingly much better organised than previously although not with much variety on what was on offer.

The seminar rooms felt much better than the previous iteration. I attended a talk that made the case that roleplaying is part of the verbal performance culture that stretches back to the Greek epic poets and Irish bards which was a fun hypothesis if not quite worthy of a whole session.

The huge hangers of the conference centre are undeniably characterless, particularly when you take the default flooring and exposed piping of the ceiling. There are things that could be done to have a more social space but I wonder if the convention is now set on a more utilitarian servicing of the traders pre-Christmas needs.

I'd prioritised picking up a copy of *Milk Bar* from *Peregrine Coast Press* but most of my friends insisted that the most important indie item available was Zedek Slew's *Perfect Wife*. I also ended up picking up an insane amount of expensive *Shadowdark* stuff including the very attractive hardcover version of the rules.

Classic layouts

I bought a copy of *Neoclassical Geek Revival* (NGR, a pun on the OSR/NSR nomenclature) and have been enjoying its relatively unfussy (two-column for fans of such) layout. At Dragonmeet, someone mentioned to me that indie designers should be taking more inspiration from the Traveller little black books that the magazine style layout that is common in games like *D&D* and *Pathfinder* where the coffee table book art is as much a part of the experience as the game itself.

I also bought some new copies of the original Traveller books and was impressed with their legibility and function. The way that some people use monospaced fonts in this APA feels the same way.

Meta

This issue I managed to create a Typst template which does seem to be successfully sharing the styles. Due to copying the basic layout from my previous Google Doc setup I now have my basic page layout in inches which is very weird as my mental intuition for these units is basically nothing. I generally use centimetres and may try to adjust my units next time.

I tried the *Okular* PDF reader to see if would be easier to read the two page columns in full screen mode. In generally I would say it was better but I also maybe need to combine a smaller font size and some reading glasses to see if I can nail this.

Patrick Zoch's zine did choke the lazy loading though, I think the background needs to load before anything renders.

I also acquired a relatively cheap Kindle during Black Friday and that has a 10" screen that does quite a good job of having the entire E&A zine page on screen in a legible display. I'm giving that a go for a few of the zines that have retained their A&E layouts.

Roger BW mentioned in Issue 5 (Firedrake's Hoard 3) that ePub might be a better format for a digital zine. One thing that ePub readers handle quite elegantly is having multiple (or user configurable) columns of short reading length. This is because they don't have to worry about a fixed page height and instead can adjust the page height and number of columns to the screen size available.

Links

- Tower Dungeon: <https://w9.tower-dungeon.com/>
- Forgotten Cairns: <https://githyankidiaspora.com/2025/12/10/forgotten-realms-cairn-forgotten-cairns-all-20-backgrounds/>
- Neo-Geek Revival: <https://www.neoclassicalgames.com/ngr>
- Perfect Wife: <https://davidblandy.itch.io/a-perfect-wife>
- Milk Bar Demo: <https://eryk-sawicki.itch.io/milk-bar-demo>
- Speculative Whiteness: <https://www.upress.umn.edu/9781517917081/speculative-whiteness/>
- The Word for World: <https://www.aaschool.ac.uk/publicprogramme/whatson/the-word-for-world>

Comments

Joshua Kronengold

Sorry to hear about the change in your work circumstances. There's always the possibility that things might end up in a better place but you're right that it is always effort to work through the changes.

I've just shifted away from an individual contributor role but I think the way that generative AI is changing the expectations about the role of the programmer makes hiring and get attuned to a new job harder than it has been in years. Previous markers of expertise are up in the air now. There's also the uncertainty of how sustainable these AI assisted modes of work will be for those not able to run their own infrastructure and models.

Good luck with it all!

Thanks for the feedback that the spreadsheet-based approach to *Belonging Outside Belonging* works.

Mitch Hyde

Cauldron sounds really interesting, hope you have a great time and I look forward to any future write up.

Plankwell Collective

I see that a lot of my comments were actually addressed in the last issue. I'm particularly interested in the Zhodani use of war robots (definitely got me thinking about the current intense

development of drone warfare in our own world) and the line between all these different forms of machine capability.

Clark B. Timmins

I enjoyed reading about the Old City, I particularly liked the allocations of green space and the detail of the funerary rites both of which are often minimised in fantasy settlements. I think it rare to see a graveyard for example unless a scenario involves some undead.

Avram Grumer

Having spoken to some of the *Troika!* people (in passing rather than in depth) I think that the *Longshot!* rules have probably adopted the Troika rules too completely. An Ace Reporter who is actually pretty bad at their job is meant to be part of the chaotic fun of the world of Troika (as is, as you mention the player roleplaying instead of relying on their skills). However in the superhero genre a deluded or incompetent character doesn't make a lot of sense for their archetype. The advanced skill value should either be higher (maybe 4 or 5) or simpler solution is to have a higher base skill value depending on the power level of the game you want.

Or again maybe the archetype should be Plucky Reporter if the characters are meant to be at the start of their careers.

Gabriel Roark

Given my preferences I'm glad you've come round to the one column format, I've occasionally tried to view the zine on a mobile phone but I think it is bold to try that by default.

I've heard that serif fonts are better for accessibility as the additional information provided by the serifs helps differentiate the letters. I've also attended a talk that made the case that the presence of the serifs was irrelevant and it was the ability to distinguish key glyphs that mattered: e, o, b, d, p, q, i, l, 1. I guess ultimately the question is accessible to who?

I found there something ironic in the idea of laying out a book about a faux medievalism in a font called Futura but I have to say it is good looking.

Myles Corcoran

I assume *Beetle Knight* is influenced by *Hollow Knight* but I haven't actually played the game. Looking at that article the one I read definitely builds on that same idea. Maybe adding ten years worth of refinement.

I've started reading your *Mausritter* campaign but I will comment when I'm caught up. The needle through the rat's head in the cell was quite powerful imagery.

Lisa Padol

I've definitely been curious about *Sutra of Pale Leaves*, *Impossible Landscapes*, *God's Teeth*; the latter two probably as a player.

Roger BW

I've definitely seen the hexflower used to generate roles with "memory", I've never used it myself as I've always thought that the "wobble" of the random walk might just end up feeling samey so it was interesting to note the inherent bias in the 2d6 roll. Have you used this yourself?

An Unlooked For Zine #6

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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

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NATTER

Recent Watching

Wake Up, Dead Man: The third Benoit Blanc movie. It's hard to do a movie that has a discussion between Faith and Reason without somehow blatantly favoring one or the other, and this one walks that tightrope surprisingly well. The first movie may be technically better, and I've watched it often, but I may like this one better. I'll need to watch it again.

Thunderbolts*: A lot of fun, tackles some heavy issues probably about as well as this sort of film can, has a great father-daughter relationship.

May I Ask for One Final Thing?: Anime that rings interesting changes on the concept of "Villainess Anime". The supposed villainess clearly isn't (as in clearly from the first episode), and in the world of the show, there are a surprising number of problems she can solve, or at least mitigate, by punching them. Delightful to watch so long as one doesn't take it more seriously than it merits.

My Status as an Assassin Obviously Exceeds the Hero's: Isakai (portal fantasy) anime where the protagonist's entire class has been brought to a fantasy world. He's the eponymous assassin, though he isn't at all sure he wants to assassinate anyone, which, when one thinks about it, is a reasonable stance. It may or may not change; we're following this one as it comes out, episode by episode. Also, while most of his classmates are kept offscreen because the scriptwriters don't want too many characters (among other reasons), the handful that are in his general proximity are refreshingly competent. Sure, not up to his level, but not idiots or total novices. This is refreshing after Rise of the Shield Hero.

Genkutsuou: I've seen the first 2 episodes of this. It's anime based on the *Count of Monte Cristo* (they wanted to do Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination*, but his estate objected to the liberties they were taking, so they went back to the source). It starts with Carnivale on the moon. If I weren't reading the original book at the same time, I'd have sworn "Luigi Vampa" was invented by the anime creators, but it is straight out of Dumas.

Recent Reading, Non-Game

Shaenon K. Garrity and Christopher Baldwin: The Dire Days of Willowweep Manor (reread) and The Nefarious Nights of Willowweep Manor. As Josh noted last time, delightful graphic novels with a heroine aware of the meta-level of the story.

Wole Talabi: Shigidi and the Brass Head of Obalufon: Divine heist shenanigans. If you're a Roger Zelazny or Max Gladstone fan, you might well like this.

K. J. Charles: Copper Script, All of Us Murderers: Both M/M. *Copper Script* is about a cop and a graphologist, with the conceit that the latter really can tell a whole lot about someone from a single sample of their handwriting. *All of Us Murderers* is a gothic where, as in *The Dire Days of Willowweep Manor*, the protagonist is aware of the genre conventions (although there's no sff elements).

Alexandre Dumas: The Count of Monte Cristo: I'm reading the Robin Buss translation. I'm in a Discord server with a channel for reading and discussing this book. We're going slowly, at 3 chapters a week. I love the leisurely pace. Things have time to settle, which is useful as they get more convoluted. It's a reread for me, and I'd forgotten both how much fun this book is and how utterly over the top it is, as well as how little time is spent on the imprisonment sequence (80 pages of a 1230 page book). As I type, we've read through chapter 33. In some ways, the story begins at chapter 30, though I am glad Dumas was prevailed upon to give the whole backstory first. Chapter 33 has the sequence I refer to as "okay, I need to tell you about this bandit, for reasons that will be important later, but in the middle of this, I need to tell you about this OTHER bandit!" Also, thanks to Brian Rogers for referring me to Red's delightful illustrated youtube summary of the book (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idObk4I4bdg>).

Recent Game Reading

Josh Domanski: Salutations, Mr. Gray!: Short scenario aka "incursion" for *Trophy Dark*. Premise: Basil Hallward has hired the PCs to steal this portrait he did

of Dorian Gray years ago that Dorian won't even let him see, and he wants to see it Just Once before he leaves for Paris. The PCs have their own reasons for agreeing. They're likely doomed as they try to make their way through one of Dorian's infamous parties.

This is a hack of *Cthulhu Dark* and the rules are simple. Take a light die for your skills, another if you accept a Devil's Bargain, and a dark one if you are risking your mind or body. These are all D6s. 1-3 = fail and things get worse, 4-5 = success with a complication, 6 = success. If the dark die is the highest, add 1 to your ruin which starts at something between 1 and 4, depending on whether and how many extras you take. Other things can add to your ruin, and you might sometimes lower it (to minimum what you started with). If it hits 6, well, your PC is lost to the darkness (and you can figure out how that plays out). And if you ever fight something not human, you die, period. Totally my catnip.

Jason Price: Last Sentinels: Fascinating hack of *Polaris*. Unlike that game, by default, there's only one protagonist, The Hope, but one variant is explicitly calling for everyone to play a different Hope. The Mistaken (basically, direct opposition to the protagonist) is called The Despair here, and the Heart and Mind round out the quartet. The Hope is a mech pilot, the last hope of their people, and, of course, doomed to fail—to either betray or abandon their people or die.

The only problem I have is that the backstory set up makes me shout "This makes no sense!" It's a fixable problem, nothing mechanical, just annoying.

Long ago, there was a space empire that won a war, more or less a trade war, I think, because they had mechas and trained pilots. To keep the pilots loyal, the four greatest were made heads of Houses, and given shares in the empire.

Nevertheless, when rebellion started to form, these pilots were on the rebels' side. They were tricked and captured, but fellow rebels helped them escape—and on their way out, they destroyed the Beacons, space portals, that would let anyone on AUGUR-V, aka the Planet of Head of Empire, get to anywhere else in the empire.

So, rebels are free and making their own society, because their Beacons work. And the rebels—

No, we're not talking about them right now. The folks on AUGUR-V realize they can't un-break the Beacons, and they say, "You know what? Maybe we don't need to. We actually have everything we need here."

And they build a peaceful world, a prosperous world. If there's any downside to it, the author doesn't seem to think that's important enough to mention.

Oh, also, the mechas aren't so important now, because there's no big enemy for AUGUR-V. Sure, you still test for pilot aptitude, but no big. And decades pass, and folks forget about the Houses and the rebel pilots and all that.

And then one day, evil monstrous aliens—actually, no. Not at all.

Nope, the rebels, now calling themselves the New Alliance, pour through the previously dysfunctional Beacons and attack AUGUR-V. The New Alliance believes that the folks on AUGUR-V abandoned them.

Even though the Beacons didn't work. I mean, they couldn't have only not worked from AUGUR-V's end, because if that were the case, the rebels/New Alliance could have gone through at any time and said, "Hey, why are you ignoring us?"

Even though there's this whole rebellion thing going on, and it sure reads like the rebels were intended to be in the right.

Even though the four pilots are still with the New Alliance, still piloting their mechas—even though DECADES have passed (which, Josh noted, is the least of the issues here because one can invoke relativity)—and presumably know that this "false belief" about being abandoned by AUGUR-V is false, because THEY ARE THE ONES WHO DESTROYED THE BEACONS!

So, you have the innocent semi-utopia AUGUR-V getting blasted, presumably lots of normal people dying, and folks trying to evacuate on 10 city-carrying ships of which 4 get out, taking different Beacons, going different ways.

And pursued by the New Alliance, which is determined to destroy the last mecha pilots, the last mechas—Sentinels, as the game is called Last Sentinels. The Hope is the lone pilot called up to serve and their mecha.

This is a stupid war being fought for stupid reasons, but honestly? That's not necessarily a problem. Real conflicts of significant size, real wars, are often fought for stupid reasons.

My problem is that the game resolutely refuses to take a look at this.

It explains the rules. It has multiple lengthy examples of play, all of which are useful. And these very examples exacerbate my problem with the background.

We've got a scene where the players decide that one of the four New Alliance pilots is warning a lesser member of the New Alliance—who's about to confront the Hope—not to show weakness, even though this person's wife is on board the city ship that the Hope is defending.

Wait, what? Okay, so—Let's assume this person is in his 30s, maybe? And has a wife and kids on the city ship? And... decades have passed? I don't think that works.

And if we say "Okay, ignore that stuff about decades", then... wait. People on both sides know people on the opposite side, families have been split by this—very cool set up—and... no one is communicating and figuring out that AUGUR-V tried to get to the rest of the galaxy? Really?

Also... am I supposed to be rooting for AUGUR-V? I mean, in theory, the Hope is the protagonist, and is trying to defend home and civilization from the ruthless (lied-to) forces of the New Alliance (who broke away because AUGUR-V is where tyrant leaders were), and—apparently, I'm not supposed to think about all of this?

Or am I? And if so, what am I supposed to be thinking?

This matters because of the way the mechanics work. The Hope makes Strain rolls when they act without courage, compassion, honesty, or self-control. But what does that mean in this war? We get no explanation or example that confronts the effed up situation that starts the game.

In *Polaris*, of which *Last Sentinels* is a hack, it's demons. That is, you've got a doomed civilization of elves at the north pole, and one of the things that makes you make the equivalent of a Strain role is, basically, consorting with demons. Sure, they can be as complex as the table decides, but the text doesn't give much more beyond "demons". Any complexity is added by your group, and your group decides in play what all of that means.

You're not handed this weird situation that starts *Last Sentinels*, where Josh and I think:

- Wait, can we just send messages or even surrender or otherwise do things that *should not be part of* *Last Sentinels* but would seem to make far more sense to do than playing with mechas?
- Wait, so... is the Heart fighting for the wrong side?

And I wouldn't be asking the first question quite so much if the second question got any consideration whatsoever.

For some games, this might simply destroy whatever gameplay they had. For *Last Sentinels*, this is... annoying, sure, but... I could still play the game as is and either ignore the fact that the backstory makes no sense or lean into it, weaving that into the tragic arc—

—or we could hack things. Either we could try to do a reverse *Polaris*, where the Hope really is fighting on the wrong side, which is our preferred option, even though it would take more work, or we could lean into the *Polaris* roots more, and say that the four New Alliance pilots really are corrupt, and AUGUR-V, whatever its faults were in the past, is now, overall, a good civilization, worth preserving—and doomed.

Solemn Vale: A Folk Horror Roleplaying Game:

Basically, 1970s Britain folk horror, best for one shots in theory, but complex enough setting one kind of wants to do campaigns.

The system is interesting, and I need to see it in play to know how easy it is to grasp. You've got three stats, I think, with three substats each, or at least three types of Tests each stat is used for, and you spend points from the stats to add to a D6. If you're out of points, you scratch out the stat, and if you have to scratch the same one out twice, the character is dead or the equivalent. Stats are Body, Mind, and Soul. And there's Wyrd, which is a sort of wildcard stat, which you can also spend, but this may have consequences, and sometimes you have to roll it. And sometimes high is good, sometimes low for Wyrd.

Additionally, there are rules attached to scenes, locations, beings (including people), and stuff, and these rules fiddle with the numbers or add extra consequences or damage. I'd really have liked a map, which is In Progress, and I get that, but right now? I'd love even an author's scrawl of *Solemn Vale* showing what's where.

Tales From the Wyrd: 8 scenarios for *Solemn Vale*.

These are solid, though I'm unsure how many the same group is likely to play. It's a bit of a paradox: This is a richly detailed setting, but the system is designed primarily for one-shots.

Necrobiotic: This is a beautifully illustrated rpg with a fairly high WTF quotient. I'm taking the concept of a WTF rating from <https://www.indiegamereadingclub.com/indie-game-reading-club/hear-me-out-an-ode-to-passion-projects/> which rates games with 1-5 WTFs for setting and system and the like, doing this absolutely unironically, as praise for strangeness.

I give *Necrobiotic* at least 3 WTFs for setting and for system. In terms of system, no single element is bizarre, but I've not seen them done like this. For setting, I read out the timeline to Josh and we giggled a lot. No rpg set in the future is going to get everything right, obviously, and most will get at least a few things laughably wrong, so this isn't a dealbreaker for me. It's just that *Necrobiotic* has, um, raised the bar for getting me to go "You have GOT to be kidding me."

Necrobiotic's premise is: falling population, very disruptive, we don't know why, okay, no problem—I've heard of the book/movie *Children of Man*. And because of the falling population, we raise the dead and put them into constructs, and program them to be a work force. That's maybe 1 to 2 WTFs because it's an odd premise, but sure, I'll grant a weird premise.

Between 2018 (probably a bit later than when the writing started) to 2080 (when the game is set) we have...

- A world government that functions. Okay. That's a trope; I get it. It simplifies things. (Like much of the "I don't think that works" stuff here, I pretend it's anime or the like.)
- The children of the world are reallocated to balance population. I am highly skeptical, but again, hand-wavium, maybe this is to avoid questions on how we can have, I dunno, diversity, maybe? The art is reasonable good on that. Or maybe how do we justify enough population in the location the game is set (Florence and Venice)?
- The internet goes down everywhere forever. While I'm skeptical, a) this isn't the first time I've seen this (Fates Worse Than Death has it going down for ten years and has a lot of other weird stuff in the setting, while the current Cyberpunk—*Cyberpunk Red*—gets rid of an actual internet, near as I can tell. That is, to solve the Netrunner Problem (everyone not playing the Netrunner has nothing to do while the Netrunner does netrunning), there's some hand-wavium about how computer viruses or something means that it's just not safe, so netrunners can only interface with nearby devices. I'm not explaining this particularly well, but the point is, I'm somewhat used to this, even if I think it absurd) and b) maybe I'm wrong here—I don't know what crashing population does to industries and internet.
- Even though we've set up a world government, we start losing global-ness. No one can get places, there's no global economy, there's no global politics. Er. I don't think they quite get ... Look, I edited Cthulhu

Invictus for 7th edition *Call of Cthulhu*, and I learned that the Roman Empire was extremely diverse, that all these different areas traded with each other, stuff like that. Yes, things are harder and slower. But you don't not have trade and politics and currency exchange between nations.

- Oh yes, even though we have no global economy—we're now on the gold standard. I have no idea how that works.
- We also abandon electricity as a technology because power plants are failing because of the population crash. I'm skeptical, though I do admit I have no idea how these things actually work. I'm just not convinced the authors do either.
- Also, no one knows how to do Computer Science anymore. But we are programming constructs, aka the reanimated dead augmented by machinery. But I guess those two things are completely different?
- And there's some kind of molecular formula that was invented to reanimate dead tissue. "Supermyoglobin", or as Josh dubbed it, Deadium.
- And props to the author(s) for getting how divisive and traumatic reviving dead people and putting them into the workforce is. People you knew and loved basically being a zombie workforce that don't recognize you or anything and just keep doing their task. And urban legends about how maybe sometimes they become sentient. And resistance to this with people hiding or burning their dead loved ones, and laws about how dead bodies belong to the new science world order (or at least, local order).
- All of the above is a fair bit to swallow. I'd expect Lee Gold to have a list of questions a few miles long about just how this all worked. But while I acknowledge that no rpg with a future setting is likely to meet her standards—and not just hers, but anyone's who's actually poking at things—this is not the extra special thing that raised my bar for "you have GOT to be kidding me".
- Specifically, because of the falling population and the resultant push for folks to go into Science fields and discourage going into the arts, we are expected to believe that, from 2028-2072 (8 years before game start), there is no art or entertainment. Humanity does not Art for 44 years.

At this point, however much I'm willing to handwave, we're in extra special "that's not how it works" territory.

First of all, it is utterly absurd to think that there's no art in the sciences. Also, it's absurd to think that

science people don't want entertainment even if they're sciencing day and night to try to save humanity.

Second, apparently, there's no art in clothing for 44 years? It's all purely functional? Or maybe the authors don't consider fashion to be art?

Third, there are illustration of folks making music, presumably post-2072, as we had no entertainment before then. And the instruments sure as heck look like traditional string quartet instruments. Were these somehow perfectly preserved since 2028? Did we reinvent them exactly as they used to be? I have questions.

Zero-eth, no, humanity doesn't stop doing art and entertainment, let alone creativity.

All that said, if I'm playing or running the game, I can ignore a lot of the stuff I'm skeptical about. We're in 2080, and there's clearly art and entertainment and creativity. I don't care what the world outside Venice and Florence looks like unless and until the game moves there. I'm rolling with the tropes. But the piled on absurdities of this particular timeline, even given what I know about how weird actual history, including recent history, means the setting as constructed gets at least 3 out of 5 WTFs.

And all *that* said, my main issue is that I'm not entirely sure what a group of PCs does. The book has one idea that's interesting, but doesn't quite answer the question, and has a scenario that makes certain assumptions about the PCs. I gather there's going to be a book of adventures coming out, and that may well help.

Metatopia Overview

For those not familiar with Metatopia: This is a convention where game designers bring games to playtest, and pay for the privilege. Folks not playtesting pay a lot less, as we are volunteer guinea pigs. Most slots are 2 hours.

"Hi-Test" games are limited to industry professionals and expert playtesters, which, in practice, means people the convention organizers trust to give their very best. Josh and I have been doing this for years and are good enough we qualify. Note that, in practice, there may not be a lot of difference between a Hi-Test playtester and a non-Hi-Test playtester, which can mean the latter is better than expected or that the former isn't as good as expected. I think that, in general, the quality of the playtesters and the games have been improving over time, but I am biased. I know many of the people testing their games.

A playtest can be late stage, which means it's probably solid, and the creators want to see how it runs. Possibly, they want to hand the rules to their playtesters and sit in the corner taking notes, but not otherwise interacting during play. This is the stage Josh and I are up to, in theory, with *Dangerous Refuge*, but we don't have a solid draft yet. Therefore, we didn't come in as designers this year.

A beta playtest is when a game is more or less functional, and some betas are basically done. It's also possible that the designer wants to test a specific subsystem of the game, such as character creation, a dueling system, rules for train races, or something else.

An alpha is less polished. It may have enough material for the game to be "barely functional". It may have more, but at this point, the designer wants to know if they're at least on the right track, if there's a game there, even if it needs to be sculpted out of the marble, as it were.

A focus group is for a game that's not even in the alpha stage, or that the designers aren't yet confident enough to run. Basically, they describe either the game they're trying to make or, in some case, a problem or issue they want some guidance on. Fr'ex, James Mendez Hodes, aka Mendez, had a focus group for a game that, by then, was at least in beta, likely further along, *Thousand Arrows*. What he wanted to know, iirc, was how much background and advice the book needed to have. The book has long since been published, and I think it is solidly excellent.

This year, we decided to come up on Wednesday, which meant we weren't especially worried about when we arrived. We also didn't have roommates, so took a room with one king bed. To my surprise, I needed to set the room's thermostat to make it warmer. I think we did Chef Freddy on Wednesday night, but it might have been Thursday.

Thursday was the day folks arrived at the convention and just hung out. Normally, there's a Thursday game we'd zoom into for the home gaming group with three rotating D&D games, but this week, the GM was feeling under the weather. So more hanging out in the lobby, although I think most folks, including us, went to sleep on the early side.

Friday, Josh had a hi-test boardgame, *Sprout*, from 11am-1pm, while I went to a noon-1pm Zine and Mini Game Maker Round Table.

2pm-4pm: Josh was in the hi-test of *Finding Utopia*, while I was in a playtest of *Chromatic Conjuring*, a game where all the PCs are wizards and magic is done by players dying paper. Also, I got to use the term "janitrix", thanks to Michael Cule's write ups.

4pm-6pm: Josh was in Left Brain, Write Brain.

8pm-10pm: Josh was in Light Years. I was in a Hi-Test of Silver Age, a game set in a very small town in Texas in the 1990s, where all the PCs are werewolves.

Saturday at 8am, Josh and I joined several others for Breakfast with the Bakers, which is a relaxed conversation where folks can ask the Bakers (Vincent, Meguey, and whichever other members of their family are present) questions about their game, about game design, and so on. It is also a way to make sure one eats breakfast.

9am-11am: Josh played Kid's Menu.

11am-1pm: Josh was in a hi-test of something called T.R.I.P. I was the first of two playtest sessions of Streets of Jade (*) called Flood the Block.

2pm-4pm: Josh played Magnus Archives Mysteries: The Labyrinth, basically an escape-room-in-a-box game based on the Magnus Archives podcast. I was in the second Streets of Jade playtest, Clean-Bladed Duel.

4pm-6pm: Josh was in a hi-test of Crash Site.

8pm-10pm: Josh and I were both in a hi-test of Glorious Fate: Campaign Structure Testing, an interesting Fate variant.

10pm-midnight: Josh was in a hi-test of From Dreams to Wings.

Sunday: Josh had a 10am-noon hi-test of Whimsy, while I had a hi-test of The World's Problems, an rpg with a very *Sandbaggers* feel where each of us played 3 very different characters.

Noon-2pm, Josh had A Tale of Myths and Legends, I think a game he'd playtested a couple of years earlier at an online Metatopia, while I had a playtest of Hinterlight.

(*) *Streets of Jade* uses the Paragon system which was first created for a game about Greek heroes, called Agon. *Streets of Jade* is written by James Mendez Hodes and Fonda Lee, and is based on Fonda Lee's Green Bones series, which is a sweeping epic set in an alternate world, sort of *The Godfather* crossed with magical martial arts fueled by Jade. Mendez was running three very different playtests, and I asked which, if any, he wanted me to try to sign up for, given that I'd playtested it at an earlier DexLite and was currently involved in an official Evil Hat playtest, reporting back with questions to a Discord server and via a Google feedback form.

He said I should either sign up for the hi-test, which involved seeing if the system worked for telling mobster stories set in our own world or the other two non-hi-test playtests, and I decided I was more interested in the two non-hi-test playtests, each of which tested different aspects of the system, ones that weren't in the playtest material I'd gotten, probably because they're still being tested.

I'm not entirely sure what he learned from Flood the Block, as this had to do with the PCs trying to control a neighborhood, and mostly involved what he saw from a gming perspective, but he said it was helpful. Additionally, while he was clarifying something, I realized that, in the playtest I was in on the Discord, our group had completely misunderstood a crucial mechanic, and we were doing it wrong. This was helpful both because I could explain to them, after the convention, what we should have been doing, and the GM could explain, on the server, what we'd misunderstood, and where we'd made our error, so that the authors have a better idea of where they need to be clearer.

Clean-Bladed Duel tested the dueling subsystem, and I was familiar with how that worked in the source material. For a two hour playtest, basically, the players paired off and had their PCs duel, and then switch partners. We also discussed options for duel endings.

In one case, Mars Valentine helped by playing an NPC duelist who was one of the most powerful characters in the books. What they were looking for in that particular case was:

- Did this NPC play as much of a badass as they should? Yes.
- Was it still fun for the player whose PC lost to the NPC? Also yes. It felt like the PC had done their best and managed to get some licks in before inevitably losing to a far more skilled opponent.

My Vague GMing Docket as of 11 December 2025

- Finish Pillars of Sand
- Go back to and conclude Fearful Symmetries (the King (in Yellow) and the Great Work of Restoring Magick to London)
- Do Season 2 of Urban Shadows
- Playtest Dangerous Refuge for more than a one-shot
- Playtest Agents of the Night, using it to do the last leg of Dracula Dossier
- Figure out how to write the Save Benjamin Franklin's Essential Saltes as a Boundaries of the Darkness scenario / Poison Tree side

scenario as both cover the same time period, really

There's other stuff after all of that to ponder:

- Figure out how to write the Lovecraftian Gosford Park idea as a full scenario.
- Figure out how to do the Fate of Cthulhu frame I started.
- Finish Poison Tree. Issue: It's in revisions for 2e Trail and does have some issues. But it is a fascinating generational came.
- Maybe try to run Over the Edge 3e. Issue: I'd need to reread the book, read the scenario collection, figure out what I want to do with it. It occurs to me I might be able to use the scenarios with Swords of the Serpentine.
- Maybe try to run something Forged in the Dark—Candela Obscura, CHEW, a|State, something I feel sufficiently comfortable with.
- Maybe try to run Memento Mori. Issue: I need to finish reading it.
- Maybe figure out how to run Blue Rose with a system that isn't AGE. Issue: I need to read a LOT of material and figure out a system that works but still captures the nuances.
- Maybe run Phoenix Dawn Command (after getting from Nick what I need to hack to make it work) or perhaps run it with Take the Universe (which would be a VERY different game—TTU is Penned to Good Society for military sff, though all the military stuff is abstracted and/or turned into individual scenes that are VERY up to the players to frame). Issue: It is a war story.
- Maybe run any of a number of Call of Cthulhu campaigns, likely trying to use Cat's interesting hack of Gumshoe/PbtA (Tatters of the King, Masks of Nyarlathotep 5e (which I'd have to read), Sutra of Pale Leaves (which I'd also have to read), Children of Fear (ditto) or try Armitage Files (which is asking for trouble)

COMMENTS ON EVER AND ANON ISSUE #6

CLARK TIMMINS: re The Dead and Burial: The bit about closing the mouth reminds me of *Candela Obscura's* breath binding.

MYLES CORCORAN: Sympathy on the sleep issue. I'm glad people have been being supportive. I enjoyed all the write ups. re Mausritter write up. Just how reckless, all in all, was Philbert being? I couldn't tell if this was "PCs need to keep NPC from running off a cliff" or "NPC keeps things moving lest PCs debate too long" or something in the middle. re Kriegsmesser: *giggle* at you losing track of head traumas and the > Chandler's beatings. But oh, the wine! re the figure searching the corpse's body: Wait, they found

something? The PCs didn't do a thorough search of the body? How unusual! Also, is it just coincidence that the murder victim who was likely more than he seemed is named "Falsbender"? This has a very noir feel. Oh, nice trick with the mirror!

re solo game: Interesting system. Fascinating how, after the roll of 98, the next roll is one where a "no" answer would be better for the characters, and, unsurprisingly, the dice say "yes" instead. When Ding asked for opinions, how did you decide what the others said?

re Mark Nemeth: I love the map concept and the resulting map! re Roger BW: *giggle* at the Tommy gun that only works half the time as a Pendragon metaphor. I suspect that the Winter Phase would play very differently if the rules for it were updated with the currently gaming cultural norms in mind, though I don't expect that to happen. re "tick" vs "check": Does Ireland not have ticks, then? I'd use "check" to avoid confusion with the insect. re John Redden: That's a lovely definition of the Mausritter game.

re Erica Frank: While I'm not especially technical, I'm definitely curious about your script to remove cruft and surveillance. re Avram Grumer re *Smallville*: It's not building a dice pool that's the problem. It's all the fiddly bits that make it hard to create a PC or NPC, and that make it hard to figure out how to build that dice pool. My brain could not do it—I had to ask, every time, to get walked through it. I think the answer is to create a chart showing where to put the dice, like *Streets of Jade* (which uses the Paragon/Agon system) does. re Brian Misiasek re *The Twisted Ones* and *The Hollow Places*: Ah. I am now a bit more likely to read them. I love the Sworn Soldier books.

re me re SCD: Thank you. re FRUP: Mm, yes, that's maybe more meta than most folks are going to want to go. re Sanderson: I refer your question to Josh, as he's read far more Sanderson than I have. re Joshua Kronengold re distributing skill points during play for games like CoC/BRPS: Didn't the HeroQuest version of RuneQuest allow for something like this?

ATTRONARCH: re me: Thanks for the clarification. re Myles Corcoran: How do you modify your Judging style when you have a large number of players?

JOHN REDDEN: Wow, Mouse Guard larping? Cool! re me: We now have DVDs of the original Addams Family show and really should watch them. re Joshua Kronengold: "TLDR", often written as "TL;DR" means "Too Long; Didn't Read" and often precedes a summary of whatever came before for those whose eyes glazed over at the longer version.

GABRIEL ROARK: While I do like 2-column text, I find your single column zine very readable. If you like it, stick with it. re Patrick Zoch re high-level PCs' followers: It sounds like it sets up the situation that the rpg *REIGN* tries to solve with Companies. re me: Fewer options are easier to handle than many, true. It depends on what the game and its players need. We've written combat systems for various larps, and some are extremely simple (open an envelope with a card with your combat number for the current combat or scratch off a number on a card, ditto) to more complex (here's your deck of cards for the martial arts tournament; each card tells you what it defeats and what defeats it). re my employment: I've not had full time work in several years, although I've gotten a gratifying number of edifying and proofreading assignments from Arc Dream recently. It's never going to be enough to live on, but I love the work. re players participating enthusiastically in their characters' deaths: You mean the players whose PCs were poisoned?

BRIAN ROGERS: I've now seen the third Knives Out movie and loved it. For Thanksgiving, Josh made a single very large turkey leg, and bought two more not quite as large the next day. Turns out that amount of turkey, supplemented by carrots, mushrooms, bread for stuffing, and the like, serves our needs very well. The leftover turkey broth that resulted was also quite good.

re *Draw Steel*: Nod. The disconnect between narrative expectations and systemic rules can be very jarring. re Iron Skull: I agree with going the older route, no psychic stuff, just a nice steel brick. re Roger BW re wanting the PCs to be the most important people: It's a matter of perspective. If you're telling me "It's Star Wars, and we're sticking to the movies, and no, you can't be Luke, Leia, Han, and so on", okay. Those are parameters, premise, whatever. What kind of characters may I play and what will you allow them to potentially accomplish?

If it's just Being Witness to History!, then I'm out. I'll just rewatch the films.

If it's small stuff that doesn't really matter, and you're *never* going to let us forget that, again, I'm out. I'm not playing to have what I do not matter.

If it's interesting stuff, but I only have agency as long as I don't disrupt the canon, and my character simply *must* get captured here, and if the PCs get the mcguffin it will be immediately taken from them No Matter What, and if they learn something huge, they will somehow forget it or be unable to pass on the information or no one will believe them No Matter What, then again, what I'm doing doesn't matter.

Take the X-Men game you ran. I don't know that our PCs were The. Most. Important. Characters. in the Marvel universe, but that didn't matter. They *were* The. Most. Important. Characters. in the campaign. That did matter.

To put it another way: No PCs, no players. No players, no game. The PCs are the most important characters, like it or not. But what "the most important characters" means is open to negotiation and interpretation.

re Jim Eckman re studying Chinese history as "a possible empire model for space opera": If you decide you want to look at more fantastical C-dramas (or the web novels or graphic novels they draw on) as well, let me know. re me re random death vs no plot armor: That can be a pretty fine distinction. re Marian Cox: This is what I might point to if a man ever wonders why a woman is twitchy around him for no obvious reason. It's not that he or any particular individual will do something awful. It's that, historically, there are too many cases where something like this (or any of a number of other things) happens and there's nothing the woman can do about it. re MCDM's pay rates: That's heartening.

re maximum zine and apa lengths: I'm used to 16 pages, so it'd feel like moving my cheese, but I can see how going to fewer pages might be good, and I can definitely see the merits of capping the length of the apa. Is it necessary? I don't know, and part of the issue is that we won't necessarily know for sure until it becomes an issue, at which point, people may have already started leaving.

re BESM and people short-circuiting the intent of the rules by eschewing the expensive core skills for side skills: I'm about to raise our old argument. I am often met with bafflement when I explain that I hate the way that part of BESM works. Let me see if I can describe my objections more clearly this time.

It's a bit like Robin Laws saying "I don't understand why people hoard points in Gumshoe when I specifically designed it so you don't have to." Er, no. You can say, as loudly and as often as you like, "No, when you're out of points of Melee or Burglary, your character doesn't suddenly suck at these things. You can always roll flat and hope. It's just that the spotlight is passing from your character, or at least from your character's using that skill." I don't care. In practice, it still feels like when you're out of points in a skill, your character sucks at that skill. Of *course* players will hoard points until they think it matters most. There are ways around this, and we'll pretend I've gushed about *Swords of the Serpentine* again and talked about how I trust some GMs to have a very good sense of when to tell us to refresh our skill pools.

Or, to look at it another way: You tell me you want a game where everyone is a Roman legionnaire, and I say, yes, absolutely, I'm in, and then decide no, I want to be the cook, or you agree to play in *Trail of Cthulhu* and then refuse to have your character run into danger—in other words, we're refusing to play the game we agreed to play. Whichever of us is gming is justifiably irate.

Flip that. I'm told, "This is a game about piloting. We want you to make awesome pilots! That's what the game's about!" And then you tell me, "Now, the rules will charge you more of your limited number of points for actually being good at being a pilot—actually *doing the thing the game/author/GM wants you to do*." I don't care how many times I'm told that this is perfectly correct, that this is the point, that this is game balance. I don't care. I feel like I am being cheated. I feel like I am being *punished* for playing the game the way the system supposedly tells me I should. Just set my Pilot (or whatever) skill to what you want it to be, dock the points, and give me whatever's left. Those remnants are the only ones the system wants me to use.

It seems that a lot of people think, as I do, that it is no fun to play a game where we're told "You are being charged extravagantly for the privilege of making the character the premise is telling you to make."

In other words, it feels to me like the system has broken the contract. I sympathize with players who do not feel motivated to honor it, though I think using a different system is a better answer than trying to finesse things.

re romance systems designed for larger group play: How large do you have in mind? *Good Society* games are generally 3-5 players, but if the players each have a couple of connections, that could be as many as 15 characters for 5 players. Also, the pdf for *How to GM Romance* dropped for backers, so perhaps that might spark ideas.

ROGER BW: re handouts: While I'm not sure I'd go so far as to say they're the point, they do enhance the game, especially when done well. re Neutral Currents: Congratulations on the lack of murder! re remote gaming: We generally use a friend's zoom. I'll use die rollers, but I'm also fine with rolling my dice and trusting others to be honest about what they roll, for the same reason you cite. The occasional inaccuracy generally stems from someone misunderstanding or forgetting a rule. I'm not sure players in our groups go through material faster online than in person. I've not done any kind of comparison. Online gaming fatigue is very real, and yes, 2-3 hours is about the maximum with no break.

re game conventions: Wait, what? Running 12 hours in one day only gets you in for free that day? Yeah, no. If you can't comp my membership, okay. I'll accept that, whether or not I run anything for you. If you say, "Okay, we can't comp your whole membership, but we'll give you a 50% discount", sure, that's something. But this? It feels like an insult. Does one get the same treatment if it's only one 4 hour game?

re Mark Nemeth re healing issues in *Call of Cthulhu*: Yes, it can be an issue, especially if a scenario or campaign doesn't allow the action to slow down for injured PCs. Even at my most "purist" settings, I'm willing to finesse "realism" to some degree in favor of playability.

re Matt Stevens: I find I've adapted to switching modes, and I'm trying to figure out what, if anything, I did to accomplish that and where my boundaries are, as there are times when there's not enough to a scenario. I suspect having had some acting and improv classes many decades ago didn't hurt, and that larping helps as well.

Matching expectations is critical, of course. I know when playing *Good Society* that I'm going to be playing supporting characters in addition to my main character, and that we're all going to be going in and out of pure roleplaying mode. I know when I'm playing *Swords of the Serpentine* that part of the fun is being able to make up background elements on the fly, and I love the creative ways the players in my home group have done this. ("No one may pass when a Declaration of Love is being made!" "The bride has the Traditional Right to go shopping!")

Ultimately, it's probably that I played a lot of indie games early and often, so I'm used to a lot of the concepts. Oddly, I do still have trouble wrapping my head around *Blades in the Dark* and its hacks, and I think part of the reason is the same as the reason I had trouble with some indie games back in the 00s: I want to roleplay. I'm willing to do a lot of stuff that is outside of roleplay if I get to chew scenery. But I don't quite feel the cycle of Forged in the Dark games. It might be worth my discussing some of the early indie games, and what they did and didn't do for me. I shall ponder this idea.

Robin Laws is very much a high concept thinker, and I think he sometimes overlooks how gamers on the ground play, as it were. RPGs can take a lot from other media, but they are their own thing. I totally agree that, yes, when things go right for the PCs, one should not undercut their win. re "one extra black die" as sufficient without demanding coming up with something "smart": Yes. The *CHEW RPG*, iirc, makes it clear that it's fine to decide that ticking a countdown clock is the drawback.

re Brian Misiaszek re the idea that authors of Lovecraftian scenarios shouldn't limit themselves to the beings Lovecraft created: I've heard the opposite notion, i.e.; that authors shouldn't invent some other being, but should instead find a pre-existing one to use. If they must invent something, it should be something that isn't covered by any of the traditional Lovecraftian beasts or deities. I lean that way myself, and also, to some degree, towards the Delta Green notion of not letting the players know "Ah, yes, this is an X beast, so we just have to do Y." But it depends on context, of course. It worked really well in the Harlem Unbound campaign I played in, where there really was no reason for the PCs to know precise names. (We did eventually learn Azathoth's name, in character, but all the PCs ever understood was that this Azathoth being a) was willing to help one of our number, b) had probably eaten the invisible monster on the roof, and c) was always hungry. Really, what more did we need to know?)

re Single Sin: Oh yes. I've read a couple of rpg mysteries where the GM decides who actually did the murders. Each NPC suspect has a) a potential Secret Sin and b) a motive for the murdering. re the role of the caller: I admit I don't think I ever played a game with one. re the New *Masks of Nyarlathotep*: What did you think of the Peru chapter?

PATRICK RILEY: re conventions: Given that I don't write scenarios for conventions, I only have a limited number of pre-written scenarios to run. Okay, in theory, I probably have more, but these are ones I'm comfortable running in a 4-hour slot where I don't know who'll be playing. My other option is to run a game where one really can't pre-plan anything and where there's no written scenario, so I can't run it more than once. I've done that with *Itras By* as well as our own *Dangerous Refuge*, and thus far, it works. I wonder if I'd be as eager to re-run pre-written scenarios if the slot were longer than 4 hours. Larps, of course, are a different animal.

re the game you had to sit out: I'm guessing the reason you weren't annoyed is that you could wander around and enjoy the rest of the convention. It is a weird situation, though. If I thought that might come up in a scenario I ran, I'd probably want a couple of extra characters on hand so you wouldn't have to sit out. re that Unknown Armies game: I suspect I know which one it was, though I don't recall the name. Was it one of Todd Furler's? If so, I think I played the husband in a different run.

re write up: First, my sympathy. There are days I wonder why, if folks swear I'm a good GM and they love playing with me, we can't find a day for a session, someone says "Oops, I cross-scheduled with this other

thing I want more", or doesn't reply to "What days are you free?" If folks want to know why I once had an unsent draft email that said that the game was great and I enjoyed running it for the players, and then immediately after asked if anyone wanted to drop from the game, yep, that's why. (Also, thanks to Josh for reading it over and confirming I shouldn't, in fact, send it.) I have had to pull teeth to get people to tell me that, actually, yes, in fact, the start time was too early for them, and that's why they showed up late on zoom, or that yes, in fact, they did have a regular doctor's appointment on the particular day of the week I'd been scheduling games for and yes, that was, in fact, why they couldn't make those sessions, and yes, if I scheduled the game for a different weekday evening, it would be better for them.

Plot hooks are tricky beasts. I think part of why I'm enjoying games where we regularly go out of character and plan things is because this is where we all ask each other, "So, what do you actually want for your character?" It doesn't mean someone gets everything on their wish list; as you said, you weren't going to whip up on the fly an adventure tailored to one PC. It can help with course correction, however.

It's easy to say from where I sit that you could have paused the game and said, "Hey, is anyone interested in the festival? I thought a bard would be interested in a music contest." or "Are you no longer interested in your character's backstory? I've been building an arc for that, and if it's not something you want, I should stop doing that." It's easy to say "Do a round of stars and wishes with the group, and remember to give your own." But you've probably done at least some of this, and obviously, not all tactics work for all people. And it can be hard to ask / say these things, especially if they lead to blank stares or "No, everything's fine—it's all good."

Also, I am absurdly delighted to learn that there is such a thing as a celloridoo. re the group no longer being eligible for Bronze quests: This makes sense.

re Roger BW re spending Luck in *Call of Cthulhu*: In theory, I agree with you. In practice, I think of it as using a metacurrency that has nothing to do with cosmic horror or the lack thereof, and it's grown on me. Granted, often, I'm not in "purist" mode, even in the *Harlem Unbound* game, but what I find useful is that if one wants more than a one shot, it's a way to keep PCs from dropping too quickly. And of course, there are plenty of non-purist campaigns that all but rely on GMs allowing this optional rule. *Eldritch New England* has children PCs, and it seems appropriate. I wouldn't call it pulp, exactly, but it isn't quite purist either. And Cthulhu Invictus is more sword and sandal, I think, which is probably a form of pulp itself.

re Jim Eckman re growing up phase likely being a solo thing: Interesting point. *Castles in the Air* is an obvious counter-example, but it was explicitly built to be one. re me re the analogy of a dance partner who just stands in place: Yes, that's also extremely frustrating. re wild pigs: Wow. Yah, I don't consider that a safe situation. Cool photos, though.

re me re *Eternal Lies* re why any NPC, particularly a villain, *would* talk to the PCs: First of all, if this isn't a fight situation, that's usually how NPCs interact with PCs. Second, perhaps selfishly, I want my NPCs to talk because talking NPCs is one of my strengths as a GM. Thirdly, this is the one NPC singled out as "will not talk to the PCs No Matter What" and I'm not seeing a good reason for it. I want to use as much of a campaign book as I can, and this is a fascinating NPC. If the players don't get to see this, it doesn't exist. Also, given what is established about this NPC, presuming the PCs are in a position to talk with her in the first place, she actually has good reason to talk to them. Sure, she might not, depending on their approach, but if they actually get into a position where that's feasible and have a reasonable approach, my ruling is that they've earned that conversation.

I'm sure other GMs could run it closer to the book, and if I were playing in their run, I suspect it wouldn't bother me. But having the authors say, "Nope, this NPC won't talk" when that makes no sense to me sticks in my craw.

re Mark re the Doctor as a time traveling John Constantine: Yes, that I did like. re spreading insanity a la memetics: I think I've likely encountered something like that. Delta Green's *Impossible Landscapes* probably qualifies. I've not yet read the latest edition of Kult, so I don't know if it does. re entourage straining credibility in some investigation scenes: I agree. I'm annoyed that the *Yellow King RPG* and various other flavors of Gumshoe seem to think that the PCs must go as a group to interview every person of interest and search every location. re rolling to see how long a PC takes or how well a PC accomplishes something: Oh yes. I'm fine with that.

Thanks for the one page summary of *WRS*! re bosses not caring about suit: This means that their number of successes depends entirely on the value of the cards, i.e., the number of successes generated, as each card will generate a success, correct? Do Jokers generate successes? I'm guessing they're 0 successes, though they make situations better and/or worse. re combat: If my PC takes X hits and I have some number of successes, then do I have to choose between spending any given success on defense or on a hit? Or do they count towards both?

AVRAM GRUMER: re *Dream Askew*: *giggle* at "The only one of us with a surname." re backing something on kickstarter and forgetting about it: Been there. Ooh, interesting details for Corey's possible past. I'm curious to learn what "Politics of the void" are. re prompts where each player asks one left and one right: In games where each player has enough prompts to ask one of every other player's character, the groups I've been in sometimes do this. (I've not played a lot of *Belonging Outside Belonging*, but it's still a good arrow to have in the quiver.)

re the flashback: Cool move, though I'm not entirely sure whether it "ought" to count as a weak move. OTOH, there are consequences for that sort of thing, so probably it should. re none of the three selected conflicts coming up: I don't think that's a problem. re not sure how much progress you're making on your roleplaying goals: You're trying a new game that doesn't work like most of the games you've played, with a new group, and trying to play outside your comfort zone. Be patient with yourself.

re *Monsterhearts*: Yes, good choice with the Werewolf if you're trying to push yourself in the opposite of your usual direction. It just occurred to me that you've actually played a werewolf before, in *Cthulhupunk* +20. I love the idea of a dive bar named "Low Tide". re setting up the homeroom: I love that step. You can feel the battle lines forming. re leading a sheltered life: As did I, and frankly, most of the folks we gamed with in the 90s. re Volatile and Hot stats: One thing to remember is that, as you noted, Volatile covers fighting and running. This means that if you suck at fighting, you also suck at running away from a fight.

re *Scum and Villainy*: Yep, we specialize in plans with a lot of Phase 2 in them. re Von plugging the leak with his butt: Still better than the original situation, which was Merry's body winding up plugging it. I think Von did something to take the consequences / hit for Merry. re none of the PCs believing that the Way is just technology: I think that this concept actually caused Vary to have an epiphany and start to actually understand this Way business.

re Mark Wilson re the Fiasco playset we used: I think it was The Big Anime Convention. re me re helium balloons to represent troops: This sounds about as practical as another idea we had, but discarded: If your character is speaking a language other than the one everyone speaks, hold up a sign saying what language that is. This will let folks know that only characters who know that language can understand what is being said. So, there could be signs for "I'm speaking French" or "I'm speaking German" or "I'm speaking [indecipherable symbols]".

re Gareth's *Blades in the Dark* game: I don't think we played in long enough to have Heat and Wanted come up, but perhaps I'm wrong. The second session did involve stealing a book for our patron. re *Never Tell Me the Odds*: Interesting. I like that it specifies maximum campaign length. Apparently, Robin Laws never expected there'd be a Feng Shui campaign of more than (I think) 16 sessions, but this wasn't something he noted in the original rulebook. re Joshua Kronengold re wander about approach: Technically, I think *Monsterhearts* would be considered "modern", and it suggests, iirc, that the GM let the PCs wander around for the first session or so. The idea is that the campaign should be about whatever interests the players.

PAUL HOLMAN: Congratulations to the Lunars for getting their commendations. I'm glad you enjoyed the Brindlewood Bay game and Gran Canaria. re Elf re inter-relationship questions: *Amber Diceless RPG* and *Everway* both have players ask each other questions about their characters, although this is more general than inter-relationship queries. Fate character creation often involves making an Aspect that is about a relationship with another PC.

re Myles Corcoran re keeping track of NPCs and the like: When I ran Kerberos Club Fate and the Strange School PBEM, I did this via a wiki. As a player, sometimes I take notes, sometimes other people do, sometimes we use a Google doc or a tab on a character keeper. At Worldcon this year, I saw some character and campaign journals that looked nice, from Fox Fern Books (<https://legacy.drivethrurpg.com/browse/pub/23286/Fox-Fern-Books-LLC>). Unsurprisingly, they aren't organized the way I'd do it, so I managed to buy just a small-sized "chronicle diary" (which many people at the convention admired, and I pointed them at the Fox Fern booth) as well sets of tabs to spark my imagination.

re me re *Eternal Lies*: It's not that the information the PCs need isn't available without talking to the NPC. It is, and indeed, the whole point of Gumshoe is that core clues are available. (Granted, the authors push it in some odd ways in a few places, but the principle stands.) And it's unlikely, if one tries to stick as closely as possible to the text, that the PCs will ever be in a position to have a conversation with this NPC. But if they are, it does not make sense to me, based on what was established about her, that she'd absolutely refuse to talk with them at all about anything. Would I be fine with another GM player her that way? Yes. It's being told I'm supposed to play her that way that sticks in my craw.

MARK WILSON: Congratulations on the new job! Josh acquired a pumpkin and roasted the seeds and did

stuff with the rest of it. I think pumpkin sorbet may become a thing. re conventions: Yes, one definitely needs a plan for the larger ones. It can be a loose one. I do like the dealer's room at many larger conventions, but for the last few years we did Gen Con, I definitely spent time before the convention planning how I would shop in it. re me: Cool. I really need to read *Avatar: Legends* (and a whole bunch of other stuff on our shelves). re Jim Vassilakos re *Brindlewood Bay*: Gareth made it feel like an episode of a mystery show like *Murder, She Wrote*. I'm not sure how much was him, how much all of us, and how much the system.

RAE both the Myriad write up and the OOC look behind the scenes. Years back, we were in a one session OD&D game (never did schedule another session) where my cleric was voluntold to join the other adventurers because of her terrible cooking. This wasn't planned per se; I just said that she made "orange stew", and the GM said that, perhaps because of that, she was assigned to whatever the adventure would have been.

MATT STEVENS: re Godwacking: The whole Dyas Pitar business makes sense to me.

DYLAN CAPEL: re me: Yes, getting lost in Arthur's castle has a very different feel than a gritty semi-meaningless death in combat.

ERICA FRANK: I need to read my copy of *Wanderhome*. For groups not entirely ready to have no single person a bit more in charge than the others, someone can be a facilitator, which seems close enough to the Guide as makes no difference. And when one starts that way, often, everyone else picks up enough of the game and gets comfortable enough that there may not need to be a facilitator next time around.

re the Tree: Wow, yes, that seems far too specific, if I correctly understand the way *Wanderhome* works. re solo game write ups: I don't mind. I'm not planning to do this for *My Late Father's Correspondence*, but that's because a) it's a LOT of writing and b) I'd need to explain a lot for folks to understand the context, and I think that might stretch the bounds of fair use to breaking point (and be full of spoilers, as part of the fun is being surprised by the built-in game twists).

re game conventions: Oh my goodness, we were both at the 1994 Origins! I bought what may have been the first copy of *Castle Falkenstein* ever sold, and, I see, played in a couple of games of it. And I have finally recalled that we were both on the Licensed TTRPGs as Fanfic panel at Worldcon this year.

PATRICK ZOCH: Congrolences on the end of the furlough, which is to say congratulation on being back

to work and condolences on the now very tight deadlines. re getting rear ended: I'm glad the humans involved are all right. re The Conflict of Gold and Experience: Seems like the GM brought this upon himself. re me: Thanks for the clarification about the orcs and the detail about the chocolate.

MICHAEL CULE: I have felt the Inspiration of Immersion on more than one occasion, as both GM and player, in rpgs and larps. I wonder if we should have an igheme about this. re the injections: I've had some success with them, but they don't work for everyone. Give it a few weeks, sure, but if they don't work for you, don't be shy about saying so.

re Glamour re the PCs forgetting the woman stuck to the ceiling: Back when I was running my Cthulhupunk game, the PCs (and players and GM) regularly forgot about NPCs they'd tied up and stashed in a closet. re someone swiping your EPT at a convention: Oof, condolences. re John Redden: Oddly, I did know that one presents the person of lower status to the person of higher status.

re me re your thoughts on Good Society for Military SFF: You're definitely in the ballpark. We've done some of those. Thanks for your thoughts on *A Rough Guide to Glamour* and *Citizens of the Lunar Empire*.

HEATH ROW: Thank you for the trip report. I feel like I got a vicarious tour! I hope the move went well.

JIM ECKMAN: re Worlds of Wonder: That seems like about the correct level of detail, yes. I've seen games with "oracles", aka lists, whether long or short, one can roll to pick options from to describe planets (and other places, people, or things) very broadly, as well as simple pick lists. Aviatrix created something like that for *Rovers*, a fairly simple game that had *Traveller* and *Firefly* vibes. The PCs were trying to smuggle a woman out of one place and into another, and en route, made a stop on some planet or other. We agreed on some broad options (basically, that this was a weird, quirky place with odd customs/laws) and Aviatrix made the ruler a less lethal version of Christophe Lee's Lord Summerisle from *The Wicker Man*. No human sacrifice, but definitely sex rituals.

BRIAN MISIASZEK: Congratulations to Laura and I hope Sadie continues to do well.

re Habana Horror: I love the chart for mealtime conversations. This may be a useful tool for figuring out how to write a tricky bit for a *Call of Cthulhu* scenario loosely based on *Gosford Park*. I also like the detail of the guided tour. It's so much easier to modify something like that as needed than to come up with a line of patter, and while players are certainly tolerant of "Okay, this is an overview of what he shows you", it's a

lot more fun your way. I'm looking forward to the next installment.

re Gabriel Roark: Oof. I hope you have now got your new COVID shot? re me: Thanks. While I should fix the ToC and bookmark stuff, it's a bit complicated and we have other priorities. But SCD is out, and anyone can download it. re APP: I think of POW as the stat to use for Charisma or Presence in *Call of Cthulhu*.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: re John Redden re bonus dice and roll-and-keep: *Feng Shui* did a bonus and penalty die, iirc. *Legend of the Five Rings* originally used a roll-and-keep system, and of course, *Cortex* and (Par)*Agon* variants do essentially that. re Myles Corcoran: No, *Yellow King RPG* is not more recent than *Swords of the Serpentine*. This is, of course, less relevant than its being written by Robin Laws and coming out of requests to take GUMSHOE One-2-One and modify it for group play.

re Michael Cule re "who was ever completely happy with the magic and powers subsystems": **raising my hand** I loved the Powers subsystem. re Heat going up when Loud things happen, even if the PCs didn't make those things happen: This is sometimes a thing in *Night's Black Agents*, at least to some degree. That is, there's at least one scenario where, when the PCs take Heat, they take +1 more Heat than the base rules indicate because of the local situation. Thus, while the GM doesn't track every NPC action that might raise the Heat, there's a sort of pre-existing Heat.

re Patrick Zoch re treasure that PCs can't use because, fr'ex, they're cops: I would never want to count on players not finding what they consider a sufficient justification to ignore that and have their PCs take such items anyway. Heck, remember the dagger your *Swords of the Serpentine* character created from REDACTED in REDACTED (because it's not out yet)? Yes, the PCs ultimately decided it was best to hand that over to the Church of Denari, but it was very tempting to keep it, and you might have gone the other way.

re Patrick Riley re works that do focus on a group of protagonists: There's also *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, *Hill Street Blues*, *Star Trek*, *Firefly*, *Babylon 5*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Gotham*, *Buckaroo Banzai*, and many others.

re Brian Misiaszek re hit points originally being how many hits an individual could take: Interesting. I circled back to that, I think, when I ran a *Call of Cthulhu* adventure that I translated to *Trail of Cthulhu*, and instead of doing a strict by-the-book conversion of CoC HP to ToC Health for most NPCs, just noted whether they went down after one hit or two. re why there was a lion in King Arthur's bedroom in that Pendragon

game: Yep, it's Camelot, and these things just happen there. *whistles the song "Camelot"*.

re that *Monsterhearts* game: Yes. In retrospect, the Witch's player specifying that she was avoiding eye contact so that your Mortal couldn't cast a hex on her, that was something the GM should, IMO, have made the player roll Keep Your Cool to pull that off. I don't blame the GM (Mendez, right?) for not thinking of it on the spot; a lot was going on at that point of the game. re the larp where players vanished into the Choose Your Own Adventure minigame: This was *Dance of Dragons*. re MZB: Technically, I'm not sure she wrote all the Darkover books; there are some posthumous ones that were at least cowritten by someone else (though not Mercedes Lackey).

re Jim Vassilakos re how what exact mythos being is behind events is less important than the details of what's going on and what one can do about it: Yes. In *Eternal Lies*, I could absolutely change the identity of the being behind everything without changing anything else about the campaign. I'm still highly amused that, after learning that identity back when we playtested the campaign, you completely misremembered it—and that the being you incorrectly assumed it was made so much sense that I am still astonished none of the NPCs made the same incorrect assumption. Indeed, in the incomplete second run I did, I modified things so that one group of NPCs did make that assumption.

JIM VASSILAKOS: re submitting zines to Lee at the last possible minute or second: She's been very sweet about that for a number of us. It probably also helped that we generally weren't in danger of hitting the maximum page count. re Dungeon Home Owners Association larp: We also had ideas like "I didn't want to say anything, but the dragon has a hoarding problem..."

re one-shot vs multi-session *Call of Cthulhu* (or similar tone) game: It really depends. Anything I play at a convention is likely to be a one shot. Anything I play that Oscar Rios runs is likely to be a playtest, and I've been using one character for his 1920s scenarios and a different one for the Roman Empire scenarios. The players generally accept "you may not know each other or you may, but you all have some amount of experience, and you're all going to accept the scenario's premise and work together" for these (although many convention scenarios have pregens tailored to them).

For a longer period, building in links or a framework is useful. There's also a question of whether this longer period is multiple scenarios/campaigns or one campaign that's basically a long scenario. Fr'ex, in *Eternal Lies* and *Masks of Nyarlathotep*, the PCs have been brought together by an NPC to investigate

something, and this leads to the rest of the campaign. And by the end of a long campaign of this type, it's not unlikely that the PCs (presuming they survive) are done. Nevertheless, I've had some return for other one shots and campaigns, and we've figured out the justifications for this at or before the start of those.

re Joshua Kronengold re wanting GMs who can react appropriately when the PCs wander off the map: For me, as a GM, it depends. How much warning did you give me? Did you say at the end of a session that you want to do X thing that's not part of whatever material I'm using? I can probably pivot. But if, at the beginning of next session, you decide instead of doing X—for which, following your direction, I've prepped for anywhere from a week to a couple of months (or longer, depending on how large the gap between sessions is)—you're going to do Z, then I am going to have problems adjusting. This is also true if you're following the published material. If I'm running *Masks of Nyarlathotep* and the group agrees they're going to Nairobi at the end of one session, but decide next session they're doing Shanghai instead, I will have problems adjusting, even though all the material is in front of me.

If you're trying to go off the map mid-sessions, then it depends on what you're trying to do and what my map shows. One of the reasons I sometimes prep within an inch of the material's life, going over it multiple times, is to be prepared for exactly this.

Of course, if I'm running a Powered by the Apocalypse game or something like *Itras By* or playing in a game without a GM, then there's probably no published scenario, and we're all off script. In those cases, everyone needs to be engaged, and enough people need an opinion about where things should go next. And sometimes, people don't want to have to be the ones who choose. This seems to be less of a problem than it used to be, overall, but it's why, when I was running Cthulhupunk +20, making the mistake about being too controlling wasn't as bad as making the mistake about not providing a clear direction for the players to take their characters in.

I think there are far more sandbox roleplayers than you think. I suspect they're still in the minority, but it's a larger minority. That said, there are a lot of folks who play rpgs and a lot of different ways to play them, and it's hard to get a big picture of the whole. I have a very specific slice of the pie/picture, which comes from my home groups, the games I play online with folks all over the world, the games I play at the various conventions I go to, and the games I read about in A&E and E&A and other places. But I also self-select for the types of games I enjoy.

For example, Gen Con, presuming it's at least broadly the same as it was in 2019, is one huge convention that has many, many smaller conventions within it. Someone who doesn't game at all could entertain themselves with movies and crafts projects and other programming items intended for those accompanying gamers who are uninterested in playing games. I would be unaware of how massive the board gaming crowd and programming at Gen Con is if I hadn't been attending with Josh, who is quite happy spending a significant portion of Gen Con playing board and card games. I don't think of Gen Con as a larping convention, but there are enough larps I probably could do an all-larping Gen Con if I wanted to and wasn't picky about the types of larps I played in. As it is, I might well do a larps or three, depending on the offerings.

But let's just limit our focus to rpgs. I'm aware of how huge *D&D* and *Pathfinder* are, but I don't sign up for any of those games. I'll try for *Call of Cthulhu*, but at Gen Con, and despite there being a lot of these, it's always a pleasant surprise when I actually get into one or two CoC games. They're extremely popular. In contrast, back when we did *Origins*, I might be in so many CoC games that I spend over half of the convention in the room set aside for CoC.

I'll get into Gumshoe games of various types. I'll get into *Victoriana* (this was before it shifted to 5e) or *Castle Falkenstein* or *Clockwork: Dominion*. I'll get Josh into a game of *Luther Arkwright* or *Phoenix Dawn Command* or someone's unofficial *RWBY* game using the Pythos system. I'll play *Unknown Armies*, *Over the Edge*, *Grim War*, or *Swashbucklers of the 7 Skies*. I may get into a game or two that I've never heard of. I'll try to get into something at Games on Demand, which could be *Fate* or *A Taste for Murder* or *Dread* or *Psi-Run*. I'll look for Powered by the Apocalypse games, anything from *Bluebeard's Bride* to *Masks*. And, in general, I will have a very, very full convention, coming away having seen a very, very different Gen Con than I think you would see if you went. And I'm not sure you'd enjoy my Gen Con anywhere near as much as I did, nor I yours anywhere near as much as I hope you would.

And something quirkier than Gen Con, like *DexLite*, *Dreamation*, or especially, *Metatopia*? If I haven't played at least one game I've never even heard of at those, I'm not trying to. Yet, with all of this, I am aware of... maybe a quarter of what goes on in the rpg field. Maybe. It might be more like 10%. Or 5% or 2%. There is so much more out there than either of us could absorb.

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: re Avram Grumer re Tian Deng: It isn't yet available because it's not been published. We found (at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEpcg0h2SSc> roughly 23 minutes in) that as of November, it's in internal playtesting. Apparently, after getting a lot of feedback, including ours, from the playtesting from 2023, they decided to change the game so that it's no longer about younger people in the gig economy, but instead about extremely competent people on their way to retirement doing "their final 6 gigs" while taking care of the ship's AI, which is failing. I am intrigued.

re me: Yes, I knew that the Foundation trilogy is linked stories rather than a formal "trilogy". re wanting to just turn on a light rather than have a heavier, pricier, battery-draining machine: I'm probably the other way. Part of that is because when I'm reading in bed, I like having the light out and being able to just turn off the tablet and have darkness. Part is that the Paper 7 needs a lot of light. It's probably very good for reading outside on a sunny day. And if there's a very good ceiling light, it works well. It's a good supplement, but it won't be replacing my regular devices.

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

Good: Meeting people, getting to know them, gaming with them, great games, new games, our own games, shopping, learning, connecting, being inspired.

Bad: Dry hotel air, rooms that are too hot or too cold, rising costs, sometimes being in an isolated area with few decent food options, and yes, sometimes, a game is meh or bad.

Weird: Technically, bad, but it hit me as Weird. Back in 1989 or 1990, I went to a convention somewhere in the vicinity of Los Angeles. I forget what it was called. Overall, it was fun. But there was one game...

I showed up with several other players for a game of *Shadowrun*, a new rpg I was very curious about, but which was very expensive (I think \$30). The GM was a no-show (no idea why), but one of the players said, "Hey, I bought this new module for *Shadowrun*. It's *DNA/DOA*. I'll run it for everyone." And we were happy to accept. I think this was a table of 8 players?

We made up characters. I created a shaman aligned with Coyote and sat next to a man who played an elf who really didn't like humans or shamans. OOC, the player said that if the elf had realized my shaman was aligned with Coyote, he'd like her a bit better, and all of this was cool.

We started the mission, and two other players who had created trolls decided to start combat with a group of NPCs who, like the PCs, were clearly breaking in. They were intended as potential allies, and the combat was entirely unnecessary. But as it had been started, the

rest of us sighed and backed up our more belligerent members.

This is when I learned that my choice to build a character without wired reflexes meant that I had to wait quite some time before I got to do anything, and by then, things were just about over. And the mission was clearly a disaster.

Elf: I'm out. Mr. Johnson can hunt me down if he wants.

Me/Coyote Shaman: I'm out too. What is this "hunt us down"? They said they'd pay us a thousand credits just for walking in. We walked in. We are now walking out.

And that was sufficiently satisfying to me that I still remember it, but none of this is what sticks in my head to bump this into Weird.

What bumps it into Weird is that the two men playing the trolls decided, at some point or other, that they were bored, so they took out a cigarette lighter and tried to set the tablecloth on fire.

Fortunately, they utterly failed in this.

The rest of us just sat there staring at them. We did not call hotel security. We did not call convention security or any other convention staff. I think we didn't quite believe what we were seeing.

CURRENT GAMING

- Strixhaven for D&D 5e, run by Stephen Tihor, online.
- Pillars of Sand for Swords of the Serpentine, which we playtested but also want to finish. Hopefully, one more session should do it.
- Fearful Symmetries, a sandbox campaign for Trail of Cthulhu, high magic, running every other week, more or less, online. Currently on hiatus until I finish Pillars of Sand.
- Urban Shadows, 2nd edition, run by me. We're on hiatus due to various other games I've been running.

FINISHED GAMES

- Phoenix Dawn Command, run by Nick Knapp. Note that this is a completely different game than Phoenix Command. The PCs are people who've died and returned to life to fight the Dread, a collection of supernatural crises. It's a mission-centered game with PCs who start on their second of seven lives, and each death makes them stronger and more capable. I may try to write this up broadly.

- Sweet Complex, Shoujo Society, a Good Society game with a high school setting and somewhat different rules for Reputation conditions and desires. I've forgotten a lot of details, but can probably summarize well enough.
- Take the Universe: You Will See the Tears of Time, a Penned to Good Society game that focuses on military(ish) stuff. In Tears of Time, folks were fighting a war in mechs, specifically against other humans in mechs, with some differences in Roles and Backgrounds, as well as for Epistolary, and introducing a floating Military phase. This was a lot of fun, and I'll try to write it up.
- Trials & Tribulations of Avoka Society: A sequel to last year's playtest of Joust With Spirit facilitated by Zelante's player using Avalon Society rules with the Mean Magic variant of the magic rules. We did 2 seasons of this. We might or might not do a third.
- Songs of the Fair Folk: Shared World Fae Courts, a double game of 8 players divided into 2 groups, with some sessions having each group run a separate session and some being a joint session. I don't recall a lot of what happened (and don't know much of what the other group did), but might summarize broadly.
- Agents of the Night, a playtest of the hack of Swords of the Serpentine Josh and I created for Night's Black Agents, tested on The Dubai Reckoning. I might write this up.
- Verve, a playtest of a system created by Nunzio Thron. I don't think I'll write this up as I don't recall a lot of details, and while I was fine with a several sessions playtest, it's really not my jam.
- Take the Universe: Power Is Fleeting; Love Is Eternal: A different setting for Take the Universe, this one leaning into the 1980s fantasy / science fantasy movies like Krull (which I still haven't seen). Lots of fun, and I'll see if I can at least summarize.
- Lady Susan Van Helsing, facilitated by Hayley Gordon. Lady Susan, P.I. is a hack of Good Society. It's a one shot (though in practice, likely to take two sessions) where Lord Walnut has been murdered, and Lady Susan is hired by the deceased's law firm to discretely determine who committed the murder and what to do about it. Lady Susan Van Helsing is much the same, except that Lady Susan will also determine whether there are any vampires about. This ran two sessions, and I may try to summarize.

BUGBEARS & BALLYHOO #45

December 19, 2025, for Ever & Anon #7

Gabriel Roark

Rancho Cordova, CA

gabrielroark@gmail.com

Happy December! The Cho has been socked in with fog for the last four weeks & we only just had brief intervals of sunlight on December 17 & 18. Rain commenced today & is forecast to last about a week.

My elbow healed well from the skating injury, thanks. I did that back in September & was back on the ice the following weekend. Healing took about three weeks. Celeste & I started a 13-week group skating class (Pre-Alpha level) at our rink in November. Around two weeks ago, we all earned skill ribbons in forward swizzles, two-foot glide & dip, & scooter pushes. That leaves the one-foot glide & backward swizzles. We are also working on some Alpha-level elements. We're having a ton of fun.

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Comments on E&A #6

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Twisting the Rope #6 (Corcoran): A Midleton Distillery tour? Stop! That is on my bucket list if I can ever get across the Pond. Happy birthday to your mother!

Your remarks about data centers started on a welcoming hopeful note (the tide turning against a greedy Gold Rush of mad-dash development) only to be dashed when I read

an email from an attorney tipping me off to an attempt to permit a data center supported by 300 megawatts of natural gas-fired backup generators (better than the usual diesel fare, at least) without going through California Environmental Quality Act review. At least there is legal action against this play to avoid community & environmental responsibility.

Reddened Stars #4 (John): Oooh, the return of Jargon Zen! I've given insufficient time to last month's koan but have a couple of observations to share. First, I've never heard of "the six dusts". What are they? Second, the Buddha returns to a place of light for understanding. The place of light is referenced by this koan as the sunset & moonrise from the vantage of the reader. The koan also implies that sunset & sunrise are occurring at the same time. Therefore, the reader is already in the place of light & understanding can take different forms, even from the same vantage. Leastways, that is what the Full Proof 1792 is telling me.

An Unlooked For Zine #5 (Lisa): Hello. I appreciate the tip on the campsite & caving games. LOL about Dracula's participation in psychoanalysis.

Quasipseudoludognostication #6 (Riley): Troika as smooth peanut butter mixed with mealworms & sprinkled with tajin is a fair description whether one enjoys the game or not. Thanks for the One-Page Summary for *Wildcards Roleplaying System*.

Going to be Ad-Libbed #4 (Avram): Thanks for the DCC information.

De Ludis Elficis Fictis (Pum): Hope you had fun at GridCon & didn't have to sleep in the Taunton's belly! Your remarks about my comments to Mitch on overland travel in D&D-type games were timely, helping keep applicable variables fresh in my mind during our last session of AD&D.

Bumbling Through Dungeons #6 (Wilson): I am so very happy for your new employment. Way to go! Great pics of you and Barrowman. He looks like a good sport!

The Dragon's Beard #91 (Zoch): Regarding "The Conflict of Gold and Experience", you & your table are spot-on about most details, but I think that the cascading effect that you describe on page 3 of your zine is the result of referee error. In AD&D, when PCs acquire magic items on an adventure & then return to a safe locale, they must decide the disposition of magic items *before* the referee awards XP. PCs may elect to keep one or more magic items for use & gain the XP value of the item(s), or they may sell one or more items for the GP value (and full XP value). The first approach garners the PC less XP because they also get the advantages of using the magic item or items. The second approach results in more cash & XP to the seller because they forfeit the benefits of the item(s). What a PCs can't do is hang onto the magic item(s), get the lesser XP value, then decide to sell it/them & also get the cash value & corresponding XP—that is double-dipping &, as you noted, creates more problems for the game. It also prolongs the meta (hm, sounds like a Cake album title: *Prolonging the Meta*). Consider page 85 of the *Dungeon Masters Guide*, "All items (including magic) or creatures sold for gold pieces *prior to the awarding of experience points* for an adventure must be considered as

treasure taken, and the gold pieces received for the sale add to the total treasure taken. (Those magic items not sold gain only a relatively small amount of experience points, for their value is in their usage.)” (emphasis added)

Thanks for the rundown on DCC. I did enjoy the one time that I played in a character funnel adventure. We didn’t level up the PCs cos it was a one-shot, hence my knowledge gap on the Level 0–1 transition.

Accidental Recall #5 (Joshua): I adore Lagavulin 16—proper smoke bomb, that! If you like smokey whiskey, you might look for Shinobu lightly peated whisky. It is a product of Japan, although it is a blend of Japanese & Scottish whiskies (the bottle doesn’t identify it as “Japanese Whisky”, so it has some whisky from outside Japan in the bottle. Scotch aged in ex-Bourbon casks is the most likely candidate, owing to the light color. It imparts a mellow peat & smoke on the palate, so it could function as a gateway for hesitant whiskey drinkers to the heavy hitters of Islay.

IGTHEME: THE DUMBEST/SILLIEST/CRAZIEST THINGS THE PLAYERS EVER DID

In the Before Times, I ran an Arduin Grimoire campaign at one of Sacramento’s game stores. Several sessions into the campaign, a young (19–20 years) couple asked to join our game. One of them wanted to play a pink dragon hatchling named Jewel, who could fly & breathe fire. Jewel’s player opined, after a few sessions of play, that her PC was broken (too powerful). I didn’t think so & it became apparent that perhaps Jewel’s power level was not the thing that was broken...

It started with the Red Solstice in the Kingdom of Arduin. The PCs left off their latest excursion in nearby Stonehell Dungeon (years ago a prison) to weather the Solstice in relatively greater safety in their adopted hometown of Pavane. The Red Solstice occurs every fifth summer solstice in Arduin. None of the moons are visible on this day & the sky turns blood red from dusk till the next day’s dawn. Much worse than this atmospheric aberration, all Arduin’s nexus gates open during this interval. (see *The Arduin Trilogy*, page 438.) The opened nexus gates permit (some would argue encourage) beings & phenomena from other worlds & universes to travel to Arduin. Frequently, insalubrious entities make the trip & wreak no little havoc. Pavane was not excepted from this trend.

The party’s wizard, Conor McGill, owned a wood-frame building in town that served as his residence & place of business, McGill’s Illuminaries. The PCs had volunteered to patrol Pavane’s streets with the militia. McGill happened to be on the other side of town when crashing & thumping sounds emanated from McGill’s Illuminaries. Jewel, her adoptive brother Jace, & some others were near McGill’s, though, & went to investigate. Jewel investigated the noises coming from the ground-floor storeroom & found that three airsharks had gated into the shop. Sharks shouldn’t fly & make terrible customers, Jewel thought, so she let them have it with her breath weapon before anybody could caution her. Jewel simply assumed that airsharks flew magically, although the wiser members of the party could have advised her that airsharks are natural creatures that happen to have bladder-like organs filled with helium. Jewel’s “broken” breath weapon killed one of the sharks, exploding it & creating a chain reaction with the others. Although the

explosions & resulting fireballs were brief, their power was sufficient to blow out the windows, one corner of the building, & ignited the flammable materials in the storeroom. It was an expensive night for poor McGill.

XP TALLY FOR THE TOEE CAMPAIGN

The XP tally for the Frog Leg Gang at the end of Session 15/start of Session 16:

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

SESSION 16 GOODMONTH 6 – 21 (9/22/2024)

The session began on the morning of Goodmonth 6. Omar scouted out Jubal's estate in Verbobonc (VBB), capital of the Viscounty of Verbobonc. It was a walled compound with five crossbowmen on the wall at any given time. There was a barrack inside the walls. All personnel seemed humanoid, probably mainly human. Omar saw at least 40 troops in the compound. There was one striking figure.

New Moon asked around town about Jubal. Jubal seemed to be a “mayor” of sorts. He learned of three major powers in VBB: the viscount, who keeps the law & defends the town, the Thieves’ guild, who is at odds with Jubal’s gang. Jubal is involved in the slave trade & smuggling. Jubal is more violent & the thieves’ guild is more low-key. The guild & Jubal fight over smuggling. Jubal’s racketeering makes smuggling less lucrative. Jubal is a very tall, well-built, black-skinned man. The viscount is the most powerful faction, but he allows the other two factions to exist to balance each other out. The temples (particularly the Cuthbertines) are also powers, but do not seek out political influence. New Moon cast *detect magic* on the items Ekim stole from Lakmed the alchemist. Only the “potion of diminution” registered as magical.

Ekim learned from the thieves’ guild that Jubal has about 80 men at his command & that about 50 are at his compound at any given time. Lady Raven discovered that there are three powers in ToEE: luz, Zuggtmoy, & Lolth. She also discovered that the forces of good razed the ToEE grounds & put a magical seal on it, trapping Zuggtmoy in the Temple.

New Moon, Lady Raven, Ttam, Omar, John, & Sonja attended an audience with Wilfrick, the viscount. They brought a silver necklace & two horses as a gift for their liege lord. Omar brings Lareth’s pendant as evidence of the cult we took out. Wilfrick gave the Frog Leg Gang permission to look for laborers to repair the moat house & was appreciative of them clearing out Lareth’s cult but made it clear that he did not want the party causing a ruckus in VBB. He specifically wants the Frog Leg Gang stabilizing & protecting Hommlet while the fortifications are being built.

The PCs hired a team of 10 laborers & a mason to quarry the stone over a month to repair the moat house & an engineer to manage the construction. The total cost was estimated at 2373.5 GP. The laborers traveled with the PCs on the way back to Hommlet, & the engineer/architect agreed to come out in about a month. Ttam volunteered to pay the laborers’ first month’s wages (113 GP).

SESSION 17 GOODMONTH 21 - HARVESTER 3 (10/5/2024)

The session began with the party traveling back to Hommlet in the pouring rain. On the first night, a patrol came across the party & shared camp for the night. On the second day, Ttam & Ekim rode outrider, keeping a lookout for bandits. At the end of the day, they camped at the same spot that they left the road for Serten’s Tomb. In the morning, Fern, the Atugars, & Sonja left to see if they could find the plate mail that Jack left behind at Serten’s Tomb. The tomb was unsealed & the plate where it was left. Omar took it. It was late at night when they got back to camp.

On Goodmonth 24, there was a gale force wind & the party hunkered down all day. That night, the patrol (led by Gerdas) came by again. It took the PCs three days to arrive in Hommlet. The party secured lodging at the inn. Ttam decided to rent the common room at the inn for the laborers. Jack asked the trader Rannos Davl about how much a set of mason’s tools would be.

The next day (Harvester 1) the Froggers shopped for supplies & got the laborers oriented. On Harvester 2, they traveled from Hommlet further down the unused road toward a spot that is marked on the party's map, "evil lurks here." As the party traveled, Gobi spotted a cave by the Gnarley Woods.

The PCs climbed a steep slope to the cave mouth. The entrance was 7 feet wide. There were large tracks (at least as big as a large cat) leading to & from the cave. Gobi unsuccessfully snuck in because of piles of bones in the passageway. Fern sent in his rats to scout & they reported that there is big danger inside as the party at the entrance heard a screech from the cave. Fern cast *barkskin* on Sonja as Ttam & Ekim readied their bows & Sonja readied her sword. Between Ttam's arrow & Sonja's charge, the owlbear was quickly put down. Ttam found a ring in the debris & the party returned to their horses at the bottom of the slope & made camp.

On Harvester 3, the Froggers made it to Nulb without incident. Fern cast *detect magic* on the ring Ttam found & discovered that it was moderately magical. In Nulb, Baldric began paying off his debt to Mother Skreng. She said that Y'dey passed through town a few months back but quickly moved on. She said Y'Dey was investigating evil in the ToEE.

The party took the south road towards the ToEE. As they got closer, the vegetation became mutated & twisted or dead. About 3 pm the PCs found a wall covered in vegetation with the ToEE visible behind it. They located a gate in the wall & checked it for traps, but did not find anything.

SESSION 18 HARVESTER 3 (11/1 2024)

The party walked up to the ToEE. It took 5 minutes to walk across the courtyard to the southern door. Gobi & Ekim checked the stairs at the entrance of the temple for traps. There were strange glowing runes on the doors. Ekim & Gobi were disturbed by the runes & could not approach the doors. New Moon was able to examine & translate the runes. They said:

Regeneration Antipathy

Warning

Demonic/Demon power

Private Thrall/Prisoner

Earth Sulfur/Infernal

Key

Death

Opposition/opposed Fear

2x Evil/Evil Pursuer

Possession

Danger/Dangerous/Deadly

Darkness 3x Protection

Iron

Ward V. Death

Warning

Antipathy

The party was then approached by a human monk named Ko To Taz (played by Trevor). He said that he was here to oppose & destroy the ToEE. New Moon spent some time studying the runed doors. Ekim & Gobi inspected the doors to the east & west. There were no traps, but the doors were solid & barred from the inside. The PCs scouted around the ToEE to see if there were any other entrances or things of note. They spied a tower surrounded by rubble that had a group of black birds on top. At this point Trevor reread the prophetic poem, and we noted that the Hart, the Moon, & the Crowns represent kingdoms & the four boxes where the “rocks” were put when the key was broken (and never found) need to be found (maybe in the kingdoms?).

The Froggers decided to investigate the tower in the rubble. Ekim found no traps, but the crows cried out to Ttam (who can speak to woodland creatures) “Intruder, go away!” They seemed to be giant ravens & being on the tower seemed to make them small through some enchantment. Lady Raven befriended them & they tell Ekim that there are mean “two legs” that are “human size” in the tower. When Taz climbed the tower, he also appeared smaller. The PCs decided to clear the tower, so they set offensive positions & Taz broke the chains & bar holding the door shut. Taz immediately got shot by a crossbow before ducking to the side. Amelie cast *spiritual hammer* & attacked the visible spearmen. Gobi successfully cast a *phantasmal force* mud pit under the feet of 7 spearmen & then Ttam & Ekim shot arrows at the incapacitated soldiers.

SESSION 19 HARVESTER 3

During the fight, a rock trap activated & crushed the remaining spearmen. Gobi dismissed his spell & the party entered the tower. A group of brigands nervously waited behind a table at the end of the room. After Gobi & Ekim slit the throats of the magically *slept* men on the stairs, the remaining brigands behind the table surrendered.

Malus Minn, one of the brigands, explained that their boss, Issek, had already run to her room & the remaining brigands thought she might have a secret escape passage in there. The brigands explained that they bring supplies to a side door of the ToEE regularly & that their next scheduled day to resupply the temple is tomorrow. The party acquires the armor of the brigands & emptied a chest in the dormitory containing a jeweled dagger, bag of electrum, & a bolt of silk. Taz succeeded in picking the lock to Issek’s room. There was a table with some dishes & a bottle, a chest of drawers, a bed heaped with quilts, & a locked iron chest. In the drawers, there was ordinary clothing & items, as well as a cloak & a sword with a topaz in its handle. Gobi successfully picked the lock on the metal

box, avoided a needle trap, & found 1,000 coins of varying denominations. Fern took his rat around the dormitory to look for hidden coins & Jitter (the rat) identified the chest we opened as well as the bodies of the dead brigands.

New Moon, Taz, & Ttam searched Issek's room for a secret passageway. New Moon found a flagstone in the floor with a cleverly disguised pull ring in it. When Taz pulled it up, he found a 3-foot-by-3-foot passageway going straight down with bronze rungs. Fern, Jack, John, Baldric, & Lady Raven stayed in the tower with the horses & brigands, while everyone else went down the passage. There was a bronze coffer & two locked boxes (one bronze & one iron) in a 10-foot-by-10-foot room at the bottom of the stairs. The iron chest contained about 1,000 coins, mainly gold & electrum. The bronze chest contained a mystery vial with empty spaces where two more might be kept. The passageway continued to the northeast, away from the temple. After hauling the boxes up the ladder, the party continued down the passage as it winded for about 300 feet, going slightly upward. The walls shifted from limestone to clay & the tunnel was shored up by timbers. It led to a natural cavern. A concealed door was found on the southeast wall. Gobi scouted the passage ahead of the party. It continued for about 600 feet before turning into a worked 10-foot-wide stone passageway with a room on the east side. It was a 20-foot-by-20-foot room with a green lizard-like creature in it, a basilisk. Gobi determined that is an illusion, but a wall of fire crosses the room. The outer passageway ends after that. As the party discussed what to do about the fire wall, a black pudding dropped down from the ceiling at the end of the hallway. After an intense fight in which several flaming oil flasks were thrown on the pudding, it was defeated & most of the party went to scrape clay off the wall to plug the channel of flaming oil. While they were gone, Issek attacked Sonja & Gobi while she was invisible (presumably using the missing vials from the box.) When her attack failed, she disappeared again & Gobi faintly heard a door open & close. Two twin men approached & caught Sonja in a *hold person* spell. After an intense struggle, the twin mages & the invisible woman retreated. New Moon was caught in the illusory basilisk's spell & turned to stone. Taz explored the rooms behind it, finding a chest & a bedroom full of exotic weapons.

End Sessions 16–19

Those session reports took up a lot of space in this zine & I haven't even worked on comments yet, so we will pick up nextish with Session 20. It looks like the Frog Leg Gang is in desperate need of training money, although maybe my notes & Tim's summaries spaced training that was taken. I'll sort it out eventually.

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 - Level 3 requires 5,501 XP
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1/magic-user 1)

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- **Gobi** (gnome illusionist 1/thief 2)
 - High Dex & Int: +10% XP
 - Total XP: 2,178/2,121
 - I 2/T 3 requires 2,251/2,501 XP
- **Ko To Taz** (spirit folk monk 1)
 - Total XP: 0
 - Level 2 requires 2,251 XP

Nextish

- Comments on E&A #7
- ToEE Play Reports & XP Tally

Wishing everybody a very happy holiday season. Celeste & I will go ice-skating on Christmas Eve Day & celebrate Christmas with my parents, brother, best friend & his family, & some various others. Nollaig shona!

The Estate of False Griffin Point

An OSE adventure for a party of 3rd level characters

by Limli the Librarian

Captain Abram Forge didn't like the pressure the guild was putting on him to move the cargo fast, nor did he understand where the pressure was coming from. He'd sailed up and down the Greybay Coast for years now, starting as a deckhand and settling into a quiet and unassuming life as captain of his own ship. 9 out of 10 of their voyages were between the major ports along the coast: the merchant paradise of Dortelly and the aristocrat-ridden city of Hamptonfrieze to the south. The guild he sailed with had been nice to him in return for the steady, uninterrupted business he provided, and the voyages outside of the Greybay tended to be to locations where he and his crew could indulge for a few days while his ship was in port.

That was why the time crunch imposed on this journey was all the more mysterious. Had he done something wrong to upset someone in the guild, or was he just caught in crossfire between two factions? Normally it wouldn't have been an issue, but with the news of ships along the coast recently...

"Hoist the sails! Make all!" Carter, his second-in-command, had given the orders for them to unfurl the rest of the sails now that they were clear of traffic near the port. "Clear to head to open waters, Abram."

Captain Abram kept his hand on the wheel and scowled, but didn't turn to regard Carter. "Nay, not today. We're stickin' to the strait."

Out of his peripheral vision, Abram clocked Carter's surprise. "What? Abram, you've seen the latest reports. That business near False Griffin Point is still going on. There was word just yesterday that another ship-

"I know about the reports, Carter. I saw them before you. I also know that half of those crews were full of drunkards and fools, we'll be fine as long as we're cautious."

"It's the guild isn't it?"

Abram set his jaw to avoid speaking in haste. His second-in-command had always been insightful for his age. It would serve him well when he left the ship for his own work, captain or otherwise, but Abram didn't want to indulge his habit today. "Makes no difference to you why I make my decisions."

He felt the younger man's gaze hard upon him, and felt it stray to the rest of the crew as the boat began to turn port-side at his touch. The crew all knew what that turn meant, they knew their voyage was taking them inside the shallow waters along the coast and through the strait that ran next to the island of False Griffin Point.

Captain Abram waited until he'd straightened the wheel to look back at Carter. The young man's face was twisted with anger — at who, he couldn't say. There was fear in his eyes too. Fear that neither of them would acknowledge for the sake of their crew.

"Aye, Captain," came the reply.

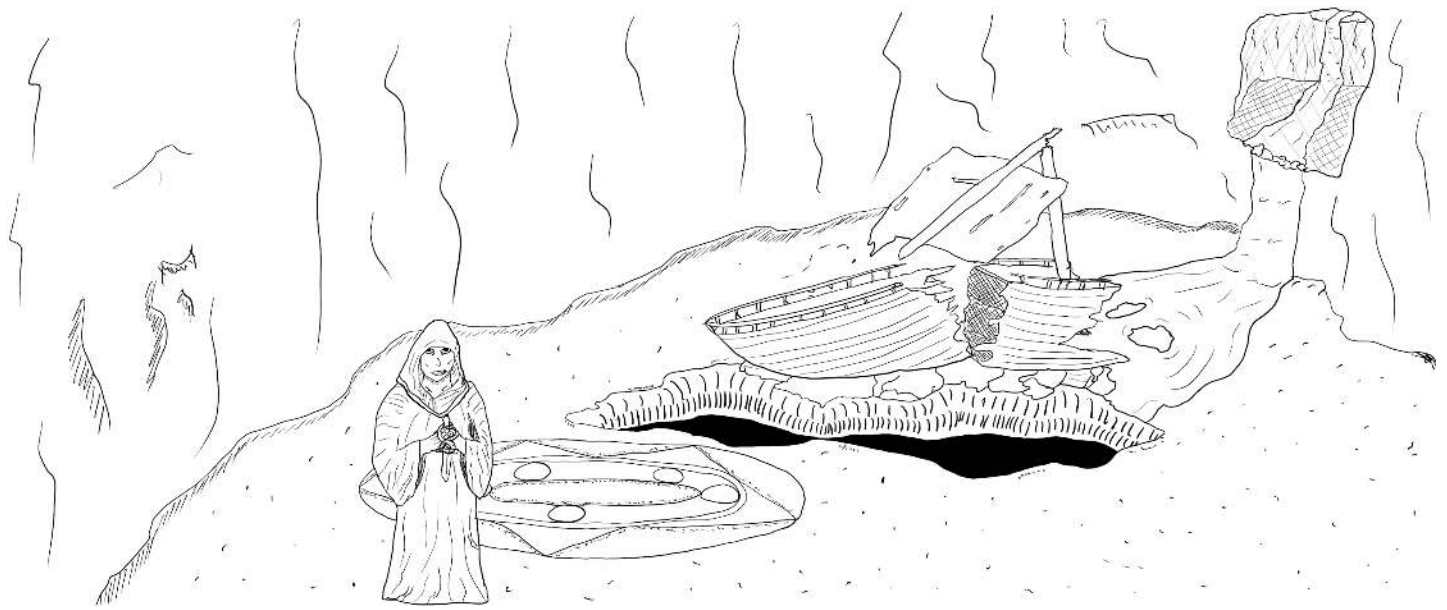
The young man left him, and he was alone with his worries and guesses at their fate.

The Estate of False Griffin Point is a mystery adventure that has the players explore an island estate and its two caretakers, uncover the plot of an isolated cult, and confront the cults in their underground lair. This adventure was designed for Old-School Essentials, but should be easily compatible with most OSR (old school renaissance) systems or your own favorite TTRPG.

Setting Overview

The Estate of False Griffin Point is set on the island of False Griffin Point and the nearby village of Broadwing. The island is about a mile from the village along the Greybay Coast. A giant shoal runs along the stretch of the coast between the major port cities of Dortelly and Hamptonfrieze for many miles out into sea which is partially exposed during low tide. However, a strait of deeper waters runs between the coast and the shoal, and ships commonly use it for transportation.

In recent months, ships have been going missing or found shipwrecked with no survivors, often while passing close to False Griffin Point. The news has spread, and ships that would normally take the quicker journey through the strait have begun taking the long way around through the open sea. This has begun to interfere with trade, so the guild in Dortelly has sent the adventurers down to investigate. They are tasked with



either eliminating the threat to the ships, or proving that there is no danger outside of drunk or runaway captains.

The Town of Broadwing

Located 150 miles north of Hamptonfrieze and 250 miles south of Dortelly, the town of Broadwing is a smaller village on the coast consisting primarily of farmers and ranchers. A dock sees irregular traffic for fishboats, but the shallow waters prevent the larger ships using the channel from stopping often. When they do stop, they're forced to use smaller boats to ferry goods back and forth from the village.

The townsfolk are a mix of humans and demi-humans, and are welcoming enough. They haven't paid much attention to the ships that have gone missing, aside from a few younger folk who have been on the hunt for washed up treasure. If asked about the island, they will mention the caretakers who stop by about once a month for supplies, mostly the younger caretaker, Matilde, now that Lenny has gotten on in years.

The Hiram Estate

False Griffin Point is home to a large estate belonging to the Hiram family. In years past, the estate was a vacationing home and place of grand parties for the family. Now, there are no known members of the Hiram family and so the estate sits empty. Mostly.

The family maintained a trust which employed staff permanently stationed on the island which is still in effect. The people in Broadwing are aware of two

caretakers currently in charge of the estate who occasionally make their way into town by rowboat for supplies. Currently, Lenny maintains the trust.

Lenny McGaskins

The older caretaker, a human male, now 78. He's worked for the estate for nearly his whole life, including when it was still being regularly used for parties and events by the family. He was in his early forties when the final member of the Hiram family disappeared, but has dutifully maintained the grounds ever since.

Lenny has a *very* strong sense of duty, and will not abandon the estate unless asked to by a member of the Hiram family. He is willing to show the adventurers around the estate to investigate, but will not tolerate their presence for more than a day. He will protect the secrets of the estate with his life, and will go so far as to attempt to kill the adventurers if they learn too much, though he is not a very capable murderer.

Matilde Speaking

Matilde is the younger of the two caretakers at only 56. She is perhaps not quite as duty-bound to her job, but she enjoys the paycheck enough to not make any waves despite the activity going on in the estate. She was hired after the last public member of the Hiram family was gone, and so her only reference point is what Lenny tells her. She aspires to save up enough money to send her sons (now adults) to the mages' college.

New Management at Hiram Estate

Recently, a claimant to the family has reappeared with sufficient documentation to please the caretakers. They wish for their activities to be kept quiet from the public eye, and so have descended into secret depths of the family crypts.

Forsythe Hiram

Forsythe Hiram (formerly Forsythe Ametti) is a young man in his late 20s with genuine connections to the Hiram Estate. He has previously been heavily involved in cultish activities, but was seeking a place of refuge to practice and grow his cult away from the prying eyes of authorities and townsfolk. When he investigated his family history, he learned of the connections to the Hiram family, renounced his Ametti family name, and took the moniker of Forsythe Hiram. His documentation was sufficient for Lenny McGaskins to believe him, and the caretaker swore fealty to him.

Cult of Mogus

Forsythe Hiram belongs to the Cult of Mogus, the Old God of Angry Tides. Mogus is a twin deity to Bilgus, whom the Hiram family more broadly has worshipped for many years as the God of Safe Sea Passage. The Hiram family crypts are littered with the iconography of Bilgus, and Forsythe finds some ironic satisfaction in reappropriating the space for his cultish lair.

The cult has the goal of summoning an avatar of Mogus into the material plane so it can wreak destruction upon the sailor merchants, who they believe are no more than profiteers seeking their own enrichment. So far, they have summoned many lesser creatures of Mogus, and are preparing for a larger ritual to summon an avatar.

Disappearing Ships

Forsythe and his cult are responsible for the disappearance of the ships that have been passing by the island. Deep in the underground lair is an enormous underground pool connected to the strait that passes by the island. Normally, the pool is kept drained, but floodgates can be opened to suck millions of gallons of water into the underground cavern. This creates a sudden current that ships close enough to the island are unable to fight against, and they are pulled down into the lair.

Usually, the ships are severely damaged in the process, but most of the crew survive. The surviving members are then used as part of the cultish rituals.

The Adventure

The adventurers start in the town of Broadwing without a means of transportation to False Griffin Point. The townsfolk are friendly to them, but they aren't themselves interested in investigating the island.

Broadwing

The older folk will remember back when the Hiram family still held parties on the island, and will complain about the rich folk that used to show up in town before. Though they might harbor some resentment towards the Hiram family, they don't mind the caretakers. The younger folks of Broadwing will be curious about the recent events surrounding the island, but it will take some convincing for the adventurers to take them along to the island.

As the players interact with NPCs around town, they might hear rumors about the island or the recent news about the strait.

d8	Rumors
1	The Hiram estate is littered with booby traps maintained by the caretakers — partially true. Most of the estate is safe, but there are mostly benign traps in the manor and the large trap used to abduct ships.
2	The Hiram family never died, they just left to get away from gambling debts — mostly false. No one knows for sure what happened to the Hiram family, but none of it had anything to do with a gambling problem.
3	False Griffin Point is haunted by ghosts, and something has spooked them into action — partially true. There is a benign trap in the manor which seems ghostly, and there are strange circumstances surrounding the cult.
4	The caretakers are caring for more than just themselves on the island now. They might be harboring a stowaway or one of their own family — true. The caretakers are helping out the cultists now.
5	There is still a living member of the Hiram

family and they will soon present themselves to take over the estate — partially true. Forsythe Hiram already controls the estate and has no intention of presenting himself to the public.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 6 | The fake griffins of False Griffin Point have returned and are causing the shipwrecks and disappearances — false. |
| 7 | There's something magic that's causing the ships to disappear — true. It's the cult. |
| 8 | Lenny the caretaker would do anything to have the Hiram family return — true. He was all too willing to believe the documentation Forsythe presented him so he could work for the family again. |

Inn — The Beaked Sea Lion

The Beaked Sea Lion is a frequent hangout spot of the locals. Grom the innkeeper serves the best food in town, so people often stop by after work for a bite to eat. The inn has a communal room that the adventurers can stay in.

Business District

Most standard seafaring items are available for purchase in Broadwing, as well as the usual assortment of torches and lanterns. There is a blacksmith, but they don't stock any weapons, and commissioning a piece will cost extra and take time.

The carpenter also sells trinkets and lesser-used items on behalf of the townspeople, and carries a magical *lantern of shadows* for 200 gp the adventurers may be interested in. The lantern subtly darkens shadows, turning dim lighting into darkness around the bearer, which gives a +3 on stealth checks to whoever carries it. It does not need to be replenished.

Boathouse and the Docks

An old sailor by the name of Creminy Bragg runs the boathouse to maintain and repair boats. He has a rowboat for hire for 5 gp for the day, but will warn the adventurers against taking it to the island on account of the strong tides.

Creminy doesn't do any sailing himself anymore, but he can tell the players who all the boats belong to so they can find a fisherman or someone with a sailboat to take them across. The sailors will ask for 50 gp to take the adventurers across, but they can be talked down to 20 gp.

Getting to the island

The currents can be strong in the strait, especially around False Griffin Point. If the adventurers take a rowboat, it will take $(1d4+2)*10$ minutes to row across with two people rowing. Each person rowing must save against poison or become exhausted until the next long rest (-2 penalty to attacks, damage, and AC).

A sailboat can cross the strait in 10 minutes.

If anybody pays special attention to the currents, they will notice they flow strangely around the island's eastern side.

False Griffin Point

The island name comes from centuries ago, before even the Hiram's presence on it. There used to be a flock of creatures that would roost on the island that were large and winged, like Griffins. For many years, they kept anyone from approaching the island for fear of being attacked, but when someone finally did work up the courage to sail over, they realized the creatures weren't griffins at all. Today, no one remembers what the creatures actually were, all they remember is that they weren't griffins, and so the island keeps its name.

Arriving at the Island

When the players arrive at the island they will see Lenny watching from atop the path that leads from the boathouse to the walled estate. By the time the players dock, he will have left to attend to other matters, but he will have sent Matilde down to the boathouse to greet them. Matilde will mention how they're not used to visitors on the island, and that she and Lenny aren't prepared to entertain any guests. To avoid drawing more attention, Lenny will allow the adventurers to take a casual look around the estate, so long as they don't go digging up any private family affairs.

Matilde will accompany the group up the path on the hill that climbs the 50 feet to the estate grounds. She is happy to show them around, but agrees to leave the group alone as long as they agree to not damage any property.

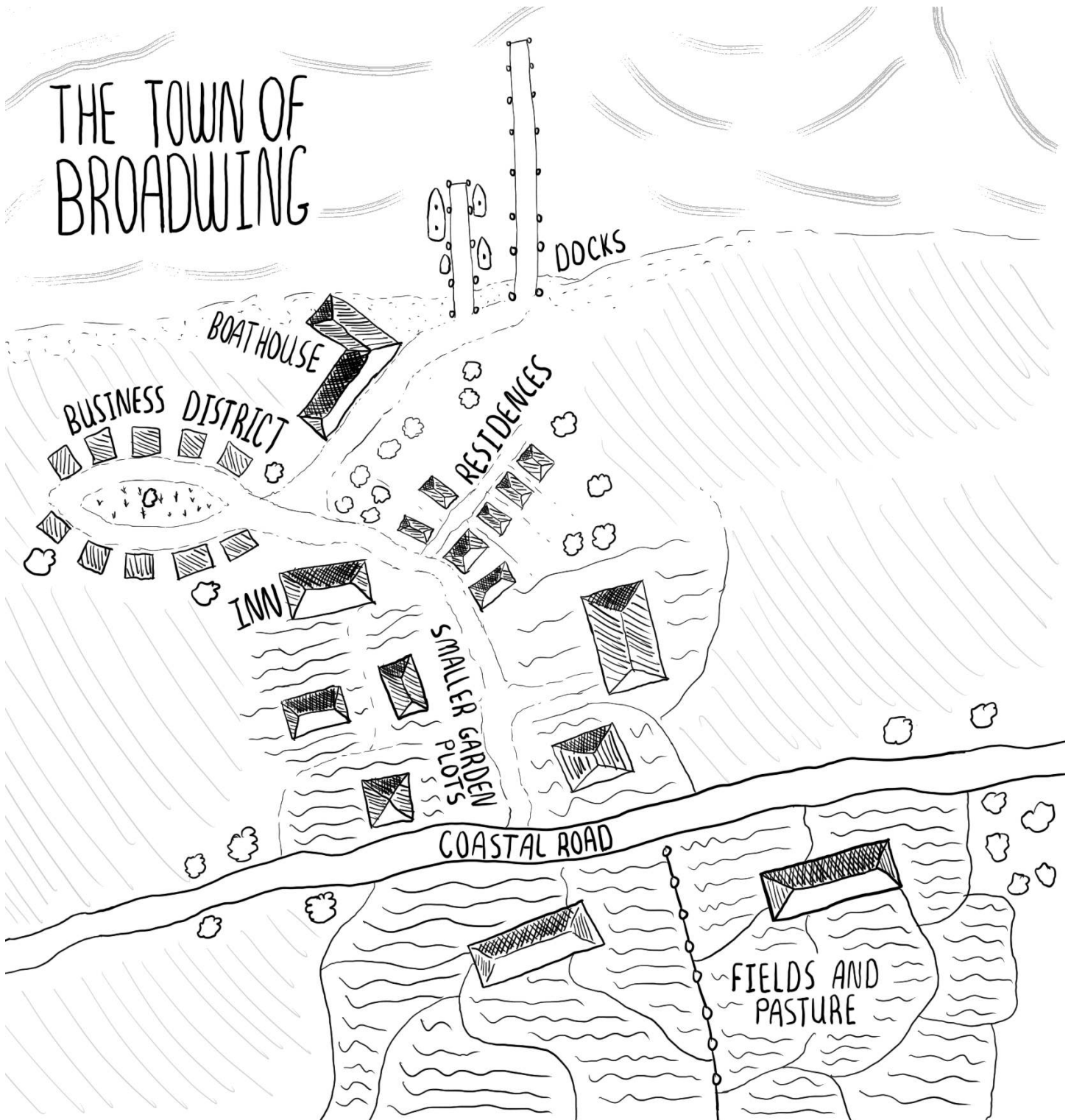
At some point, Lenny will appear to the group and will introduce himself gruffly. He will make it clear that he doesn't like the visitors being there, and that he would rather have the estate grounds clear of anyone who might mess with his caretaking. He will stop short

of asking the visitors to immediately leave, but makes it clear that they have to be gone by evening.

Exploring the Manor

Note that all the rooms on the second floor of the manor are locked, as well as the guest bedrooms on the first floor. Lenny and Matilde both carry a ring of keys around with them which unlock most of the doors to the estate (except for the boathouse door (2), which

requires the key from the library closet (20)). A backup ring of keys can be found in the caretaker's house. If either of the caretakers notice their keys missing, they will confront the adventurers about it. Lenny will either send Matilde off to Broadwing to get the authorities, or will try to murder the adventurers himself through traps and surprise, whichever he thinks is more prudent depending on how much the adventurers have



uncovered. He's old and isn't an adventurer himself, so he will avoid direct combat.

1. The Boathouse

Water laps against the inside of this old boathouse. The wood has been patched in several places where barnacles have damaged it and the sea has eaten through, but mostly the wood is dark and ancient. A small sailboat is docked next to a rowboat.

A secret door is hidden in the eastern wall, visible upon inspection of the boathouse. Once spotted, a keyhole is visible. The matching key is found upstairs in the library closet in **20**.

2. Boathouse Secret Room

A secret room cluttered mostly with supplies for boat repair. A table contains some loose papers and a plain wooden box. Inside the box, is a signet ring which can be used to open the secret entrance in **3**.

3. Old Chapel

An old stone chapel kept in fine condition and well-cleaned. A couple rows of pews fill out the open space by the entrance. Further in is a small stage with a dais. Religious iconography lines the dais beside candles and a section in the middle has been hollowed out forming a small indentation shaped like a signet.

The religious imagery is associated with Bilgus, the God of Safe Sea Passage.

The impression in the center of the dais responds to an associated signet ring placed into it. When a matching ring is inserted, the dais will magically slide away revealing a passage into the dungeon beneath. The rings can be found in **2** and **22**. This will open up the passage to **24**.

4. Chapel Library

A small library containing books on philosophy and religion, including many on Bilgus. The door to the library is locked, but the lock is simple and easy to pick. A key for it can be found in **23**, **21**, or **19**.

5. Chapel Office

An office with notes primarily on the running of the estate. Close inspection will reveal that there has

been a significant uptick in expenditures recently that fall under the category "repairs and miscellany".

6. Chapel Storage

A storage room full of cobwebs and dust. Doesn't seem to have been touched for many years. Close inspection will reveal an ornate chalice buried behind some boxes. It is a cursed *Chalice of Grime* which rapidly accumulates dust and cobwebs in the room it is kept in.

7. Caretaker's House

A modest house that Lenny and Matilde live in. The first floor contains a kitchen/dining area and a living area which has a few scattered books lying around. A large hearth sits in the north-east corner of the room near the stairway.

The caretakers will accompany the adventurers through their house if they wish to investigate it, but will flatly refuse to allow them unaccompanied observation. The two of them will begin locking the door behind them and Lenny will send Matilde to Broadwing to hail the authorities if the adventurers press the issue.

8. Entrance Hall

The mansion is grand and extravagant. Here in the entrance hall, decorative stone columns line the corners supporting a tall ceiling that stretches into the second floor. Stone friezes run from pillar to pillar around the ceiling depicting sea creatures amongst waves and sailing ships.

Dark wood fills the space between the walls, itself adorned with large portraiture depicting stoic men and women. A large patterned rug leads from the entrance into rooms beyond.

The entrance hallway sets the tone of grandeur that will continue throughout the rest of the mansion. A mixture of mundane and some magical lighting fills this and the other spaces intended for guests. Everything is kept assiduously cleaned.

9. Living Room

Complete with fireplace, a small bookshelf, plenty of seating, and a liquor cabinet. Most of the liquor is very old, but there are a few more recent bottles.

10. Dining Room

Featuring a large table, more art, and a harpsichord.

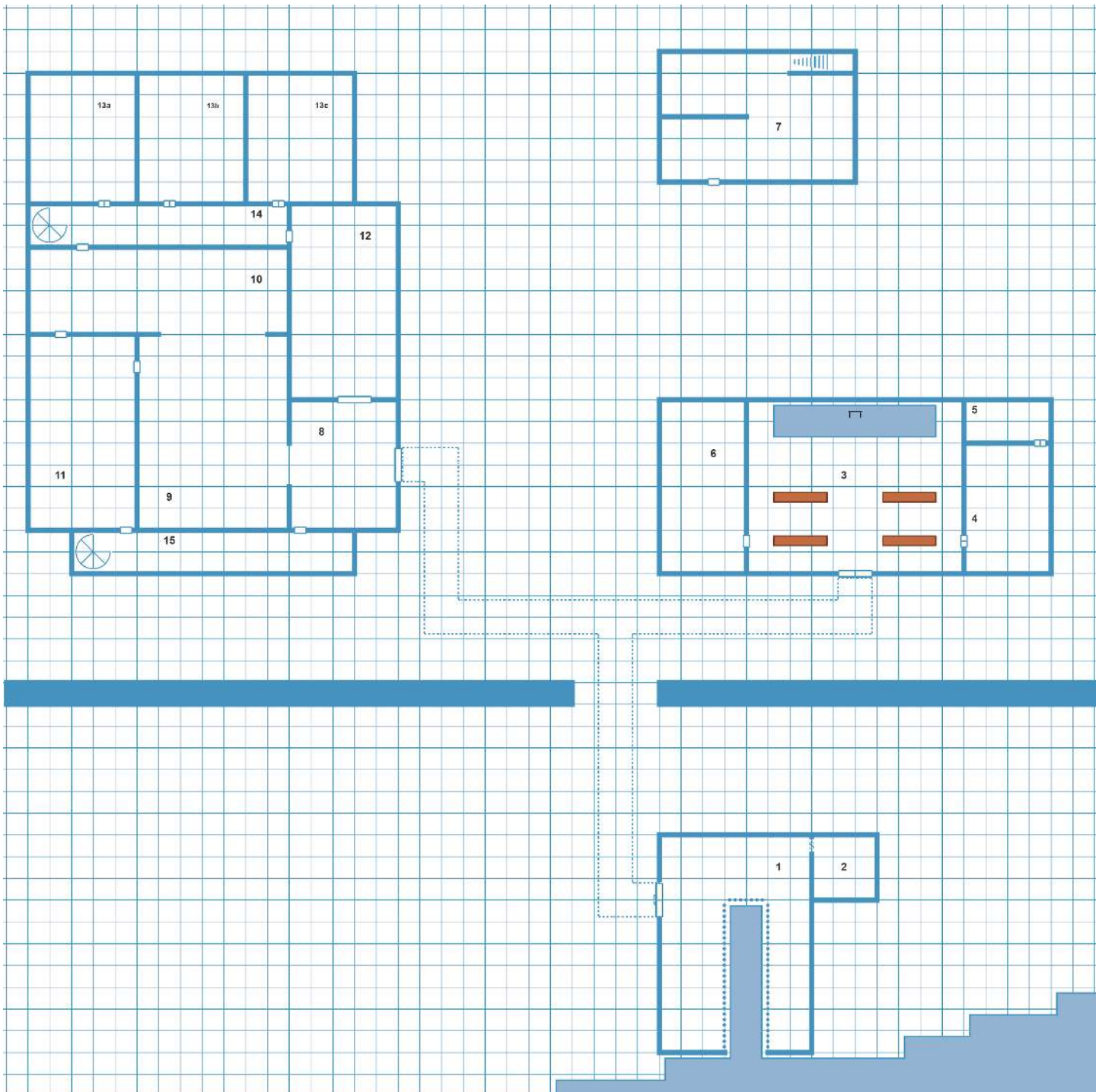
11. Kitchen

The kitchen has plenty of kitchen implements, but not much food. However, investigation by the adventurers will show a large supply of flour, and remnants of recent baking in the oven. The caretakers won't mention anything about it, but if questioned will lie and say that they have been using the kitchen in the

mansion sometimes instead of the one in their house. In reality, they are baking bread for the cultists.

12. Library

The large library is kept just as clean as the rest of the house. A tall bookcase with a ladder lines the western wall, filled with tomes on everything from history and math to fiction and navigational charts. A large fireplace sits along the wall opposite the bookcase with the remnants of burned logs.



d6 Book

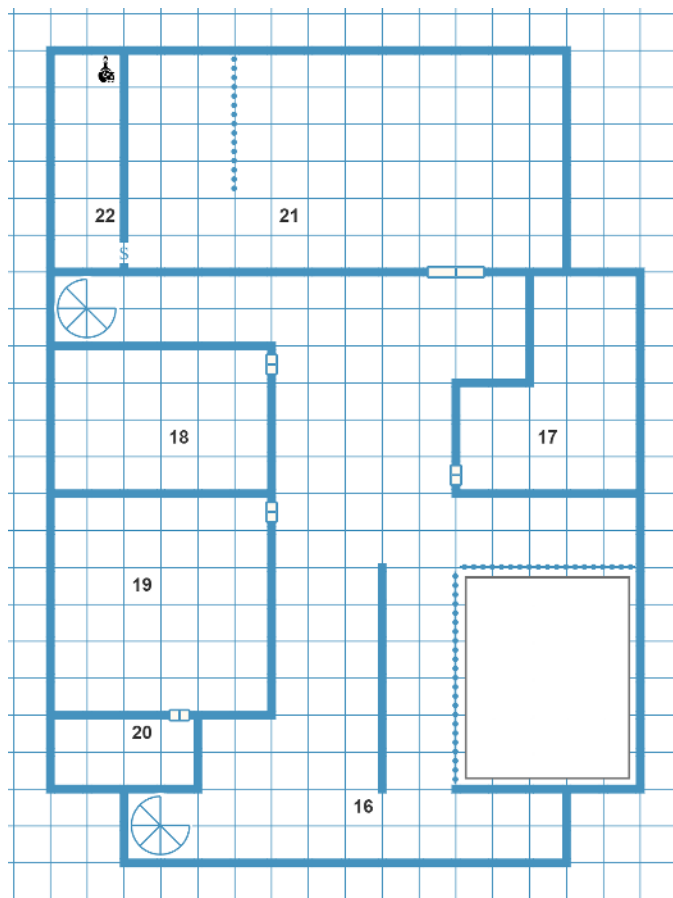
- ### 13. Guest Bedrooms

The rooms are occasionally used by cultists if they have been up using the house for the library, or more rarely, if they are entertaining guests. If the bedrooms are closely investigated, the adventurers can find evidence of their recent use.

- a) Fallen down a crack in the floorboards by the desk is the scrap of a note which reads “Mogus”.
- b) A bit of sailcloth is in a nightstand drawer.
- c) Underneath a neatly-folded set of extra bedding is a wad of dirty clothes encrusted with salt and a dagger (one of the sacrificial daggers the cultists wield).

Adorned with a few paintings of island seascapes and magical gold sconces which automatically dim in the evening. A staircase leads up to the second floor.

Portraits and statues line this hallway in a curated gallery which continues the rich decoration of the entryway. The stonework along the walls also continues down the hallway, and there is a large bas relief mural depicting pastoral island life and ships fighting against a raging sea. A staircase leads up to the second floor.



16. Upper Floor Art Gallery

More artwork dominates the open area on the second floor. Paintings and shelves with vases and gold-inlaid boxes line every wall. By the southern stairs is a large combination statue and fountain, clearly magically enchanted. Spheres and shapes are depicted in abstract balanced atop impossibly thin arches of marble, and water hovers in spheres and stopped mid-descent cascading off the top features.

A balcony looks down at the second floor ringed by a marble balustrade. A wall behind the railing showcases the most striking paintings yet. Dark sea storms rage and capsize ships. One in particular depicts a terrified crew aboard a ship running from a dark figure towering above them in the water, only visible in outline as some monstrous biped.

The dark paintings along the wall by the balcony are clearly different thematically from those in the rest of the manor. Close investigation reveals faint sunbleaching and nail hole repairs, suggesting these paintings are a more recent addition.

17. Guest Suite and Storage Room

Behind a locked door, what was once a guest suite has been turned into a storage room. Furniture is packed into the room, making it difficult to navigate. Also present are the paintings that have been displaced from the wall by the gallery.

18. Game Room

This room is filled with several large tables with chess boards and other strategy games. In the center is the largest table which hosts a wargame and long mallets used to push pieces around. Several dice made of some dense bone are scattered about.

The walls are lined with maps and atlases of the kingdom and known world. They seem to be from various ages, and most contain incomplete information about what lies beyond the borders of the kingdom.

The wargame in the center of the room is an *Enchanted Wargaming Set* which can be played with only one player. If the players push the pieces around on the board, then the opposite team will respond. Such a set would fetch a pretty penny to the right buyer.

19. Private Study

Several smaller bookcases line the shelves of this room, along with a great many notes written in shorthand. The notes also contain tracings of maps, especially of the sea around False Griffin Point, and arrows point to the east side of the island.

In the southern corner of the room is a large door with a combination lock on it.

The shorthand for the notes is difficult to impossible to interpret for those unfamiliar with shorthand. A scribe or someone similar would be able to describe them. The notes talk about the best way to lure ships towards the island, how affected by currents various boats are, as well as estimates of how many people are likely to be on board different kinds of vessels.

The combination lock on the door was added by Lenny.

20. Library Closet

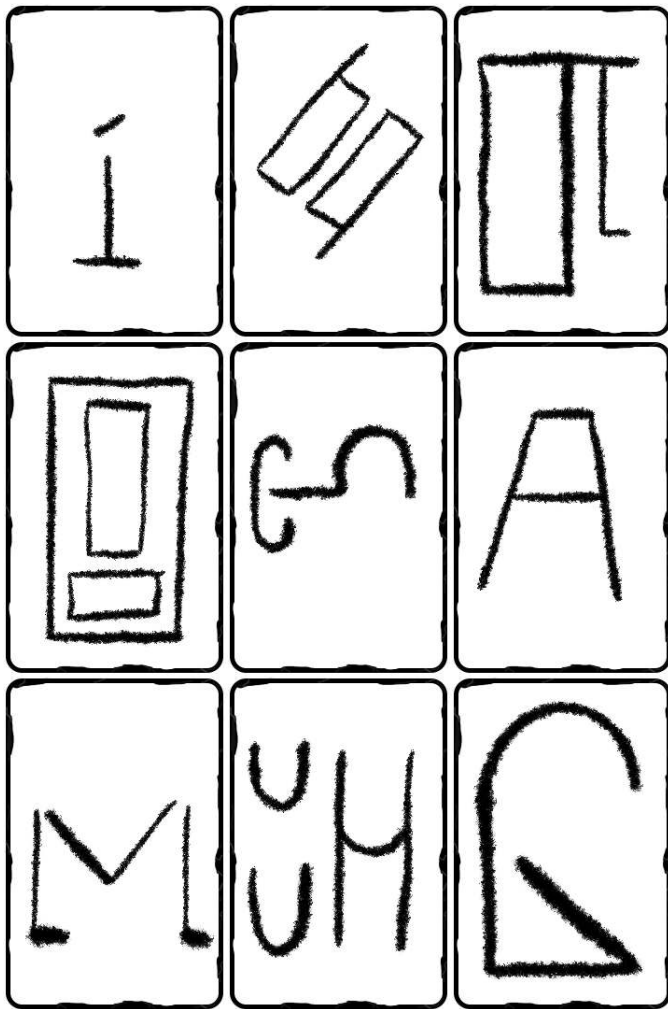
This room contains a bookshelf full of rare and collectable books, as well as a filing cabinet full of the estate's finances. Inspecting the filing cabinet will reveal the estate is worth close to a million gold pieces, plus the value of the property on False Griffin Point itself. Also found in the filing cabinet is a key to the book room in the boathouse (2).

21. Master Bedroom

A huge four-poster bed draped in dark green dominates the eastern wall of the room as you walk in. The usual bedroom furniture (a wardrobe, a desk, a small bookshelf) sits about the room. Unlike the rest of the house, this room has not been kept meticulously cleaned. The covers on the bed are strewn about haphazardly, and dust and cobwebs are noticeably collecting in the corners.

On the western side of the room, an elaborate stone frame hangs from the wall. Silver and gold filigree spirals around a 3x3 grid with rectangular indentations. Runes, barely recognizable as common script, run the bottom length of the slab. It reads *"Order my size from left to right then create the groups of three. Fit me right and cast aside shall be this marquee. But fit me wrong and beware the spirits that shall be set free."*

On the ground by the wall is a small basket of tiles.



There is much evidence of recent use of this room scattered about by the bed and desk, but the main feature is the puzzle against the wall. The basket contains 9 tiles which must be fit into the grid on the wall. They should be ordered left to right by the number of discrete shapes they contain, and each row should contain one of the groups of: tiles with curves, tiles with enclosed areas, and tiles that depict letters. Which row goes where does not matter for the puzzle.

If the tiles are placed correctly, the marquee will slide aside and the wall will become intangible, allowing entrance to the secret room. There is no trap if they are placed incorrectly, but a ghostly howl will sound from the floorboards beneath them.

22. Secret Room

As soon as the door cracks open, the strong smell of brackish seawater wafts over you. A carpeted

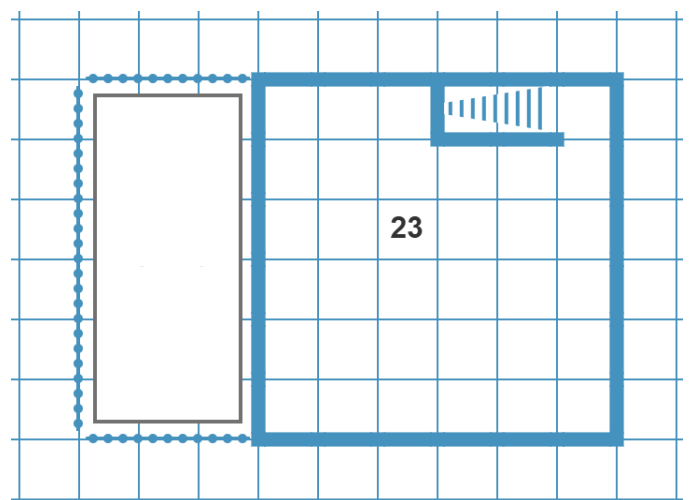
hallway, dimly lit by red magic candles wavering unnaturally slowly, beckons you to your right. The carpet is alternately damp and crusty, but whatever the source of the moisture, it does not affect the journals and scraps of paper which are laying on tables or pinned to the walls.

At the far back of the room is an altar inlaid with black stone and sharp shards of obsidian. Atop the altar is a gaping fish skull, large enough to fit a human head within its open mouth. Sharp teeth shine dully in the candlelight, shrouding the gleam of a signet ring past its open jaws.

Another signet ring that can be used to open the boathouse door (2) is sitting inside the open fish mouth. If someone tries to retrieve it, it will clamp down on any organic matter and deal 1d6 damage. If a metal rod or something to that effect is used to reach it, the fish head does not react.

The scribbles on the wall are from Forsythe Hiram. He uses the area as a personal study and place of worship, and frequently sleeps in the bedroom for ease of access to his shrine. The altar is a shrine to Mogus, and the writings also contain various cult texts that treat the sea god reverentially.

Adventurers can also get a sense of Forsythe's plot to capture ships through the writings here. They speak of the sacrifice grounds beyond the family crypts and detail many of the ships they've captured. More recent writing suggests that the cult is nearing the number of sacrifices needed to summon the avatar of Mogus.



23. Caretaker's Bedroom

The second floor of the house contains a bedroom with two beds, two dressers, and a single large desk.

A backup ring of keys to the house can be found amid clutter on the desk, as well as a note that reads "*Don't forget: 11-17-31*". This is the combination to the lock to **20**.

24. Stairs to the Family Crypts

When the signet ring is placed into the indentation in the chapel (**3**) the dais will slide aside to allow passage into the family crypts. The door will remain open for about a minute, and will then slide shut automatically on its own. There is a matching indentation on the underside of the crypts that the same signet ring can be placed into to open up the crypts.

Most of the cultists will also carry a signet ring on them, but there is no backup mechanism to allow passage in the event the rings are lost.

25. The Hiram Crypts

Some 20 feet underneath the chapel are the dark Hiram family crypts. Rows and rows of the dead are entombed within these walls, each with a plaque proclaiming their name and documenting parts of their life with symbols of societies and religious icons. Various epitaphs make reference to Bilgus.

Some magical light with no clear origin fills the room with dim illumination, just enough to navigate by without an external light source. A small wooden table full of candles is located by the entrance along with a couple matchbooks.

26. Crypt Expansion

A section of the wall has been cleared away at the end of the crypts. A decorative arch with writing in an unfamiliar script circumscribes the entryway, but only raw lies beyond. In the next room, a flickering light casts shadows along tomb walls and occasional muffled noises can be heard.

This area was a planned addition to the crypts that never got finished before the family faded into obscurity.

When the adventurers approach, there are a group of 4 cultists (3 regular, 1 magic user) taking a

break from the noise of the main area. They will attack on sight.

- **Cultist 1** HP: 4
Sacrificial knife (d4)
□□ □□
- **Cultist 2** HP: 10
Sacrificial knife (d4)
□□□□ □□□□
- **Cultist 3** HP: 4
Sacrificial knife (d4)
Slingshot (d4)
□□ □□
- **Magic Cultist 1** HP: 4
Spells: magic missile, shield
□□ □□

27. Lair Overlook

Past the crypts the pathway opens up into a large underground cavern. A natural ledge is formed along the wall, and you are able to get a clear view into the lower section some 100 feet below.

Peering over a stone wall, you see a half-dozen figures in dark green robes clustered into small groups around a giant summoning circle. It looks as though they are making adjustments to the dark purple paint the circle is made out of, or ferrying materials back and forth between workstations around the room.

In the center of the lower section is a large chasm descending to darkness with water dripping down from a shallow pool to the east. Inside the pool are the remains of a wooden ship, shattered and destroyed nearly beyond recognition. Even further east are giant stone cliffs with pools of water at various points. The tunnel that leads up the cliffs is large enough that the wreckage of the ship could have fit through it.

On the south side of the room is another large ledge with a crane holding a platform suspended by ropes and pulleys. Several cages containing humanoid figures are scattered around these ledges, and their moans of pain are occasionally audible.

This area allows the adventurers to get a sense of what they will be running into further in the cavern. There isn't a huge group of cultists, but they will definitely outnumber the adventurers. They can also see the area where the prisoners who will be the sacrifices for the ritual are being held.

28. Cultist Barracks

This room is full of beds and food for the cultists to use. A group of 5 cultists will be asleep when the adventurers arrive unless they made noise in **26**, in which case 3 of them will have woken up. They are not immediately on the lookout, so stealthy adventurers may be able to take them out discreetly or sneak past them.

- **Cultist 1** HP: 7
Sacrificial knife (d4)
□ □□□□□
- **Cultist 2** HP: 12
Sacrificial knife (d4)
□□□□□□ □□□□□□
- **Cultist 3** HP: 11
Sacrificial knife (d4)
Slingshot (d4)
□□□□□ □□□□□□

- **Cultist Brute 1** HP: 10

Broadsword (d6)

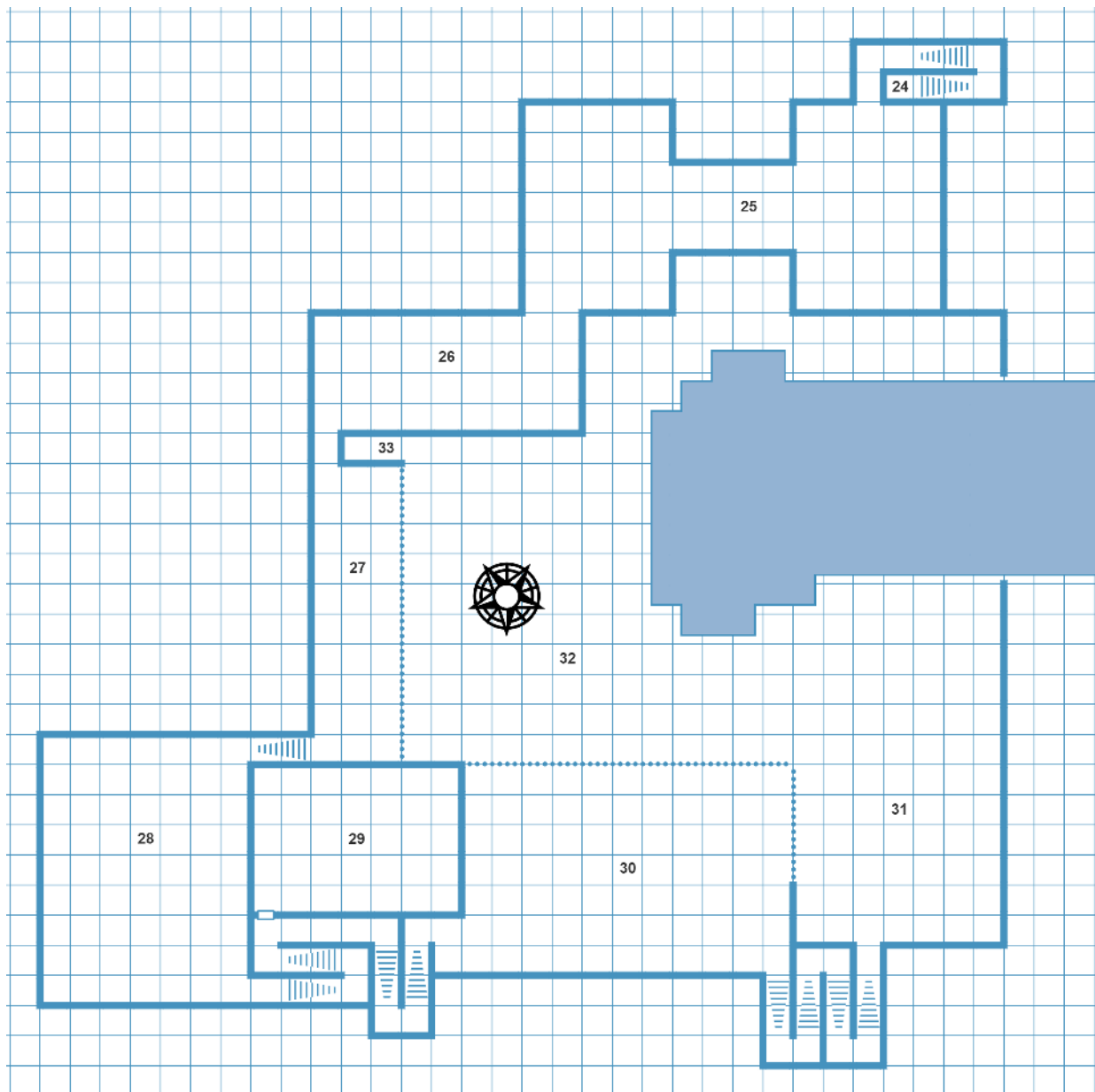
□□□□ □□□□ □□

- **Magic Cultist 1** HP: 4

Spells: skull crusher*, Irvine's tickling blades*

□□ □□

Various supplies can be found in the barracks, but not much in terms of weapons aside from a few scattered sacrificial daggers. Rations and building supplies can be found, along with various trinkets which have been collected by the cultists from the murdered sailors.



29. Cult Library

A brightly lit library is through the wooden door. The inside is made of rough stone, but rough-hewn wood furniture is strewn all over. Bookcases, tables, and chairs are arranged without clear rhyme or reason and diagrams of evil looking summoning circles are pinned to every available wood surface.

At the back of the room is a robed figure who looks up from some frantic scribbling when you walk in. He wears the same dark green robes as the figures seen in the lower section of the cavern, but he also wears a thick amulet of emerald set into what looks like dark steel. His eyes look at you for a moment, as though trying to recognize you, and then he lights up.

"I do not recognize you lot," he says. "If you do not belong to the cult of Mogus, then perhaps I can enlist your aid."

The man will introduce himself as Kennedy Preston and will explain that he is a sage learned on the matters of the old gods. He was taken by the cultists to help build their summoning circle for the avatar of Mogus. He has been fitted with an **Amulet of Compulsion** that prevents him from leaving and forces him to work for the cult. Kennedy will explain that you must kill the mage who created it to set him free (the mage in **32**). He will promise to work for you or give you gold in exchange for your help.

The library contains many occult texts, as well as several books that have been taken from the manor library. From the writings and Kennedy's explanations, the adventurers can piece together the cultist's plans to capture enough sailors as sacrifices until they can summon the avatar of Mogus. They can also learn that Mogus is the source of the giant pit in the center of the lower section. It is by Mogus' ancient magic that the eastern side of the island can open up, sending a torrent of water spilling down the cliffs and into the pit. This disrupts the currents enough that passing ships are pulled in and annihilated on the rocks on the way down. Any survivors are captured and placed into the cages for later sacrifice.

30. Prisoner Storage

Nearly a dozen prisoners, all humans and all with serious injuries, are kept in cages here. They are mostly moaning and delirious with pain and hunger,

but a few of them perk up a little when they see you approach. A dolly is positioned by a large crane along the northern edge of this natural rock platform.

The cultists tend not to hang out in this section much because of the incessant moaning from the prisoners. The same squat stone wall looks out another 40 feet below into the central area.

The cages are locked and the matching keys are carried by Forsythe and the cult captain. They are of shoddy construction, and can be forced open with noise, or easily picked.

None of the prisoners are in any shape to help in a fight aside from a few healthy enough to cause a distraction.

31. Workbenches

Various cultish workbenches are located in this section containing incense, powdered gems and rare metals, and alchemical ingredients. A large glass flask of blood is also atop one of them with a spigot on the bottom.

The cultists in **32** will intermittently walk over to this section to do some work or grab supplies, so adventurers can't hang out for too long in this section.

32. Cult Summoning Circle

There is a palpable tension in the air around the summoning circle. It is muggy and your hair begins to prickle like in a thunderstorm. A haze seems to suffuse the area, making the corners of your vision blur and tunnel towards details and edges, somehow even more sharp than before.

Among the group of robed cultists, one stands out from the rest: a smaller frame, walking slightly hunched, but with a wicked look on his face that all the others shy away from. His robes bear thick stripes down the sides in brocade ornamentation, both garish in texture, yet sinister in spiraling patterns.

Already, the summoning circle glows heavy with arcane power, and it pulses as thin streams of blood slowly swirl around the markings of their own accord.

The cultists will attack the adventurers on sight, but can be temporarily fooled if they wear the cultists' robes. They immediately see through the disguise of any non-human adventurers.

Forsythe will order his followers to intercept the adventures. He will spend his first turn to run over to the summoning circle to activate it for lair actions. Roll on the lair action table every round of combat. The lair actions can be disrupted by killing Forsythe or by dealing damage to the circle. The summoning circle is not destroyed by simply trying to scratch it out or cover it. Attacks against the circle automatically hit, and it is resistant to non-magical weapons.

d6	Lair actions
1	A torrent of water cascades down the falls, washing more of the ship wreckage further into the central chasm.
2	Angry incorporeal crabs are summoned and attack the adventurers. Each player can choose to either forgo their attack, or be attacked by a crab. The crabs have a +2 to their attack roll and deal 1d4 damage on a hit. The crabs will disappear after the round.
3	4 tentacles erupt out of the ground and writhe around searching for targets. If the adventurers are within 10 feet of each cardinal point of the summoning circle, the tentacle will prioritize trying to grapple them, otherwise it will grab the nearest available target.
4	Steam hisses out of the summoning circle. Anyone within 5 feet takes 1d4 damage. The steam cuts visibility. Ranged attacks are made with a -4 modifier for the round.
5	Lightning cracks upward from the pit into the cavern ceiling, briefly illuminating the outline of a giant many-armed monster standing above the ship wreckage. The adventurers must save against paralysis or be frightened to swing against the worshipers of this creature. For those who fail, melee attacks are made with a -4 penalty for the round.
6	Water roils up out of the chasm filling the room, then rapidly draining. Everyone must save against death or be pulled 10 feet towards the chasm.

- **Cultist 1 HP: 10**
Sacrificial knife (d4)
□□□□ □□□□
- **Cultist 2 HP: 9**
Sacrificial knife (d4)
□□ □□□□

- **Cultist 3 HP: 11**
Sacrificial knife (d4)
□□□□ □□□□
- **Cultist Brute 1 HP: 11**
Broadsword (d6)
□□ □□□ □□□
- **Cultist Brute 1 HP: 7**
Broadsword (d6)
□□□□ □□ □
- **Magic Cultist 1 HP: 9**
Spells: alter mass*, Irvine's tickling blades*, bilge blast*
□□ □□□ □□□
- **Forsythe Hiram HP: 18**
Enchanted dagger of Mogus* (d6+1)
□□□ □□□□□ □ □□□□ □□□□

33. Treasure Pile

A large chest of drawers has been placed in the corner to be used for storage of valuables and gold retrieved from shipwrecks. The total haul is:

- 1d6 x 100 cp
- 3d4 x 100 sp
- 1d8 x 100 gp
- 3d6 gems
- 2 scrolls of major quell waters*

After the Cult

After the cult has been dealt with, Lenny will fall into a state of despair. He no longer will act murderous towards the adventurers, but he will beg them to help him find another heir. Matilde is indifferent, and will continue collecting her paycheck.

The adventurers can report back to the guild for a reward of 150 gp each. If they return the money and scrolls that the cultists looted, then the guild will give them 25% as a finder's fee, but will hold them in high regard for future work.

Appendix

Items

Enchanted Dagger of Mogus

A finely-crafted silvered dagger, heavily patinated, with tentacles twisting around the grip to form

a basket hilt. When this weapon deals a killing blow, the wielder regains 1d3 hit points and grows closer to the old god Mogus.

Chalice of Grime (cursed)

An ornate gold and red chalice which always seems to have a layer of dust on it no matter how well it is polished. It is cursed so that whatever room it is placed in rapidly accumulates dust and cobwebs.

Enchanted Wargaming Set

A wargame where the pieces have been magically enchanted to allow for a single player to play against the enchantment. If someone attempts to use it for a traditional multiplayer game, the enchantment will fight against it, and throw a magical fit with the pieces.

Spells

Skull Crusher

Magic-user 1

Range: 60'

Arcane force grips the target's head dealing 1d6 damage and giving them a splitting headache for 1d4 minutes that makes decision-making difficult.

Irvine's Tickling Blades

Magic-user 1

Range: 120'

Invisible blades prick at the target's flesh, dealing no damage, but giving the sensation of their flesh sloughing off. Target must save against spells or have disadvantage on all rolls for 1d6 rounds.

Alter Mass

Magic-user 1

Range: touch

Duration: 10 minutes

Choose a target to have its mass reduced to 20% or increased to 200% of its original weight. If the target is a creature, they can choose to save against spells to nullify the effect.

Bilge Blast

Magic-user 2

Range: 120'

A jet of water full of barnacles and sand blasts towards a target. If the target is a creature, the jet deals 2d6 damage or half as much if the creature saves against spells. If the target is a non-magical object, it is rapidly worn away

(like an intense sand-blast) and can be used to bore holes through up to a foot of rock. If the target is a non-magical object wielded or worn by a creature, the creature may save against spells to avoid having the object destroyed.

Major Quell Waters

Magic-user 4

Duration: 1 hour

This spell affects the water in the area surrounding the caster for its duration, calming stormy seas and stemming raging currents. Most often used by ships as a backup against the harshest storm at sea, the spell can also be used unconventionally to slow the descent of waterfalls or to prevent offensive water magic from harming the user.

Creatures

Cultist

Armour Class 7 [12]

Hit Dice 2 (7hp)

Attacks 1 x 1d4 (sacrificial dagger)

THAC0 18 [+1]

Movement 90' (30')

Saving Throws D9 W12 P13 B13 S14

Morale 10

Alignment Chaotic

XP 15

Cultist Brute

Armour Class 5 [14]

Hit Dice 3 (11hp)

Attacks 1 x 1d6 (shortsword)

THAC0 17 [+2]

Movement 90' (30')

Saving Throws D9 W11 P12 B12 S13

Morale 10

Alignment Chaotic

XP 40

Magic Cultist

Armour Class 8 [11]
Hit Dice 2d4 (5hp)
Attacks 1 x 1d4 (sacrificial dagger)
THAC0 19 [0]
Movement 90' (30')
Saving Throws D12 W11 P11 B12 S11
Morale 9
Alignment Chaotic
XP 40

Forsythe Hiram

Armour Class 5 [14]
Hit Dice 5 (18hp)
Attacks 1 x 1d6 (dagger of Mogus*)
THAC0 16 [+3]
Movement 90' (30')
Saving Throws D9 W11 P12 B12 S12
Morale 12
Alignment Chaotic
XP 150

Information

The Estate of False Griffin Point was created by Limli the Librarian. Maps were made with Mipui and the art was made with procreate and paint.net. *The Estate of False Griffin Point* and all art is published under the CC BY 4.0 license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

More adventures available at
<https://limlithelibrarian.itch.io/>

Questions, comments, or feedback? Reach me at
limlithelibrarian@gmail.com

De Ludis Elficis Fictis

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

Email: Pum@Pum.org

December 2025

Web: <http://www.pum.org>

Recently I have mostly been ...

... starting Michael Cule's new Wednesday evening GURPS campaign with the High Wycombe RPG group. We are all beginner mages who have been "recruited" into the Institute of Magic in the city of Aegis, the city now of two thousand gates. Some of us are from other worlds, and some are natives of the city. We have all shown the initial signs of magical ability by instinctively casting our very first spells, which resulted in us being "talent spotted" by recruitment agents of the institute.

In other gaming news, at the end of November I went down to the deepest, darkest west country to visit my gaming friends Alex and Kez, and go to GridCon with them. Many boardgames were enjoyed, including *SETI*, *Red Cathedral*, *Underwater Cities*, *Village Rails*, and *Galileo Galilei*. We also tried *Orloj: The Prague Astronomical Clock* and were sorely disappointed. It took us 2 hours just to go through the rules! Playing it we found there was just too much complexity to remember, for us at least. When we abandoned it perhaps a third of the way through, we realised there was a whole sub-section of the game that we had all forgotten about and completely ignored. It is a shame, as the game looks very nice, and ticked many of our like boxes: rondel, worker placement and retrieval, and tech advancements.

In non-gaming news, the last couple of weeks my bad back has been playing up, preventing me from going out as much as I would have liked, mostly due to being unable to get in and out of my stupidly small car, and this week preventing me from going to the Wednesday evening game. Getting old sucks 😞

IgTheme: Dumb/Silly/Crazy Stuff

The dumbest/silliest/craziest things the players ever did.

There was that time in my epic fantasy campaign when I had an encounter be alternate versions of the PCs from another dimension with useful information for the party. However, they looked physically different from the PCs, as they were alternate versions not parallel copies, and the PCs declared immediately on sight "they're adventurers, the most dangerous of monsters – get 'em quick whilst we have the drop on them!" <face palm> I got to reference this amusingly later in the campaign when I introduced a letter to the PCs from previous, more enlightened iterations of themselves (it was that kind

of campaign: shades of Eternal Champion-ness) which spoke of how helpful the information they had received from those alternate versions of themselves had been.

There was the Temple of Brian that spread through the Loughborough University games club D&D multiverse. A player contrived a background for his extremely unintelligent PC in which he worshipped the Great God Brian. When asked why, he said that he was walking through town one day and heard a voice say "Great God, Brian!" and decided "If Brian is a great God then I should worship him." A few other low Int PCs joined in, and we occasionally had Brianist only parties go adventuring, with amusing interludes.

In the Judges Guild supplement *Verbosh*, if the internet is right, there are a pair of NPCs in a shop selling "demon destroying dirt" for a copper piece a bucket. This is a cover for them tunneling from the shop into a nearby bank vault. I was in a party of PCs playing that adventure at Loughborough University games club. A player at a nearby table overheard just the "demon destroying dirt" bit, and, as one of his other PCs was a very high level PC fiend (called Friend), he called over to us that he'd pay 10,000 gp per bucket – the transaction being possible due to the D&D multiverse of the club. Long story short, he embarrassed himself in the extreme by throwing a bucket of ordinary dirt over a high level demon in a failed power-play, and our characters ended up very horribly dead shortly thereafter.

Comments

#6 Myles Corcoran: RYCT Mark Nemeth, I love the puddle stain map – very evocative!

I use the en dash (and semi-colon) quite a bit, usually to separate something that follows closely on from the previous thing where a full-stop feels too separating and a comma feels not enough. Apparently, en dash with spaces is UK style, whereas em dash with no spaces is the US style. No spaces around it looks wrong to me – it looks like the words on either side are somehow being joined together, like some kind of special hyphenation. Having thought about this issue so much now, I'll probably find myself over-using en dashes.

#6 John Redden: RYCTM I had to work hard to finish LotR.

#6 Lisa Padol: RYCT Myles re debloating Win11, see my CT Elf lastish re Shutup10 and WinAero Tweaker.

There's a B5 reboot?! To the interwebs!! Hmm, looks like it is "currently stalled", perhaps for the best.

#6 Roger BW: RYCT Matt Stevens "Sometimes everything just goes right for the PCs: for me that's not an occasion to throw in a new complication so that there's an appropriate climax, it's an occasion for backslapping and "aren't we great"." Yes, I strongly agree! And I think the converse can be true as well – sometimes it all goes horribly wrong for the PCs, perhaps due to a run of bad dice luck or bad decision making by the players: for me I'd rather the PCs realise this and ~~run away~~ tactically withdraw (and the game system allow this as an option) than for the GM to dial back the difficulty of the encounter. Of course, we don't want this happening a lot of the time, but I think it gets boring, and hurts verisimilitude, if the PCs succeed every single time, against roughly equally challenging tasks, and often with the fullest level of success possible.

#6 Patrick Riley: I know exactly what you mean about social anxiety at cons. It sounds like I don't get it as bad as you. There's no need to be ashamed for having to take a timeout, quite the opposite as that's you being considerate of others by removing any bad reaction you might have from their vicinity – that's you being a good person.

#6 Avram Grumer: RYCT Lisa suggesting helium balloons with faces drawn on them as accompanying troops, that sounds genius!

#6 Michael Cule: ah John Dallman, small gaming world, isn't it. I met John at Loughborough University games club in the very early 1980s. He was a year ahead of me doing computing, and despite him enlisting my help to grok his new BBC Micro PC, I didn't realise I should have switched course to computing. Yes, he's a clever fellow.

Re "police officers left to guard an 'E' factory", it was a house that had been covertly converted into an LSD factory – they got very trippy after a few hours of inhaling the air in the house.

Re you forgetting that Eshan had access to Dismiss Lune from his cult, for me this was a feature, not a bug, as it made the situation feel more realistic – verisimilitude that! Pretty much a case of what Roger was talking about lastish when sometimes everything just goes right for the PCs.

RYCT Dylan Capel re problems running the Great Pendragon Campaign, I thought the problem was our incessant insertion of Monty Python references 🤪

#6 Jim Vassilakos: RYCTM for more details about how my variant D&D combat rules worked, I'll check my typewritten notes from 1981:

First of all, my memory was slightly faulty, and I used the term "Endurance", not "Body Points", but the hack otherwise worked as previously described.

Did the amount of damage affect the System Shock roll? Yes: "Each time a character takes an Endurance hit they must make a System Shock roll based on their current Endurance, or become incapacitated. If a character's Endurance goes below 3 then they fall unconscious. If Endurance goes to 0 or less then they are dead."

Was there any rule regarding continued bleeding vs. binding of wounds? There weren't any explicit rules for bleeding and binding of wounds. However, I did rule that a natural 20 followed by a normal successful roll to hit on a character with no Hit Points left was a critical hit, causing a specific injury to a specific body location; I described the outcome as "something nasty happens, such as limbs amputated, head severed, etc", depending on the amount of damage dealt, and suggested that the damage limit of any specific area of the body be about half full Endurance, but left the details of the critical injury to GM discretionary ad hoc ruling, which could conceivably include a bleeding wound.

At what point did death occur? See above.

And how did you deal with the healing/restoration (both natural & magical) of lost HP & BP? "Healing potions and spells work as normal, except that Endurance is healed first, then Hit Points."

Also, did monsters also have separate HP & BP scores? I generally didn't bother with that, for simplicity sake. This would skew the odds significantly in favour of PCs against low level monsters, but that allowed me to throw more of them at the party, making them feel more awesome.

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

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

1. Iron Crown's *Middle-earth Role Playing* (1982)
2. Iron Crown's *Lord of the Rings Adventure Game* (1991)
3. Decipher's *The Lord of the Rings Role-playing Adventure Game* (2001)
4. Cubicle 7's *The One Ring Roleplaying Game* (2011)
5. Cubicle 7's *Adventures in Middle-earth* (2016)

It occurred to me that a nit-picker could pull out the old Marvel *Star Wars* comics and argue that *Star Wars* is part of the Marvel universe, especially since they're both owned by Disney, so all of the Marvel and *Star Wars* games should get bundled into one list. Then, having made that argument, they could pull out the old Marvel *Conan* comics from the 1970s. Maybe issue #14, which guest-stars Moorcock's Elric, bringing in the various *Eternal Champions* games. Maybe toss in the observation that *Star Trek* has crossed over with Marvel's *X-Men*, and we're well on the way to *GURPS Tommy Westphall*.

Whenever We Go Out, The People Always Shout

Does it seem to anyone else like the names of game system frameworks are getting longer? Used to be, you'd build your game with *d20*, or *Hero*, or *GURPS*, or *Fate*, or *Cortex*. Nowadays it's *Powered by the Apocalypse*, or *Forged in the Dark*, or *Belonging Outside Belonging*. I feel like five or ten years from now, we'll be talking about a new game that uses the *Three Raccoons in a Fast-Food Dumpster* system with some ideas from the *Achromatic Verdant Conceptions Slumber with Violence* family of games.

Recent Gaming

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Monsterhearts: Vermillion Cove, Session 1

The Park Slope group had our first full session of *Monsterhearts* on Nov 22nd. I was hard-pressed to try taking note of everything.

Before the session, I modified a copy of the Werewolf Skin sheet to put in a drawing I'd made of Steffan, trying to mimic by hand the high-contrast photo style used in the originals, and tweaked the layout a bit

to give myself more room to note Strings. I also corrected some grammatical errors. ("Bask" is not a transitive verb in modern English!)

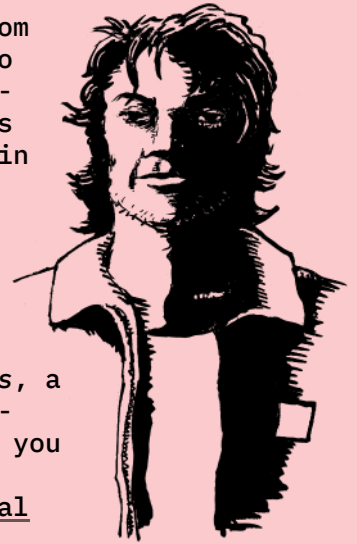
A thing I realized during this session is that, while we divide RPGs into "tactical" and "storygames," *Monsterhearts*, a storygame, is also tactical as hell! (Unless you mean "tactical" in the sense of, like, tactical Internet pants.) The terrain is relationships, as well as the physical terrain of the homeroom, and the weapons are emotions and obligations, but there are definite tactics.

On the other hand, maybe not? A common feature of games considered "tactical" is that conflicts are run with task-based resolution, allowing players to adjust their tactics mid-conflict. *Monsterhearts* resolution seems more goal-based.

- * MC: Briar (she), who also hosted
- * Blue (??), the Hollow (Johnni, they/she)
- * Drake Kennedy (he), the Queen (Mike, he)
- * Laeli Vahad (she), the Mortal (NJ, she)
- * Logan Caldwell (he), the Infernal (Erica, she)
- * Steffan Mactire (he), the Werewolf (me, he)

I've included pronouns here for both players and PCs because I think some of my sentences get incomprehensible otherwise, due to the way I'm describing both player actions and character actions.

Briar puts on a tune (Ok Cowgirl's "Larry David") and sets up an opening scene, as if directing a movie or TV show: Black screen, then we see Blackwell Island, with its lighthouse. She then prompts each of us to narrate a brief scene about getting up and preparing for school. I have Steffan doing some morning work with his father at Bluestone Manor. When Steffan tries to talk to his dad, dad just sort of grunts inarticulate acknowledgement. As Steffan leaves, his mother wishes him a nice day, and he grunts back at her, just like his dad. I think NJ narrates Laeli scrolling through photos of Steffan on her phone at



the breakfast table, and Drake gets in his fancy car to drive to school. I don't recall the others.

Then we had the homeroom class fill up, students wandering in one by one or in small groups. This served to remind us of all the names and backstories we had established in Session Zero, and provided an opportunity for a bit of role-playing. Drake, the new kid from wealthier Tenleyton, comes in dragging a desk. Even though he's new, he's already got a gang (that's part of the Queen playbook; Mike explains it by saying that the two towns are close enough that kids travel between them to party), and Logan (who's focused on getting good grades as his ticket out of this crappy town), seated near the teacher, is occupying the prime slot Drake needs to be with his buds. This fact winds up driving a chunk of the drama this session.

We also note that we're in the unusual situation of having two cliques in the class, and they're both all-male: Drake's gang, and the basketball team. Laeli's also the only unambiguously female PC. (Blue's still coming to terms with having a corporeal body, and hasn't figured out gender.)

Talia, the gorgeous NPC girl who had some sort of thing going with one of the teachers last year, hands Steffan a note for Pete, the newly-gorgeous guy (he blossomed over the summer, and isn't coping well with the sudden attention) who sits next to Steffan. Steffan surreptitiously reads the note – something about how she wants to meet up with Pete in some particular place I've already forgotten – but doesn't pass it on. Laeli develops an immediate hatred for Talia.

The teacher, Mr Singer, tells us that due to the school shooting in Tenleyton last year (twenty kids were killed!), we're going to be getting metal detectors, but they aren't here yet, so here's a cop who's gonna pat us down and search our bags every morning.

CJ, the people-pleasing NPC girl who sits next to Laeli, passes Laeli a note asking for help. CJ's got a gun in her bag! (To defend against school shooters! Honest!) Laeli writes back "You're fucked." Blue, who sits near CJ, on the other side, wants to get involved, but CJ pulls away the bag when Blue reaches for it.

The cop works his way through the room. Students react in various ways. Drake gets

searched first, and has nothing. He hasn't even gotten his schoolbooks yet! After being searched, he loudly announces that there'll be a party that night; this serves as a distraction so that someone can swap his bag with Scottie's. (Scottie, an NPC, is the local drug source, and also part of Drake's gang, I think.)

Briar narrates that Steffan is hearing a grating noise (she plays a sound on her phone), which is disturbing him into losing control and taking on his werewolf form. I have no idea what to do about this. As the game progresses, the other supernatural PCs get similar prompts, which they can generally address by giving in a taking action of some kind, but I'm the only one whose Darkest Self comes with a physical transformation. It's possible that I could have kept from monsterring out by hitting someone, but that didn't occur to me, and dude, it's a cop! So Steffan leaps out the window. (I had established during the Session Zero homeroom setup that I was sitting near the window, with just such a situation as this in mind!) Fortunately, we're on the first floor. The cop jumps out after Steffan, and the rest of the class is free to do other stuff for a while.

Ernie (NPC, likes to roast the other kids, part of Drake's gang) tries to taunt Logan, who still isn't giving up his desk to Drake. Erica rolls to have Logan shut Ernie down, and rolls really well. Logan roasts Ernie so bad that he makes Ernie cry, and he gets a Condition to reflect the public humiliation. (This is the point where I realize that this is a tactical game.) Drake has Ernie move to Steffan's empty desk to get into on Pete; he wants the basketball team at the party.

Laeli asks if she can go to the restroom, claiming to be on her period. CJ and Blue chime in, saying they're also on their periods. Mr Singer says fine, but be back in five minutes, ordering CJ to keep an eye on the other two. Once they're out, Laeli wants to go look for Steffan. Johnni does this hilarious thing where Blue has CJ half-convinced to fight the cop, but then CJ calms down and Laeli volunteers to hide her gun.

Laeli also uses her phone to start up an Instagram account called "TaliaSkank69," with fake porn photos of Talia. I think this is the Shut Someone Down move, but NJ rolls a partial success, so it's obvious to

everyone that Laeli made the account. Talia gets the Condition "Skank," but Laeli gets a Condition in return: "Jealous." Teenagers can be so cruel!

Blue, for reasons I didn't bother to write down, causes the blackboard to fall off the wall. (They must have come back to class, and I neglected to note it.) This hits both Mr Singer and Logan. Logan asks to go to the nurse's office, but goes to the school library instead. He sends Ernie a text apologizing for insulting him, but also suggesting the graveyard (where the Dark Power that he made a deal with is strongest) as a place to relax and meditate.

Drake, after asking Ernie for advice on how to destroy Logan, heads off to the library. Mr Singer has obviously lost all control over this classroom, though I think at some point the cop came back, having failed to catch Steffan.

Drake and Logan have a really good negotiation scene in the school library, during which Mike and Erica totally neglect to use any of the game's mechanics. Drake offers to have a highly-placed family friend in Boston write a letter of recommendation to help Logan get into MIT, if Logan will just stop interfering with him. I think Logan accepts the offer, demanding that Drake type out the email on his phone and send it with Logan watching. (I think Drake later write a follow-up email apologizing; not sure if this meant he was breaking his half of the deal.)

The bell rings, ending homeroom period, without the cop having searched everyone. When the class disperses, so does the odd tension that the supernatural PCs have been feeling.

Drake has a conversation with Talia, in which he tries to convince her not to come to the party. She slaps him.

(NJ: "Do you think an NPC might die at the party?"

Mike: "You're the one with the gun!")

A lot of fights have been breaking out, all over the school. Lots of kids have black eyes, bruises, etc.

I had Steffan go off to the mountains to chill out, which meant that I missed out on a lot of the fun. So I figured I'd best bring him back, thinking maybe of slashing the cop's tires or something. But when he gets back, around lunchtime, the cop is gone. Drake approaches Steffan in the cafe-

teria with an invite to the party, and that grating sound happens again. I'm afraid of having Steffan wolf-out in public, so I have him retreat to the bathroom, when I probably should have just had him push Drake around. A huge fight breaks out in the cafeteria, and Blue happily joins in. Drake takes a lot of Harm, and his gang drags him outside. As he leaves, the fight starts to die down, but then Steffan comes back out, sees that Blue is fighting with his basketball buddies, and attacks him. Steffan's Darkest Self is in charge, so Briar puts Limp Bizkit's "Break Stuff" on. (I don't think we're making as much use of people's soundtracks as we planned.) Steffan Harms Blue (2 points, I think), but Blue figures out that Steffan is a werewolf. Johnni also uses the Hollow's Strange Impressions move, which gives Blue a one-time use of a Skin move from Steffan's sheet. She goes with Scent of Blood, +1 to rolls against characters already harmed in this scene.

Laeli tries to intervene between Steffan and Blue, but Steffan swats her away, hard. Not only is she hurt, but the gun falls out of her pocket, landing at Logan's feet. This (the hurt, not the gun) is enough to break Steffan out of Darkest Self.

Blue does something – Shut Someone Down, I think? – and inflicts a Condition on Steffan, to exert some control over him, since they know his secret. I suggest the phrasing "Blue holds my leash." Steffan also figures out that Blue is a Hollow, or a Ghost, or a Ghost using the Hollow playbook, or something.

Logan kicks the gun away from his feet, which I think Briar interprets as a Keep Your Cool move. It doesn't work! The gun goes off, and the bullet hits Pete, one of the basketball players! (NJ: "We're not going to State this year.")

That's where my notes run out, and I think that's about where we stopped. I remember Briar complaining at some point that we hadn't even started engaging with her plot, which I generally consider a sign of a good session, though we've been warned that the plot's gonna keep on plotting even if we don't engage with it, so we'd probably better do something. This was planned as a two-session game (not counting the Session Zero), but we're all having enough fun that we're gonna extend it.

Our sessions (both *Monsterhearts* and

Dream Askew) have been four hours long, which seems to allow for a pretty good amount of stuff going on if you don't have to slow it down with a complicated resolution system. (I'm lookin' at you, fond teenaged memories of *Champions!*)

Monsterhearts: Vermillion Cove, Session 2

Dec 9th. Same cast as above, except Logan's surname is now Caldwell-Collins. (*Erica: "Logan's last name is Collins." Me, consulting notes: "It was Caldwell last session." Erica: "Caldwell-Collins, then."*) Briar sets the opening scene with the same song, but the opening visual is the school lunchroom, cops (all three of them; it's not a big town) arresting all of the kids there (except for Drake, at the hospital with a broken shoulder, Ernie, who drove Drake there, and Pete, who got shot, also in the shoulder). I'm enjoying how she frames opening scenes; she's got a good feel for visuals.

The kids get split up by gender, and assigned to the jail's two cells. There's a bit of a dispute over which cell Blue belongs in; they're fake ID says M, but they alter their features to appear more feminine, mostly to screw with the cops. Blue winds up in the girls' cell with Anna, Talia, Debbie, and Agatha. (It occurs to me, while writing this up, that the cops don't even consider making a fuss over putting Anna, a transgender girl, in with the other girls. All cops may be bastards, but I guess they aren't always entirely bastards.) Blue has a conversation with Talia about power, and about how none of the kids in their homeroom (Talia included) are the "right" people. (*Blue: "Crazy that they tried to stop a school shooting, and we wound up with a school shooting!"*) There's a point during this conversation where Briar calls for a Turn Someone On roll from Johnni to see if Blue inadvertently turns Talia on, and I think it's the first Turn Someone On roll of the game so far. (The roll fails.)

In the boys' cell, every boy in the class (except for the three at the hospital) is there. Steffan's pacing angrily. Logan's freaking out about how this arrest will affect his future prospects.

Laeli and CJ are in the sheriff's office, getting grilled. Both their prints are on the gun. Who shot Pete? They've run

the numbers on the gun, and know it belonged to CJ's karate teacher. NJ volunteers to roll Keep Your Cool to have Laeli convince the sheriff that she knows nothing – and fails. (This is a failure-heavy session. Johnni makes three early rolls that come up 6, 5, and 4, respectively.) Laeli confirms that CJ had brought the gun in; CJ gets a String on Laeli. A cop calls the sheriff out to deal with something leaving the two girls alone in his office. They start to conspire against Talia. When the sheriff returns, Laeli tries to convince him that Talia took the gun, but video footage confirms it was in Laeli's bag. The two girls are released.

Logan gets called in next. Erica makes a Keep Your Cool roll – the first success of the session! Logan manages to avoid breaking down, but the sheriff has video evidence of him kicking at something, and they eventually get the truth out of him. He hits Logan with a guilt trip, and extracts a promise that Logan will help Pete recover. Logan also gets a Condition: "Town disappointment."

Drake, in the hospital, gets a call from his mom. She's worried – should they change schools again? OpenAI has already pulled out of the next round of funding for the data center, maybe this is the wrong town for the project? Drake reminds her that successful investing means buying low, selling high, and if the town is a wreck now, that just means it's easier for them to buy it all up. Mom tells Drake that she's going to arrange things with the cops so that he'll be looked after. Drake & Ernie then look for Pete, but Pete's in the ER, so Drake leaves a note in his bag. Drake also decides to postpone the party, originally planned for that night, to Saturday.

The cops let all the students go, but stop Blue on the way out. Blue's ID is fake, and they aren't in any identification database, what's up with that? The sheriff was gonna call ICE, but then he got a call from Drake's mom. She wants them to get someone who can keep Drake safe, and Blue looked pretty tough in the video footage, so that's what Blue's gonna be doing. Living with Drake, following him around at school, keeping him safe.

Laeli heads to the cemetery to chill, and puts together a video of Steffan beating up Blue, in which Steffan's trans-

formation is pretty obvious. She puts in lots of hearts and a romantic soundtrack.

On Steffan's way out of jail, that weird noise starts triggering his werewolf transformation again, but then it passes as the cars (parents picking the kids up) drive off. I've got a plan for following up on this, but it'll take moonlight. Till then Steffan gets a ride with Troy and his dad. They get Steffan's bike and Troy's pickup truck from school, and then Troy and Steffan go to the hospital to see Pete. Pete's still unconscious, but they talk to his mom a bit, and promise to do what they can to help Pete recover. Troy also tell Steffan that he blames Logan for Pete getting shot, and the team should harass Logan over it. Every Thursday is gonna be Make Logan's Life Hell Day.

Drake & Ernie arrive at Drake's home. Blue is already there, smoking a joint. (Blue: "OK, Drake, I'll join the Boy Clique.") Drake gets a String on Blue, and Blue gets a Condition that indicates that they're part of Drake's gang.

Laeli posts her video to TikTok, adding Steffan as a co-contributor. Steffan comments "Cool AI," and Briar calls for a Keep Your Cool roll. I manage to get a partial success by spending a String, and Briar tells me that most people will be convinced that it's AI, but there are other people out there like me, and they'll recognize the video as authentic.

Logan shows up at the cemetery, and has a conversation with Laeli. Logan has a crush on Pete. Leli gives relationship advice. ("If I were you, I'd find out who Pete hates, and destroy them.") Laeli also suggests that "one of these weirdos" - she's figured out that some of the kids are supernatural - might be able to heal Pete. She offers Logan a snack, from a Tupperware container she's buried, with Rice Crispy treats, nails, and a hammer.

Logan wanders off, and has a chat with his Dark Power. Can the Dark Power heal Pete? That's the opposite of what a Dark Power usually does, but Logan points out that there are people counting on Pete not being able to compete in basketball, and they'll suffer if he recovers. The DP accepts: "This boy will be healthier than he has ever been." The price is that Logan has to observe the consequences, and come to DP to describe them in his own words. Logan kicks a rat in frustration, and Briar

calls for a Volatile roll. Full success! That rat goes flying through the air, and hits Laeli.

Drake and Blue discuss their plans. Blue points out that they have leverage over Steffan, who in turn has influence over Laeli, and also that Logan will be desperate for any help he can get.

That night, Steffan strips down to his shorts and goes out running through the woods. He catches a rabbit, slits its belly open with his unusually sharp fingernail, and tries to read the entrails in the moonlight, hoping to divine some clue as to the origin of that weird noise. This is a Gaze Into the Abyss roll, and with my Dark raised to 3 by my Howl at the Moon move (Dark 3 when bathed in moonlight), all I need to do is roll 4 or higher on 2d6 to at least get some clue, but the dice say *screw you, have some snake eyes!* Ah well, another point of experience. One more and I get a playbook advance! Steffan gets a vague impression that the answer is in front of him, but then succumbs to hunger and eats the rabbit. And then feels ill, like there was something wrong with it. Urp!

Wednesday morning, there's a big graffiti mural on the school, saying "You're Monsters." (It's true, we are!) Pete shows up in class, apparently completely healed! CJ is absent. Steffan hears the weird sound again as he approaches, and skips homeroom. Laeli & Drake chat about Steffan, Talia, and Pete. Drake gets a call from his mom



about a new source of funding that's turned up: a company called Eliza, that wants to do AI-based psychological therapy. And that's where we end for the day. If we don't speed up or skip ahead, it'll take us till February to get to the party!

Scum and Villainy, Session 4

In-person post-Thanksgiving session!

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

We start off the session still in Holt system, at Jerek's Junkyard. The GM suggests lines of research we might want to investigate, or we can wait around for a job. He reminds us (or maybe establishes) that Merry, whom we rescued last session, is also the Magpie ambassador who we heard about a couple sessions back. There's that whole weird thing with the Hegemony using Magpie body parts to interface with or enhance Ur artifacts, and there's the Aleph Key and the closed Hantu Gate. While we aren't currently Wanted in Holt, our Heat level is 5.

(Gareth: "Are you sure our Heat is 5?"

Gaylord: "Remember what you did last session?"")

Citani, our reclusive info broker, calls with a courier job. Package to be delivered to Mem, an aquatic planet in Holt system with amphibian xeno natives and lots of Ur cities and artifacts. Oh, and currently under quarantine for a plague that affects those xenos, which the Hegemony is claiming was caused by Magpies.

Josh wants Vary to Gather Information on the job before we take it; all we learn is that Citani is probably a xeno. It seems to be a general rule of this game that you don't get detailed info about the job without accepting it. Makes sense, since the entire game is built around eliminating the need for detailed planning, but old habits die hard. We take the job. The package is roughly cubical, about half a meter on a side (that's about 20" for us counter-revolutionary non-metric folks), and covered in biohazard warnings.

To get past the quarantine, we're trying a Deception plan, pretending that we're



bringing medical supplies. We scrape together a 2d6 Engagement roll, and roll a 2! Arg! We start out in a desperate position! At least we'll be earning some extra experience points.

We get past the quarantine easily, but there's a riot at the spaceport. People really want those medical supplies, since there's a plague going on! Von fires his flame-thrower above the crowd and commands them to back off, getting a 5 on his Command roll. They back off, but there's an 8-wedge clock to determine when they riot again. (I don't think the clock gets touched again for the rest of the session.)

Harmony, Valsi, and Vary go for the package delivery, leaving Von behind to guard the ship. To get the package through the crowd, Valsi uses her mind-clouding Way powers. ("These aren't the supplies you're looking for.") She rolls a 4; success, but the crowd's still angry, and they pelt us with rocks and garbage. Lisa rolls a Prowess resist to keep the package from getting broken. The rest of the delivery oughta be straightforward, except that the doctor to whom we're supposed to deliver it isn't at his regular workplace. He's been taken somewhere by the government.

Meanwhile, they guys from the local Governor's Office (this is the planetary governor, not the Sector Governor in Rin system) show up to tell Von that they want to confiscate the ship. Von talks them out of it, Gaylord offering Gareth the Devil's Bargain that, no matter the outcome of the

roll, the security guys will want to inspect the ship. Gareth accepts the Bargain, and rolls a critical success! They're definitely not confiscating the ship, and they let slip that they're planning to violently suppress the rioters later tonight, news which Von passes along to the rest of us via our comms.

Vary's plan to find the doctor involves getting to know the rioters and finding out who's at the top of their hierarchy. Harmony's plan, which yields faster results, involves hacking government computer systems. She learns that the doctor has been taken to the Governor's Palace, and also that this very same doctor has been blamed for starting the plague!

In the process of inspecting the ship, the security goons figure out that one of the crew is a Magpie, and accuse Von! (Magpies are shape-shifters, after all, so it could be anyone.) Von agrees to have a blood test, and he comes up human, but is told that he's carrying the plague, and needs to go into quarantine at the Governor's Palace. (Hey, we're all gonna wind up at the same place, eventually!)

I assume that our next step is to go to the Palace, but I put my head down to write the above events in my notebook, and come up to learn that Vary has gotten us more entangled with the rioting Memish natives. We're at the edge of some body of water, and a big, tough-looking, scarred Mem named Espa Nur, with lots of Ur artifacts, is wondering why he shouldn't just drown us all and take our package, which might be something to end the plague.

Von, at the palace, sees the doctor (Wyndham is his name) talking to the Governor (Victor). They're partying to celebrate the imminent genocide of the Memish. He manages to muscle his way past the guards, but winds up stuck in a conversation with the Governor, who somehow concludes that Von is really gung-ho about killing the Memish. The news broadcasts video of Von drinking with the Governor. Von manages to talk to Wyndham, talks about the origin of the plague: it was an accident with an Ur artifact, caused by a colleague of Wyndham's. (Wyndham is obviously not happy about the coming genocide; he's being held at the palace to keep him from doing anything to prevent it.)

Meanwhile, at the lake, Vary has talked Nur into letting us go, at the cost of us

taking a bomb into the palace. "We're criminals! Did you hear about this big explosion a few weeks ago? That was us!" Rolled a 6, so it worked. I think the bomb might have been a Devil's Bargain? Anyway, Nur gives us a briefcase, tells us it's going to go off in a few hours, and gives us codewords to get us past security.

On the way there, Harmony looks over the bomb, and sees that it's set to be detonated remotely. She inserts a delay into the triggering mechanism, so that when Nur sets it off, it won't go right away, but we'll know. (That's what you get when you only get a 4 for your Rig roll.)

Our codewords get us into the palace easily, but once there, Vary gets spotted as a Magpie. Josh checks the Spacesuit box on his equipment list, and declares retroactively that Vary's been wearing a spacesuit this whole time, to keep from infecting people! (This kind of thing wouldn't work in a visual medium like film or comics, where to depict a character is to establish what they're wearing, but can work in prose or a role-playing game. We had established that we were carrying Heavy loadouts, which means enough equipment to attract attention – that could include wearing spacesuits. Fortunately for Josh, nobody had narrated anything prior to that point establishing that Vary *wasn't* wearing her spacesuit, so that detail was still up in the air.) Harmony creates a distraction by knocking something over while Vary sneaks out the back of her spacesuit, leaving the suit standing there. She keeps talking through the suit remotely, so the guards don't realize that she's not in it, and keep interrogating it.

Von drags Wyndham away from the Governor, eventually punching him. (*Gareth: "I knocked the wind out of him." Me: "Now he's just Ham!"*) Valsi grabs Wyndham, Harmony hides the bomb behind a potted plant. The PCs leave, Wyndham in tow. We get to Wyndham's home as the bomb destroys the palace.

Wyndham spills all of the tea about the plague: He'd been studying an Ur artifact in Bakdur, an old Ur city, undersea. His colleague, Merry the Magpie ambassador, stuck his arm in the thing, and that started the plague by replicating Magpie genetic material. With our delivery, he's going to be able to wipe out all Magpie genetic material on the planet, ending the plague. He advises us to get off-world

first, and stay away for a few weeks.

We wind up adding 7 Heat to the 5 we already had, which brings us to Wanted 1 in Holt system, with 4 Heat left over. Time to change systems again!

We get 12 Cred for the job, which leaves us in pretty good shape, even after we wind up having to bribe the Hegemonic News Network with 2 to get rid of an Entanglement. (I don't even remember what the fiction was for this bit.)

I spend one of Harmony's Downtime actions indulging her vice to clear Stress, and another drinking with Vary to clear her emotional Harm from last session. Then we look over the rules, see that we can buy additional Downtime actions, and I spend 2 Cred on a couple of Resolve Trainings. (In retrospect, that's against the rules. I should rejigger my sheet before next session.)

(Gareth: "What's our crew's reputation?"

Josh: "We're violent idiots trying to do the right thing."

Me: "That describes 90% of all RPG characters.")

I didn't bother to take any Crafting Downtime actions because all I've got cooking is the concealment for the Aleph Key, and Gaylord's attached some pretty onerous limitations to that (it'll be both Consumable and Volatile). That does imply that having the authorities try to track the Aleph Key is going to be an important future plot point that he doesn't want me negating in advance, so I guess that's some useful strategic info.

I'm also realizing that I really need to find a way of taking notes more quickly. Probably at the expense of detail. Gareth seems to be able to take notes without falling out of the game for extended periods, so I should probably look over his notebook and see how much he writes. I actually looked into Gregg shorthand a while back, but I don't know how long it'd take to acquire that as a useful skill.

Blades in the Dark – One Shot

Another faction of the Park Slope group heard from! Akshith wants to run a campaign, but hasn't settled on a rules set yet, so he posted to the group Discord asking which of three games people are interested in: *Shadowdark*, *Blades in the Dark*, or *Daggerheart*, so he can try 'em all

out. *Blades* got the most votes, so that's what we played today, Dec 20th.

* **GM:** Akshith

* **Magnus**, aka **Slimer**, the Whisper (Andres)

* **Joe**, aka **Koe**, the Slide (Rena)

* **Robin**, aka **Apple**, the Cutter (Angie)

* **Reza**, aka **Raven**, the Spider (Bailey)

* **Johann**, aka **Squirrel**, the Lurk (me)

To speed things up, Akshith assigned us a crew type, handed out cards so we could pick backgrounds and heritages, and skipped over the bit where we pick friends and rivals. We jumped into the action and then paused to explain the rules as they came up.

We're a crew of burglars, working out of an old tobacco shop in the Crow's Next district of Doskvol. We picked playbooks after being told that we were burglars, so I picked the Lurk, the burglar playbook. Our rep is Strange, and we call ourselves "The Strange Seven" because there aren't seven of us. (This was Bailey's idea.)

To start things off, the GM explains to us that Roris, the old ward boss of the district, and leader of a gang called the Crows, has died. He had brokered a peace between two other gangs, the Lampblacks and the Red Sashes, and with him dead, that peace has collapsed. This is an opportunity for our tiny gang to make a new ally.

The GM narrates us meeting with the Lampblack leader, Basso Baz, in his office at a coal warehouse. He knows where the Red Sashes store their money, and he wants us to go in and swipe it for him. Then the GM introduces the flashback mechanic: earlier, we had met with the leader of the Red Sashes, who wanted to hire us to sneak a rune-covered artifact into Baz's office! This gives us an opportunity to decide that our visit with Baz is just a pretext for the artifact-hiding job. We consider maybe taking both jobs, but instead decide to just take Baz's job (which pays more) and rob the Sashes.

This group of players has a lot of the chaotic energy that I remember from my early *D&D* days. The kind of thing where you don't take the setting very seriously, and make modern-world jokes. (No Monty Python jokes, though. Times have changed. Kids don't learn the classics anymore.) Andres has fixated on the Church of the Ecstasy of the Flesh, an element from the setting, and

is looking for a way to integrate his character Magnus's faith into the game. Somehow, he winds up talking to Baz about religion, and when Bailey makes a joke about the Crawling Spaghetti Monster, and the GM asks if she's saying it in-character, she goes with it. Dice get rolled, and somehow the situation doesn't turn against us. There's now a religion in Doskvol based on Italian food.

We're told that the chest of funds is small enough to carry, and is kept somewhere in the Red Sash Sword Academy, a large mansion at the north edge of the district. (Akshith had a big laminated map of the city printed up at Staples! Like, 22"x17", or about an A2 sheet for yadda yadda ISO sizes yadda.) There's a park nearby, so Magnus (the only one with dots in Survey) decides to pretend to be talking to people about religion while he cases the joint. Andres rolls a failure (the dice generally seem to hate him), the GM sets a 4-wedge clock with 2 filled wedges: the Sashes have taken note of him, and if the clock fills up, they'll figure out that he's definitely up to something.

Joe, Reza, and Johann try to talk their way in, posing as inspectors. (This is all Gathering Information; we haven't started the actual job yet.) Reza uses her past as an academic to bluster her way through, with Rena (damn, I just realized we had a player named Rena and a PC named Reza) mentioning that her PC Joe has a Mesmerism ability that can make the guard forget about us if we screw it up. We get a partial success, which Akshith declares means we get in, and the guard (Jakob) even says he'll vouch for us, but once we're in, he'll forget that he saw us, so we can't actually rely on him vouching. (We know this as players, but our characters don't.) Since we're in, Akshith draws us a map of the interior of the mansion.

Meanwhile, Robin has been casing the joint outside, learning the guards schedules. She rolls a crit, so she learns the heck out of 'em!

Having gathered all that info, we're ready for the actual heist. We go with a Stealth plan, most of the team going in through the roof while Joe, using a flashback to have convinced one of the workers (a guy we dub Bob) that he's a new hire, goes in through the front. (Bob's got a 6-wedge clock to figure out that Joe's fake,

but that winds up not mattering.) We get 2 dice for Engagement, and I roll a 5: Risky position. The GM sets down a 6-wedge clock with one wedge filled in – we made a little noise getting up there, so the guards are listening, but haven't yet figured out anything's afoot. Joe learns that there's a guy named Riposte, a kind of magic-using duelist, who lives on the second floor, and is second in command of the Red Sashes.

Magnus listens at the roof door, and Andres flubs the Survey roll again! Akshith tells us we hear noise on the other side. I explain that the nature of the game, which leaves facts uncertain until they've been established in play, means that a failed listening roll can mean guards are now there that the GM had not planned to put there. These rules do not follow blorb principles.

Things get a bit confusing here. Andres wants to know if it's raining. Why? He's got the Tempest ability, and he wants to use thunder as a signal to Joe to distract Bob, so we can get in through the skylight. I suggest using a Fortune roll, which Akshith goes with: a 5, so there are storm clouds. Andres says that the specific thing Magnus is doing is clapping his butt cheeks to produce the sound of thunder. Akshith offers a Devil's Bargain: Andres gets an extra die to roll, but win or lose, Magnus is gonna crap his pants. (See what I mean about youthful chaotic energy?) He fails, the Guard clock advances, and Magnus's stinky poop smell is a source of humor for the rest of the session. (Andres has a run of bad luck in this game. He keeps getting bad rolls with his best Action, and most of his cool abilities are geared towards dealing with ghosts and demons, which we aren't encountering.)

I roll to have Johann pick the lock on the roof door, and get a crit! Not only does it open, but Riposte is there, back turned, and doesn't notice us! Robin tries to sneak up on him, but rolls crappy. I suggest that this is a good time to learn about Resisting Consequences. Angie rolls a 4 for Robin's Resist roll, marks 2 Stress, and we rewind the scene.

(I think we might have run that action wrong anyway. In a game like *GURPS*, if you're sneaking up on someone and conking them on the noggin, that's a Sneak roll and then a Conk roll. In *Blades*, I think you're supposed to combine that into one roll.

It's either Sneak-to-justify-conking, or Conk-justified-by-sneaking, and the GM sets Effect, Position, and Consequences accordingly. I think.)

My (Johann's) and Angie's (Robin's) playbook sheets, for some reason, don't have our playbook gear listed, so I look mine up in the book (PDF on my iPad Mini), and see I've got a magic silence potion that cancels sound in a 10' (3m) radius of the drinker for a few moments. Aha!

Johann quaffs the potion. Robin Skirmishes (that's the Conk action) Riposte, with Magnus giving Aid. A partial success means that Riposte smells Magnus coming, and stabs him in the leg (Harm 2) before we incapacitate him. (We don't want to kill anybody, because in Doskvol, deaths are automatically detected by Spirit Wardens, who show up to prevent the deceased from returning as a ghost.)

Meanwhile, Joe tries to Sway Bob into leaving. Another partial success, so Bob is gonna go home, but first they've gotta go upstairs and check out that poop smell. Robin knocks Bob out, but it's another partial success, so we're just one clock wedge away from the guards catching on that something's up!

We've got Bob's keys, so it ought to be easy to open the door to the money room, but it's magically locked. Good thing Magnus's sheet lists a Ghost Key that opens magical locks! Johann opens the chest (another crit! the dice love me!) to verify that it does, in fact, have money inside it. It does! Now we just have to leave. It's a small chest, so we can carry it easily. We just have to be stealthy.

That's a group action. Johann leads, since he's got 2 dots of Prowl, but nobody else has any dots! I roll a partial success (the guards twig to us just as we scamper away), but I have to mark 1 Stress for each PC that fails, which is all the rest of them, and this fills up Johann's Stress track. (I've been doing a lot of Pushing and Aiding, figuring that this is a one-shot, so I don't have to care if this character gets used up.) He's traumatized! Driven paranoid by the poop smell!

We deliver the goods to Baz, getting 4 Coin, a +1 relationship with the Lamp-blacks, and a -2 relationship with the Red Scarves.

This was pretty cool! In some ways, I think

Blades might be a better game than *Scum and Villainy*. But there were a lot of nifty-sounding sections of rules that we didn't get to test out in this one-shot. Not just the supernatural stuff, but the turf and crew rules. Those look like fun!

Comments on E&A #6

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John Redden: yct **Josh** re "TLDR" – Literally "Too Long, Didn't Read," often written with a semicolon in the middle. Originally a dismissive response to long-winded online posts or comments, some people use it as a shorthand way of saying "Here's the summary, for people who don't want to go through the whole thing." I think it's sometimes pronounced "teal deer." The earliest citation Know Your Meme has is from 2003, so it's been in use at least since then.

If you're familiar with sci-fi author Bruce Sterling's Viridian Notes, the "Attention Conservation Notice" summaries he'd put at the beginning were a similar thing, without the dismissive meaning.

Lisa Padol: re page count woes – We talked about this in person, but I'll repeat it in case other people find the advice useful: It looks like you've got 1-inch margins (2.54cm for people in countries that blah blah I'm running out of snarky ways to complain about the US having not gone metric), which is more than you need. I've got mine set to half an inch.

You could also fiddle around with your font and your line spacing. It looks like you're currently using Verdana at 9 points with 13-point line spacing. Consider switching to PT Sans at 10 points, which has a similar look to Verdana, but is a little narrower.

Also consider taking your line-spacing from 13 points down to 12. If that looks too tight, turn it back, but if it looks OK, you've just saved a bit more space.

Note that if you're gonna use downloaded Google fonts, you probably need to make sure whatever app is building your PDFs is using font embedding. I have no idea how to do this with Microsoft Word, but I'm sure it can be looked up. It's entirely possible that this is already the default setting, but who the

heck knows with Microsoft.

Added note for Typst users: Typst doesn't yet support variable fonts. There are ways of converting a variable font file to static fonts, but if you get a variable font from Google Fonts, you'll find that the download conveniently includes a folder of already-converted static font files, so it's already taken care of for you.

yct me re the scene with Harmony and her brother – One issue there was that none of us are really emotionally invested in that relationship. We should probably have fleshed Kenn out more; if not in our Session Zero, then before running that scene. For example, I mentioned that, when he had to join the military, it meant giving up on his planned career, but we never decided what that was. What if we knew what he'd given up? Like, what if he'd been a musician in a group that struck it big after he left, like Pete Best and the Beatles?

Roger Bell_West: re your *GURPS Pathfinder* map – This reminds me that, a few months ago, I was googling for examples of people playing *GURPS* without a map, and found one by a group that had used a hex-grid to map out a formal dance party, so they could keep track of who was close enough to chat with whom.

Not long after that, I was looking through the rules for my old copy of *GURPS* 2nd edition, and saw in the section on Basic Combat: "It is not a 'tactical' system; no game map is used. The GM regulates movement, using a few simple guidelines and his own common sense."

yct **Matt** re "the 'alpha player' problem" – In my experience, this term is used to describe the tendency, with cooperative boardgames, of inexperienced players asking so much advice of experienced players that the game winds up effectively being the most experienced player playing with himself. This isn't a matter of one player being domineering so much as the others deferring to them. Some games have rules designed to counter this effect. The Grizzled, for example, forbids players from discussing the cards they're holding.

Patrick Riley: In "Iggy: Rock Gnome Bard," does *rock* tell us the kind of gnome, the kind of bard, or both?

yct **Josh** re calling God out on his bullshit – In the Jewish tradition, this is not just an obligation that humans have, but some of have even succeeded at it! See Exodus 32:9-14 for an example.

self: re Voidlight – It was half-off for Black Friday (still is, as of Dec 16th), so I bought it. Used some PayPal credits I had sitting around, so it didn't even really cost money. Haven't had a chance to give it a good looking-over yet.

I also used a 30%-off Lulu coupon to get the Star Dogs Referee's Handbook and Player's Handbook. This is a simple space opera game, but I'm mostly interested in the Ref book's random tables, and the fact that these are slender little volumes that take up hardly any space on my shelves.

Elf: re *Wanderhome* – Interesting to see someone else trying out the *Belonging Outside Belonging* family of games for the first time around the same time that I am! Our *Dream Askew* worldbuilding setup went more quickly than it sounds like yours is, but it also sounds like you're setting up a larger area than we had to.

The huge number of Natures you get to choose from sounds like it might actually be a problem. *Dream Askew* just has six Setting roles, each very distinct from the others, so it's usually obvious when one needs to come into play.

(Hmm. Someone's probably already put together a *BOB* game about the Church of the SubGenius, right?)

Michael Cule: re John Dallman and "the inspiration of immersion" – But what was the pseudo-scientific explanation for Basque? Don't leave us hanging!

We've got another *Monsterhearts* session scheduled for tomorrow, the 21st, so I don't expect to get it written up before the deadline.

DENIZENS OF THE LIBRARY #6

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

All About Me

It's been a chaotic few weeks at Casa Rogers, so I'm calling off getting comments on E&A 6 done before deadline, especially with the holidays looming. Baking is going in full swing, as well as our minimalist decorating. Of course everything has been thrown into a tizzy since the leak in the pipes to the tub expanded and expanded until mold remediation tore the entire washroom/pantry apart. So much for a chunk of the money that contract work had set aside; fortunately we have mold coverage on our homeowners insurance, but it's and expensive and ongoing problem I had hoped that would be the last kick in the teeth from 2025 but the back to back deaths of Tom Stoppard and Rob Reiner certainly set the list for movies over my daughter's winter break. Did you know Stoppard did the final rewrite on *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*? I did not, but I'm not surprised. In any event post Christmas there will be retrospectives of both men's film works, along with Season 2 of Andor.

Speaking of plays, the kiddo and I are off to NYC tomorrow to see a new play by the people who did the *Arcadia* production that introduced our daughter to Stoppard as Stoppard. This is "*Are the Bennett Girls OK?*" and is a comedy adaptation of *Pride & Prejudice*.

Speaking of the Kiddo, she has reaffirmed her plan to bring her *13th Age* rulebook to school to run a session or two for her game group, if only to show them all how a different system handles the F20 *De&D* tropes. She's hoping it might gain some converts, as she is playing 5E under duress. "It's... *fine*," she says. Talk about damning it with faint praise. I'm proud that she's trying life behind the screen once again, not attempted since she ran 2 sessions of 3E 4-5 years back.

I'm afraid the *Under the Giant's Shadow* mechanics will have to wait another month as well; I got absorbed in another project I'm sharing this issue for *Villains & Vigilantes*. I'm taking a deep dive into the Skills list (the random table of super-abilities you get through intensive training. My work on the Regrettables has highlighted some of the deficiencies of the list, so I am revamping a lot of the abilities and adding several new ones. The intent is to make it easier to create differentiated two-fisted adventurer types.

Inside the Library:

Alire: a wood elf bard/sorcerer raised in the Elf Queen's court as part of the living wards that hold in the Great Green Wyrms in check, he spent some time representing the Elvish army as a gladiator in Axis. He is also the inventor of the 6/8 time signature, which he feels is more important.

Sol: a dark elf druid, an orphan who sailed out of the Underdark's and wandered the surface world. She is the Diabolist's adopted daughter. Kai the Fifth spared her life for a promise to protect the empire. Even with him not there she has continued to act in the Empire's best interests... since they haven't hindered the Diabolist.

Numina: a high elf of unknown family line, an acolyte of the Cloaked Healer (Domains of healing, trickery, and strength), and emeritus member of the Crown Hospitallers, an order of martial clerics. Numina has directly summoned her god inside the *Forbidden City*

Mikeala Jaxon: An agent of the Archmage, this wood elfish ranger was the field partner of Oolay'ah and was caught in the Mirror of Life Trapping the moment that blackguard got her hands on it. A professional field agent and bodyguard, she also has spent decades leading hunting parties in the Dire Wood.

Quint Whitebear: Trapped in the Mirror since the 5th Age, Quint is the last surviving member of the Imperial Bear Cavalry, who were the reason the Orc Lord didn't rise in that age. After spending a millennia in the mirror, his ability to see the unnatural is heightened.

This marks the start of the 3rd year of this campaign. We concluded the Adventurer tier with *The House in the Frozen Lands*, the defeat of Oolay'ah-ben-Ethra-mah-Lanoorah's attempted coup of the Sept of Infamy and her conversion the Schola of Law on the northernmost edge of the Dragon Empire from Thoth and Ptah to the dark worship of Loviatar, Tuoni, and Tuonetar. Whether she was an ally of the Orc Lord or not, this change would have weakened the Empire against his growing horde.

With Oolay'ah's death the Denizens were able to recover the Mirror of Life Trapping and free those held within. This included not just the leadership of the Schola of Law and the Sept members opposed to Oolay'ah's coup, but two individuals little connected these events. Onyx packed up the Denizen's last sled with the Mirror of Life

Trapping, hitched himself to it, and headed back at his best speed (by the rune's magic, he has to have someone follow him, and Rob Banks volunteered to get out of this snow covered hellscape and back to civilization).

The days immediately after Oolay'ah defeat were busy, with the Schola recovering, Ghanorlah-ben-Thylorh-mah-Lanoorha (Oolay'ah's cousin and the true heir of the Sept) leading most of her people back across the Moonwreck to the Sept clans center, Dragon's Lair. One clan members, Selthor'ah-mah-Lanoorha (Oolay'ah's younger sister and a spellcaster) opted to study at the Schola. Over a week she tattoos a magical lair for Lua, Sol's displacer beast, into Sol's shoulder. Alire, wakes to find the Wand of Lathendar has fused with his fuscina to form the Trident of the Dawn God.

Session 53 (November 25, 2025)

The Denizens had a robust discussion as to whether they wanted to stay the winter in the schola, to head west across the moonwreck with Ghanorlah, or head east to follow up on other issues, but settled on trying to race the winter south and get back into the Empire proper. Mondaleth, the head of the schola, outfits them with some dogs (to join the ones they brought with them) and fresh sleds that have been blessed to resist the cold for this season. Their trip over the next five and a half days is unimpeded by encounters but a storm sweeps in shortly before the company can reach Ulrich Monastery.

Unfortunately any hope for hospitality is dashed by lack of firelight or smoke from the monastery, and the door being visibly ajar in the growing storm. While everyone else takes shelter Sol assumes the form of an ice weasel and skitters across the snow to see what happened. She passes the sign of some sort of battle, with blood on the snow, and pushes on to the monastery's foyer, where there are human bodies mounded in the center, a severed head atop them. As a snowy owl she flies back.

The others get a higher-level view of the battlefield, with Alire finding a broken sword with the distinctive ibis-hilt of the knights of Thoth who guard the monastery and Schola. Once everyone is inside, they close and bar the door, leaving the dogs and Lua outside under the shelter of a tarp, trusting the magic of the sleds to keep them warm and the displacer beast to keep them safe. Quint's bear, however, follows them in. Numina autopsies the bodies, finding them likely two days old but frozen. She accounts for 4 bodies but 5 heads, all killed either from large claws or very rapid freezing. Sol wracks her memory for something this could be but comes up empty. Alire finds an intact companion to the sword outside, along with a heavily used prayer book, a wrapped package, and other odds & ends. Assuming the package's original owner is likely a corpse. Mikeala opens

it to find an exquisitely crafted prayer book, which Numina takes. Sol mouse-scouts through the peepholes in the room, finding both flanking guard rooms empty.

There are double doors that Alire and Sol know lead to the main chamber of the Monastery, and past that the living quarters. Alire heads deeper in, looking for Father Harlder's journal (he took a minute to confirm Harlder's body isn't in the pile, but he did recognize two of the others from last year). Quint follows him into the central chamber – which shows evidence of a beast rampaging in it – but not farther as he bear won't fit through the deeper doors. Alire heads into the dining hall, seeing the door that leads to the north corridor has been broken, and the cold air coming through it means the door to the outside is likely also broken. He turns west and finds Halrder's room, containing the daily log, the Father's library of the frost range's flora and fauna, and the monastery's book of prayers to Thoth and Ptah. He takes the journal finds his exit blocked by 7 feet of fur covered, terrifying monstrosity!

Terror that Alire would poetically call 'instinct' kicks in and he uses the Cloak of Forest Shadows to disappear before the creature can charge, reappearing on the far side of the dining hall and leaping back to Quint, blasting the beast with chaotic fire as he flees. This commotion summons the other Denizens, who join the fray, but Alire is by far the most effective, expending his Lightning Bolt (retooled to fire thanks to the Trident of the Dawn God), Dragon's Leap, and Soundburst spells in lingering terror as they overwhelm and harry the Yeti into the snow, pummeling it before it could extinguish its fur and escape. Quint's bear eventually shakes off the Yeti's gaze's terror-driven paralysis, snuffing embarrassed promises of a better showing in future. A mystery remains: Father Harlder's body is not present, and per the monastery log another resident is missing....

Session 54 (December 8, 2025)

The Denizens spent the night in Ulrich Monastery, beginning with scouring the building for where Father Harlder and the other missing man – either Athyer Jordaye, an agent at the Abyss, or Geoffry Tere, a philologist of demonic contracts – might be.

Nothing is found inside, but Sol locates debris indicating where the Yeti dragged bodies. Numina prepares for a dawn cremation; Sol's concerns about the flames being enough are met with a gentle reminder that she worships a fire-aspected divinity; getting things hot will not be an issue. Mikeala and Quint make repairs on the monastery, and Alire spends hours pouring through Harlder's volumes of mountain naturalism. His discovery of a document that Yeti and Snowy Owlbears can live in symbiotic relationships does not improve his mood.

The deaths of monks who had once been kind to her affects Sol deeply; she spends the night capturing their likenesses and writing out their story for Sir Rosh, who per Harlder's journals is due any day. After the cremation she leaves the account with Quint, who drew the short straw and must watch the monastery while the others leave to recover the missing bodies. Mikeala and Sol both find the trail, and ranger led her companions forward while the druid scouted from the air. As a snowy owl she could see the evergreen-shrouded rise of their destination, but she could also see a woman, back against a tree, fighting wolves. Sol swoops low and identifies a Sept amulet, and drops, becoming a wolf mid-landing.

During a growled conversation with the wolves – who inform her that they are hungry, and that the woman smells of hot blood and dark soul – Sol manages to convince them that she will help them find other prey. The woman is circling, trying to get some clearance, when Alire, Numina, and Mikeala arrive. The wolves depart, and the Denizens question the woman, Loorha-ge-Thylorh, who claims to be the last survivor of a Sept attempt to explore the Crystal Caves near here; she just wants to get back to Dragon's Lair. All are wary of her – while the Sept of Infamy are imperial allies, they aren't precisely *good* – and Alire's questioning reveals holes in her story about the caves being white dragon nesting grounds against his own extensive dragon lore; such as how white dragons nest in aeries or at the death site of the White ('Dragon's Lair'¹). She shrugs, says it was worth a shot, and draws, hoping to go down fighting.

Despite her skill the four-to-one odds are impossible. The Denizens capture rather than kill her. As Sol fulfills her wolf-promise the others tease out Loorha's story: a member of Oolay'ah's coup sent to assassinate the Ulrich monks, she learned things had gone 'pear shaped' and had been contemplating her next move. Returning to the Sept would mean her death; Numina convinces her to accept Imperial arrest². If the Empire finds a use for her, they will 'forget' to arrange her extradition; Imperial intelligence doesn't like to waste resources.

The five of them reach the cave and spot Yeti, adult owlbear, and worse... owlbear cub tracks outside. Mikeala uses her white crystal glove to create a hand to hold a candle to accompany her pet kingfisher. Using the bird's senses she explores the cave, locating the bodies being ripped apart by mother to feed to a quartet of

cubs. Alire puts his foot down: they have found the remains and there is no profit facing an enraged owlbear.

Back at the monastery, Quint had brought Sir Rosh up to speed. The paladin offers to watch Ulrich while the Denizens head south with their tale. He warns them that the imperial waystation is now on the mail route, meaning dragon couriers! If they can hitch a ride, their return to Axis might be swift!³

Comments on E&A 5

Clark Timmins: I love the age of architectural notations on the town map; clear and evocative!

Myles Corcoran: while as an HR professional I eye roll at "People and Culture" I'm glad they got you the support you needed. Your statement about being an open ear runs both ways, old friend. I always loved your *Tudor Talents* game, and think fondly of the hero who could turn things invisible or intangible with his gaze as a delightfully tricky super-power. I have questions about Lennon's mummified penis, however. "Brute Force and Ignorance" is my *Hackmaster* cover band. LOL at your lack of hydrological preparedness. It's not that a wizard did it; just whoever did do it isn't terribly smart. I cannot tell you how much I adore that one of the beetle guards was just a beetle to begin with. re *Kriegsmesser*: "Eggs and Jesus" is my *In Nomine* cover band.... re head trauma: does the game have a hit location system? "Alfonzo clocks her across the back of her head with his pry bar." Raymond chandler would approve! I found your solo pseudo-*Traveller* game fascinating! re *B/X*: Yeah, the next iteration of Cleric will be cleaner, especially if I can get rules for multi-classing in place. re *Dungeon Crawler Carl*: I found books 2-5 better than book 1; The series starts to get a bit creaky as hanging threats accumulate, but Dinniman does a good job of keeping them from overwhelming. I hope you continue to enjoy.

Attonarch: open doors checks being incredibly tense: <yorkshire accent> "and if you tell that to the young people today, they won't believe you" </yorkshire accent> re RCT Lisa on time and attendance: one of the big advantages of everyone having or being able to quickly make new PCs.

John Redden: re Live Action Mouse Guard: if they weren't wearing mouse ears it doesn't count!

¹ This bit of world building came from the first of two icon relationship spends this session.

² This is the second icon relationship spend, making Loorha a likely future ally.

³ The adventures here were cribbed from James Adams *The House in the Frozen Lands* from the June 1986 issue of *Dragon*, *The Ulrich Monastery* from *Dungeon #39*, and the *Shadowdark* adventure *The Forest Owlbear* from *the Arcane Library*

Gabriel Roark: did I look up the typeface in *AD&D* to give subliminal nostalgia factor in my in play *Under the Giant's Shadow* notes? I did, I did indeed. re YCT Patrick Z on 0 level troops: the other thing to keep in mind is *AD&D* doesn't scale up monsters individually to the players the way that current games do - goblins are still 1d6 HP less than 1 HD monsters when you're 9th level as they were at 1st, and the evil general probably has a small army of them. Which is meant to be opposed by your small army of better than average (that is to say 1 HD) troops. The PCs on average 5th level plate mail and magic axe bearing fighter with your 20 light cavalry and 100 heavy pike are your fighter's force projection, intelligence gathering, and defensive power that makes you on par with a 9th level spellcaster. In a world where you are not constantly dealing with small numbers of scaled against you opposition your 121 heavily armed men can do a LOT. They won't help you in the 9th level of the dungeon, but that's not their point. re YCT Dylan on *TOEE* repair crews: yeah, that's something games could use more guidance on other than the DMG telling you in passing you should do that. re YCT Lisa on remembering everyone who can act: To be fair, I did just make a spreadsheet to remind myself to ask the players if their PCs are using any of their potential abilities each round - Sol, your animal companion is only relevant in half the fights, is this one of them? Numina are you invoking a clerical domain this fight? if so which one? - because the kids so often forget. In the crunchy bits heavy world of 21st century F20 game design, 5 players can feel like 18 entities! Re state of the *Frog Leg Gang*: If these suckers don't train fast they are deeply foolish!

Lisa Padol: I loved *Musical Comedy Murders* - it's fast paced and funny, and now full of jokes about 1940 that people might get in 1987 but are obscure for the kids these days... except my daughter. As far as *Puffs*, yes, I know it's unauthorized and the utterly reprehensible JKR gets no money from it directly, but she has said that she considers any publicity around her work to be an endorsement of her views, and she made money from all the *HP* related tat that purchased as set dressing. The sad fact is that until she gets her morality kicked in gear by three itinerant holiday spirits or we can actually apply a death of the author, *HP* just needs to vanish. re *Moonlight on Roseville Beach*: Roger's comment to me this ish has the right of it. Re Drow Capstone: At the end of *D3 Vault of the Drow* it is possible for the PCs to have killed the people responsible for the giant raids that were their ostensible reason for going into the underdark, and in so doing restored the clan that has no interest in the surface. That seems like a capstone. "Do you want to push your luck and charge unprepared into a different dimension to fight the Drow's god?" is a question that answers itself. (Also see my comment to Roger)

Roger Bell-West: I want to see that serpent cult recruitment poster! My wife spent years doing costumes for kids shows without knowing how to sew, because hot glue gun work is good enough for long enough. re *Demonweb Pits*: well, here's the text from D3:

If any individual is bold enough to walk through the projection of Lolth (at 11) and then touch the "mural" he or she will be instantly drawn into the tunnel vortex and brought to the plane of the Abyss where Lolth actually dwells. (If you plan to continue the campaign, this will be handled in MODULE Q1, QUEEN OF THE DEMONWEB PITS; OTHERWISE, SUCH INDIVIDUAL CAN BE CONSIDERED AS SLAIN.)

If you beat Lolth's avatar elsewhere in the module, she leaves behind a cursed item that geases you to touching the mural. Until Q1 is printed TWO YEARS after D3, this is an instant kill either as a retribution or if the PCs push too far. Re YCT Matt Stevens: You're not wrong on the gear switching in play styles, and the costs of trying to make game sessions too much like other media. It's a balance between "I am hitting on the genre tropes" and "This will be a 44 MINUTE TREK EPISODE, GOD-DAMIT" as a GM. YCT Myles Corcoran makes *Bayern* sound amazing! re Caller as hiving off GM duties: that is what I always assumed - when you had 10-12 players and initiative by side some wrangling is required!

Patrick Riley: the old adage of "your players will always pick the option you don't want off the list, so don't put it there" holds here. If you wanted to set the scene at the festival, just ask everyone what their PC is doing at the Festival. Yes, you're all there, but doing what? As for Iggy's player forgetting their tragic backstory: I had that problem in a *Star Trek* game where the pre-game quiz asked everyone what they would do if they had no inhibitions, and then in session 3 or 4 put them on a planet whose EM fields mirrored the whole *Naked Time/Naked Now* virus in removing inhibitions. None of the players remembered what they wrote that I had set up parts of the world to lean into. ah well....

Avram Grumer: I do appreciate the unevenly distributed Eschaton! for some reason the "Go Rockfish" word balloon made me burst out laughing in the library re mapmaking: I assumed crude charcoal maps on cured skins, if the mapping was diegetic at all. There's a reason why *Under the Giant's Shadow* dwarves have the *Shanarra* Dwarf Power of not needing to map. LOL at the LLM being used for purely reactive pattern matching monster plots

Everyone else, more next month

Stating up Regrets 6: Doctor Hormone

This month, the sixth hero from Jon Morris' *League of Regrettable Superheroes* is one I've been eager to get to as it is so completely off the chain. A master of biochemistry beyond all human understanding, who violates all ethical rules for medical experimentation to fight for liberty, I give you: Doctor Hormone.⁴

Doctor Hormone (and yes, that is apparently his real last name, no first name is given) was an 85-year-old scientist who, on the brink of death, ingests his 'youth hormone' that restores him to the ripe old age of 25! His vigor returned, he and his granddaughter hop to Novoslatvia, a European country under threat from Eurasia (ruled from the Krimlen, in case you were wondering with a 1940 publication date if the bad guys were nazis or commies) and offering a \$25 million reward to anyone who can find a way to save their country of 10 million from an invasion of 200 million. Doctor Hormone Can!

How, you ask? By the power of hormones! He uses his 'youth hormone', which is a 'stabilize someone at 25 years old' hormone to age their youth brigade to fighting trim! He (or rather Jane his granddaughter) doses an antagonistic government minister Rassinoff, who turns out to be a spy, with donkey hormones to give him donkey ears and a tail (and the nickname Assinoff, yay!) and also donkey powers (boo!)! He gasses the incoming Eurasian army with 'you are all patriotic Novoslavians' hormones! The initial invasion is thwarted!

Unlike other heroes of the time, Doctor Hormone's adventures are serialized: Assinoff and the Eurasian threat to Novoslatvia are the foes for the first 4 stories, including Assinoff using chemicals he stole from Hormone to transform a chunk of the Novoslavian populace into animals temporarily (via cunningly disguising himself as Doctor Hormone by wearing a surgeons mask and a fedora to hide his ears). While the animal-shaped Novoslavians hold off another Eurasian attack, Jane is kidnapped and Hormone must surrender to Rassinoff and get death-trapped!

Fortunately for him he had already transformed units of the Novoslavian army into rat and locus people who can summon hordes their kind to become a literal plague on Eurasia, rescuing Hormone and Jane while disabling the Eurasian war machine!

Doctor Hormone is called back to the homefront to help confront the Nazi-allied Ku Klux Klan. I kid you not!⁵



The next arc sees multiple train wrecks, fifth column saboteurs, and... the group of Novoslavian soldiers that he turned into fleas to help them get into the states that, when he changes them back to humans, have flea-powers that include super strength, super leaping, and the ability to summon and control fleas in massive clouds (that they use to smother the flames when Doctor Hormone and Jane are the key guests at a cross burning). Apparently once you're hormoned into an animal, you get powers!

The final chapter makes all of that look tame: Doctor Hormone is contacted by a disembodied voice called The Thinker who summons him and Jane to a distant locale – aiding them against attacks from the Klan along the way by giving Doctor Hormone super powers or just directly killing the Klansmen – until they parachute out of a plane *through time* to get to The Thinkers Grecian temple at the beginning of the world, where they are informed they should rest before the Thinker explains how they are critical to the defense of Democracy and the human race. They lie down to sleep. The End.

<blink> <blink blink>

To clear our heads let's stat him out in *V&V*. First off, he has a *Transformation* device in the form of Hormone Pills. These let him a) transform humans to 25 years of age, giving them +8 Endurance when they do so (this requires his Angstrom Ray or the process is fatal) or b) transform humans to animals and vice versa – this can be a permanent partial transformation (such as Assinoff getting donkey powers and features) or a temporary one, where once they return to human form they keep some animal powers. He has 16 charges per day.

⁴ Doctor Hormone was created by Bob Bugg in 1940 and is in the public domain. All his adventures are at <https://comicbookplus.com/?dliid=90438>

⁵ Points to Dell for publishing this in '39/'40, while the clan still has significant influence, though some contend this story is why Hormone got cancelled.

(I am ruling that his ‘gas that turns people into patriotic Novoslavians’ is an invention under V&V’s one-shot invention rules. Also, if someone has had their age changed, they can’t be subject to the animal transform; this isn’t mentioned, but it is consistent with the stories.)

Second, he used his transformation power on himself, so he has the body of a 25-year-old but with 85 years of experience and training. This is *Body Power: Endocrine System* and it gives him +8 Endurance (via *Transformation*) but also +8 Intelligence and 2 bonus areas of knowledge due to his life experience. We’re going to say he has Science (Biology), Science (Physics), Engineering (Science!) and Medicine.



We could add more, but we won’t: Jane could be a ‘pet’ like Jack Barrister with the Eye, but not only do I not want to fall back on that too much, but Jane is as much a liability as an asset. Doctor Hormone never shows any fighting acumen, being a man of science, so no need to add those. He is often called on to lead people, and his transformed humans are surprisingly loyal, but not to the point where I feel the need to add things on.

In the end he has 11 Str, 18 End, 12 Agi, 22 Int, 13 Cha, and weighs in at we’re gonna say 160. That gives him a solid 16 hit points and 63 Power, with a surprising 250 lbs. lift due to the increased endurance. He’s in great shape but not a two-fisted hero. “What about the powers he gets from The Thinker?” you ask? Well....

But how do you play it?

The baseline adventures for Doctor Hormone are just not super-hero tales in the classic sense: they are science adventures, with our hero inserting himself into geopolitical events and using his shtick to drive outcomes. You could easily play this as an early 3rd Doctor style game where there’s no time travel but there is super-science... just with lots of hormones and transforms. Other PCs could easily be the wily Jane, a transformed ally with animal powers, and maybe a few others.

But we won’t. because Doctor Hormone is one of the two wartime heroes responsible for the world of The Iron Skull! You could say that since his enemy Assinoff of Eurasia (the Soviet Union) still had some of his hormones might do it, but surely Doctor Hormone would have moved to stop that... if he were around. But he’s not. He’s ‘sleeping away the ages’ at the Thinker’s highly improbable temple. So who is The Thinker?

I contend that it is the enemy of... The Eye! It is another astral projecting time-traveler, trying to manipulate the events of this timeline for reasons of its own. And while the Eye has telekinetic and pyrokinetic powers in his astral form, the Thinker casts mental illusions!

With Dr Hormone & Jane trapped in an illusion, the Eurasians & Nazis can deploy hormones to alter the war’s path. Eurasians field a veritable *Animal Farm* of armies! The Nazis, in contrast, master the Angstrom Ray, getting the youthful super-soldiers of Teutonic myth!

The Regrettable World

Now the real-world ramifications of this are horrible – something that The Iron Skull’s creator Carl Burgos (born Max Finkelstein) was likely aware of as the early stages of the Holocaust are gearing up in 1939 – and it’s something we have to address if we’re going to seriously use this timeline as a space for game play. Marvel solves the problem of WWII by having their heroes simply not be powerful enough to end it; DC with supernatural gimmicks to handwave why their veritable gods didn’t step in. In any case the war ends right on schedule. The Regrettable World doesn’t have either option: our WWII runs until the mid-1950’s. This is something I’m going to explore as we continue, looking for a path with some verisimilitude that isn’t a horror show.

But we do know that the Eye is opposing the Thinker in trying from the future (or a parallel future) to influence the Regrettable World, giving us some time and space.

Regretting what I said to you...

Myles wants some of whatever the golden age creators were smoking: a hookah of unbridled potential! And he and Lisa are correct that Speed’s disguise is delightful. As for Josh’s question, whenever the situation calls for something other than a horse to interact, Speed takes off his horse head and interacts as the city’s centaur hero – I think he might be overthinking this.

Roger BW correctly identified the Racket City’s motto: *Non ludimus teniludium*. (tecnically “we are not playing games of chance”, which is also true; they cheat.)

I’m not sure I understand Jim Eckman’s question about who Speed Centaur is for? Why, he’s for you and me!

Villains and Vigilantes Skills List

I'm using this space to do a review of the super-abilities on V&V skills list, mostly to expand or modify them based on my 40 years with the game, but also to add some more options and tweak percentages. The new chart is right here.

Roll	Ability	Roll	Ability
1-4	Advantageous Background	51-57	Heightened Intelligence
5-8	Companion	58-61	Heightened Movement
9-15	Heightened Agility	62-68	Heightened Senses
16-22	Heightened Attack	69-75	Heightened Strength
23-29	Heightened Charisma	76-79	Heightened Training
30-36	Heightened Defense	80-86	Natural Weaponry
37-43	Heightened Endurance	87-93	Weakness Detection
44-50	Heightened Expertise	94-100	Willpower

Heightened Basic Characteristic:

There are 5 abilities that increase basic characteristics (Strength, Endurance, Agility, Intelligence, Charisma), and *Mighty Protectors* (V&V 3E) has a clever innovation for Reduced Basic Characteristics that I want to expand. In MP each Reduced Basic Characteristic has 5 options where you can reduce the initial characteristic, or it and one other. If you have 10 points of Reduced Endurance maybe you are Unhealthy (-10 End), but you could be Emaciated (-6 End, -4 Str), Decrepit (-6 End, -4 Int), Lethargic (-6 Str, -4 Agi), or Sickly (-6 End, -4 Cha). This is great because not only does it split the pain, but it gives descriptive terms for the splits⁶.

A common issue is players wanting to boost their basic characteristics to play skill-based heroes in better than normal shape. I let players split their Heightened X bonuses up, but this formalizes it for those who want more rigor. (And for new players who need handholding). For now...

Heightened Strength can be Powerful (all Str), Sturdy (Str & End), Sinewy (Str & Agi), Stalwart (Str & Int) or Impressive (Str & Cha)

Heightened Endurance can be Tireless (all End), Healthy (End & Str), Athletic (End & Agi), Thriving (End & Int), or Fit (End & Cha).

Heightened Agility can be Graceful (Agi Only), Gymnastic (Agi & Str), Spry (Agi & End), Flexible (Agi & Int) or Lithe (Agi & Cha).

Heightened Intelligence can be Smart (Int only), Varsity (Int & Str), Resourceful (Int & End), Quick (Int & Agi), or Brilliant (Int & Cha)

Heightened Charisma can be Impressive (Cha only), Overwhelming (Cha & Str), Beautiful (Cha & End), Dashing (Cha & Agi), or Charming (Cha & Int)

The basic idea I think holds, both as evocative terminology and a way to split up points. The ability to split points is an implicit advantage of Skills over Ht. Characteristic B, the 'super' version. I doubt I would be as draconian as to stop anyone who really wants to split a power, or force the 3:2 split, but for trying to drive behaviors I'll leave things unsaid.

Heightened Combat Ability

First, let's discuss some aspects of Combat in V&V. The game does not assume close combat competence: everyone hits with a 5- t on d20 *before defenses*, and then gets a -1 penalty *at least* for being 1st level. On a hit normal people do 1d4

damage. This is accurate to how well a normal, untrained person lands telling blows. Solid verisimilitude to the real world, and a decent baseline for Doctor Hormone, but less so for the array of two-fisted Pls, soldiers, and... lawyers, I guess... joining the Regrettables.

Even without powers they can easily get another +1 to +2 from better-than-average Agility and d6 damage from superior Strength, which helps but not a lot. They can supplement this with weapons, which increase to hit and damage, approaching the weakest super-power attacks⁷. Having all your athlete-heroes carrying signature weapons is good iconography, but it's not the standard comic or player fantasy⁸. This is a space where a 2.5 edition of V&V needs some work.

However, that's not today's mandate! Today we're looking at the Skills list. I'm trying to ignore synergies for this and do away with the idea that the effective melee character needs 2-3 of these abilities plus Heightened Agility. Having just one of these abilities should make you as effective in combat as the least combat capable super-ability.

V&V has five abilities that improve your combat capability:

- Heightened Attack (increase damage)
- Heightened Defense (reduce chance to be hit)
- Heightened Expertise (increase accuracy)
- Natural Weaponry (unarmed as if a weapon)
- Weakness Detection (improved accuracy vs. foes you have spent time analyzing)

Now, as combat is a pillar of supers games these should each be distinct, clear, and customizable. Are they? Welllllll.... Needs some work. My goal here is for a hero with any one of these powers to feel heroic in combat, with the attack related ones bringing the character's per attack damage potential to par with the weakest super-power. If you end up with more than one (which with the short list on the Skills table you are likely to do so) you get properly formidable.

⁶ Yes, I too would swap Decrepit to be with Cha and Sickly to be with Agi.

⁷ Which is Sonic Powers at 10- to hit and 1d12, or 3.3 damage/attack made. This is the Sonic Powers Threshold.

⁸ Strong...beings like Iron Skull and Speed Centaur need high weights, cutting into Agility and reducing accuracy; V&V leans hard into "and then

the Thing hits him with a car!" style: the Iron Skull could lift an 8 ton car and smack someone with it, getting a +5 to hit (10 or less) and a +3d10 damage... he'd probably pull that lest the 6d10 splatter someone. In any event they don't need to carry weapons; just grab things and start swinging!

Natural Weaponry: Weapons in V&V add to both your attack type base⁹ and your damage. This ability gives you similar bonus in unarmed combat – because of martial arts skills, claws and fangs, or some other reason.

Since V&V is from the early 1980's it has both a simulationist attempt to make weapons 'realistic', with knives giving smaller bonuses than swords, *and also* make nunchaku the ultimate weapon. The power does what I want it to – with just this ability an otherwise normal person hits the Sonic Powers Threshold – in the worst possible way, small increase to attack type base and a huge damage bonus so the player still feels stymied while making actual weapons pointless. My solution here is to stop having individual lines for weapons and instead group them – I want to have some weapons better than others to keep the tone and the random scaling.

2d10 Roll	Weapon Type	Attack Type Increase	Damage Bonus
	Trivial	+1	+1
2-5	Minor	+2	+1d2
6-10	Significant	+3	+1d4
11-17	Impressive	+4	+1d6
18-20	Heroic	+5	+1d8

I'm not bothering to define exactly what weapons are in which category; not only do I not want to get that granular but I want to be able to have 'cheap sword' be a minor weapon while 'fictional 1980's ninja katana' is impressive. Heroic is reserved for devices or items gained via Special Weapon, but there's a slight chance that your Natural Weaponry is just that good. There is no chance that this power is Trivial, though a trade-off between powers the player could opt to reduce the ability to that level.

Where does this meet the Sonic Powers Threshold? At Impressive +1d6 or higher basic HTH. I needed balance between this and untrained people with weapons not matching super-powers. The ability has always been weighted for the higher bonuses, so no real changes, and even '100 lbs. when soaking wet' heroes can get to the 1d6 HTH level with a 15+ strength and endurance

Jenny Capricorn's preternatural martial artist skill earned her a spot in the Ubiquitous Zodiac Gang. With a 1d6 HTH and *Impressive Natural Weaponry* she doesn't need more to compete, but *Advantageous Background (Support)* for her UZG connections and/or *Heightened Agility (Spry)* to boost her Agility and Endurance she becomes a significant threat. Her chi will manifest as glowing goat horns, which is just chrome.

Heightened Expertise gives a +4 bonus to hit with a variable array of attacks. As written, most characters will have a bonus with a single attack, some have a group of attacks, while a precious few have the bonus with all combat. In my experience, the single attack version was dropped unless it was supplementing an iconic power or special weapon. Much more common was groups of attacks – martial arts, modern military, medieval – because that stood on its own as a character shtick.

2d10 Roll	Weapon Type
2-5	Single Attack
6-10	Tight Group of Attacks
11-17	Broad Group of Attacks
18-20	All attacks

As you can see, I made 'single attack' much less common but added a split between tight and broad groups. Basically, tight group is logically half the characters usual options, broad group is all their usual options, and all attacks is "I can pick up damn thing and be effective with it." So if we have a hero with a Power Blast item, with 'single attack' she could be really, really accurate with her item... or since power blast is already 16- to hit take the bonus with a sword, have the item shaped like a musket and take the name Musketeer. With 'tight group' she could expand that to 'fencing weapons' which I would include punching someone with her off hand or kicking them in a corps-a-corps. With 'broad group' it's pretty much everything in his idiom – punch, kick, the musket, all blades – but also give the bonus to any swashbuckling related acrobatics because it's such a clear shtick. At 'all attacks' it would apply to any combat related d20 check, even if she picked up a machine gun, or a battle axe – she's just preternaturally skilled.

Musketeer: *Heightened Expertise* power gives +4 to hit with a broad group of swashbuckling weapons. She's got an Impressive sword¹⁰, which puts her well past the Sonic Powers Threshold at 3.9 damage per sword attack. Of course, her *Power Blast Item* (musket) does 9.2 damage per attack, but I like the idea that it has a small number of charges (let's say 5), so she alternates between her attack options: the vast majority of the time she's deep into swordplay for dealing with conventional criminals, but when she needs to stop a vehicle in its tracks, disable a marauding robot, or deal with a superhuman behemoth the musket gets unslung and fired. This is an example of where the name of the hero shapes the entire rest of the idiom.

⁹ As I mentioned in DotL #3, there are various interpretations of when modifiers apply to the defense chart. My stance is they apply before, and the language here reinforces that.

¹⁰ Basically yeah, if she doesn't have one at the start she's gonna get one.

Heightened Attack: I discussed this in DotL 3 with Zippo, and it's a strange beast, giving you a +1 to damage to all attacks per level attained; it's useless early and brutal later. Now, Heightened Attack gives a damage bonus of +1d8 in the same groups as Heightened Expertise¹¹.

2d10 Roll	Weapon Type
2-5	Single Attack
6-10	Tight Group of Attacks
11-17	Broad Group of Attacks
18-20	All attacks

Players can negotiate reducing or expanding the breadth of attacks by altering the die size, especially if it feeds a clear character shtick. Maybe the player wants to use an array of weapons, or just a lethal lightning bolt.

Ragk-Na, Queen of the Cryptids, is an exile from the neanderthal race that lives in a cave complex under North America. Her core shtick is her *Heightened Attack* with Stone Age weapons. Classically Ragk-Na has *Heightened Charisma (Overwhelming)* from the "Inherent Savage Nobility of the Cryptid Race" to boost Charisma & Strength, so her strikes do 2d8+1d4 damage, well over the Sonic Powers Threshold. If we added a 3rd ability it'd be a pet dinosaur, or Cryptids Control.

Heightened Defense: This is very straightforward. V&V has an 'evasion' mechanic where spending an action reduces someone's chance to hit you for a round by 1'/10th your current Power score when you can detect the attack and move. (it's clever in that the more tired you get, the less effective your evasion.) Heightened Defense, by giving you a -4 to be hit under the same circumstances, is essentially a continual evasion¹². As with all V&V this is a negotiation; maybe the defense applies to tighter attacks to boost a different ability. Someone with the shtick 'super-boxer' dropping this to only apply to unarmed attacks get Natural Weaponry or Ht. Attributes makes sense. This is where having the standard table for Heightened Attack and Heightened Expertise is helpful as a framework.

Bantam: *Heightened Defense* power gives -4 to be hit only vs melee attacks he can detect and evade, but also gets significant Natural Weaponry. As a street level NPC, just this ability is... not bad. Add in *Heightened Strength (Sturdy)* to take him to a wildly-improbable-at-the-118lb-bantamweight-limit-but-fuck-it-this-is-comics 1000lb lift and 1d10 basic HTH, and he's formidable with 20 HP and punches over the Sonic Powers Threshold. Yes, he's a golden age Atom expy... there are worse fates.

Weakness Detection: As we discussed in DotL 5 with Iron Skull, this is the intelligence-based combat ability. Taking 1 action to use at very close (5') range, you get an Int-based bonus to hit and learn a target's Weakness. Learning is permanent, so the Weakness Detection hero gets a list of foes they studied and can reliably mess up. This captures the fantasy of Batman (who weakness detects allies!) or Taskmaster (the quintessential weakness detector¹³), but high Int characters get HUGE bonuses, such as the Iron Skull's +9.

To try to even this out, I am editing it so learning your foes weaknesses increases your Effective Level against them. As mentioned above, level plays into combat: a 1st level hero against a 4th level villain is -3 to hit and +2 to be hit; this works in the PCs favor against mooks and thugs once they get some levels, but it evens out to a +0 or -1 against foes of your same level. Since the experience modification is the one thing I put *after* the defense table – under the theory that a higher level hero can find the weaknesses in their foes defenses – being even slightly higher level is powerful.

Once you Weakness Detect someone you fight with them as if you were 4 levels higher, which is roughly a +/- 3 to hit/ to be hit. To keep the Intelligence factor, you can keep a number of foe's weaknesses in your head equal to 1/2 your Intelligence, rounded up. This keeps the list from getting too crazy. The action requirements – 1" range, 1 action – remain the same, with the caveat that it must be *in combat* (you can't learn how to fight someone without seeing them fight). Pick one type of Weakness Detection below.

- A) Tactical: You can target a mob of henchmen in the current fight. Villains recruit similar henchmen over their careers, so if you detect 'Jenny Capricorn's Mob' that bonus stays even if she recruits a new mob. You only learn a Weakness if it has direct combat application.
- B) Psionic: Can be done out of combat but requires successful Mind Control attack at 1" range to scan the target's brain for their Weaknesses.
- C) Supernatural: detection can be at Intelligence in inches range. If this is *not* done in combat, you only learn a Weakness, you don't get the effective level bonus.
- D) Structural: While you never learn a Weakness, you can apply this to non-living targets, halving their Structural Rating against your attacks¹⁴.

I think this manages to capture the various fantasies.

Pythia: possessing Supernatural Weakness Detection, she is Ophiuchus, the secret 13th member of the *Ubiquitous Zodiac Gang*, acting as a non-partisan advisor to the others, manipulating them to settle disputes between them that drive her own objectives. She also possesses Ht. Intelligence (Brilliant), boosting her Int & CHA. A third ability, if needed, is some sort of Heightened Senses for prophecy, based on magic or just reading situations.

¹¹ The increasing effect aspect of this is being pulled out to its own ability, *Heightened Training*.

¹² This works nicely into the action economy, freeing up a hero without a defense type from having to set up evasions.

¹³ Of course, Taskmaster also has a mutation of Photographic Reflexes

¹⁴ This is the Karnak option, matching that member of the Inhumans a super martial artist who can analyze objects before breaking them. He might well have been the first practitioner of Asian-chromed martial arts in comics.

The Other Classic "Skills"

There are a few other abilities on the Skills table: Heightened Senses, Pet, Speed Bonus, and Willpower.

Heightened Senses: One of the most open-ended powers in the game, delightfully so, it doesn't require modifications.

Willpower: As we discussed in DotL #2 and 711, this is the 'wild card' 'let do what you will be the whole of the law' ability on the Skills list, like Body Power, Mutant Power, or Psionics. The default is a general purpose 'do force of will or mental acumen' stuff, but it can be whatever. Works for me.

Heightened Movement: Speed Bonus is oft derided as the weakest ability in V&V... because it's true. To put some more rigor into the ability, I'm going with the following:

- A) Standard: One of your movement rates increases by 50-100" ((1d6+4)*10 inches) per turn. Any Basic Characteristic saves for complex movement are one level easier (d20 saves are automatic, BC*3% saves are d20, etc.). Increase your effective Power score by 1/3rd your Movement bonus when calculating evasions or 'rolling with' damage when you have room to move.
- B) Unique: You have a unique movement rate – wall-walking, tunneling, air-walking – for which you and the GM can develop as you see fit.

The intent here is for this ability to indicate a degree of super-athleticism that is not dependent on having high basic characteristics, to let people be super-effective fliers and swimmers if they have those powers, and also to give space for the player to come up with their own unusual movement types with unique rules that aren't covered elsewhere.

Companion: This is the expanded pet and has a few options of what NPC allies are under your control.

- Pet: you have an animal companion that, while non-sentient, can act more intelligently than normal animals. Control can be from a psychic link or it just being very clever and trained. This might be an normal animal, a normal-appearing with powers, or a supernatural beast. The animal always operates as if 4th level.
- Companion(s): you have one or more skilled-but-not-quite-superhuman allies as your 'right hand man' or 'girl Friday' or 'non-gendered ass-kicker'. They take the field with you (or operates independently) and are not solely remote support. A single companion should be created with the characteristics of a two-fisted adventurer type and operates at 4th level. If you have more than one companion, their competence and level should be adjusted downward accordingly.
- Sidekick: you have a companion who is a younger, less powerful version of your heroic identity. The Sidekick is one half your level, with super-abilities that are roughly 2/3rds of your own, basic characteristics equivalent for a youth, and the added weakness of 'Immature' and the GM can force an Int or Cha save o d20 to avoid foolish decisions or to caveat that they have been captured. At your 1st level the Sidekick might also be 1st level but with an -2 penalty on all actions, could act normally but not yet gained the mirror of your powers, or the power doesn't activate until you are 2nd level. Your call.

New Skills

Here are a couple more that I think need inclusion.

Heightened Training: As commented above, the ability of faster improvement was pulled out of Heightened Attack and broadened the way I mentioned with Zippo: for each level attained the character gains not just standard training (+1 to a basic characteristic, +1 to hit or damage with a single attack, weight gain or loss, a new knowledge area, animal training) the character gets an additional benefit.

At its most versatile, this allows the character two training opportunities per level, but it's more common for the additional training to apply to a tightly constricted power set. For example, Zippo's *Heightened Training* represents his perpetual tinkering with his contraption, and every level he gets not just his normal training but a +1 to contraption-related things: his *Heightened Speed* (every level increases the Heightened Speed roll by 1 point, adds +1 to his special attack damage against objects and he gets +1 inventing point/+5% on inventing).

Advantageous Background: this ability is lifted whole hog from a concept in the UK super hero game *Golden Heroes*. One of V&V's many charms is the default character is you, the player, with super-powers. This does make it hard to roll up millionaire industrialists or philanthropic billionaires. This ability exists on the Skills list, indicating decentralized abilities that the character can draw on in a significant way: Nick Fury in his 1960's comics has this as the head of SHIELD where he constantly in the field prepped with fresh intel and outfitted with a creative array of gadgets provided by SHIELD, with back up a radio call away... but he still is the one to race after the criminal mastermind. These aren't needed for every implied or minor aspect: if your PC has a device that you say they built, then you built it and have access to the resources to maintain it, no matter how little sense that makes (Peter Parker can't make rent but can keep his web shooters stocked and repaired), and you don't need an Advantageous Background for that.

There are several types of Advantageous Backgrounds

- A) Resources: You have some source wealth, personnel, and expertise that makes it easier for you to invent or commission things. Roll 2d10+10 as a bonus to your effective Intelligence solely for inventing, increasing your inventing points & percentage and ensuring that the relevant knowledge area is available. You also have a staff of 1-2 people, such as a trusted butler.
- B) Contacts: You have connections across various strata of society that you can call on for information. Roll 2d10+10 as a bonus to your effective Charisma solely for information gathering for any information. With a Charisma save (against this enhanced charisma) you can call on these contacts for direct, combat related support inside an adventure.
- C) Support: You have an organization behind you that takes your direction and provides you people & tech. Each level you get a new 'one-use' invention, and you can make saves against your Charisma score in order to call in investigative or field support.

Goodnight, Speed Centaur, wherever you are.



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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...

December has not been very joyful. Over the past month we've watched our 14 yo dog Sadie decline even more rapidly, with loss of appetite from chronic pain, strength, and engagement in the small pleasures that once defined her due to her metastatic cancer. Some days had better than others, but the overall trajectory has been unmistakable, and the pace of change has been heart breaking. Knowing, we nearing the end has brought a kind of anticipatory grief that I had not fully understood until we finally decided for euthanasia, and this took place December 17th 2025. We are all ❤️. RIP sweet Sadie.



In better news, our daughter Lauren has so far been accepted to two of the four Canadian law schools she applied to: Osgoode Hall in Toronto (her first back-up) and Western University in London, Ontario, where I went to medical school. We are very proud of her. She is still hoping for an acceptance from the University of Toronto's law school and waiting to hear.

Role-gaming wise has been quiet, other than a session in Peter Hildreth's online Victorian Era game.

Habana Horror: *The Mazorra* (Part 5)

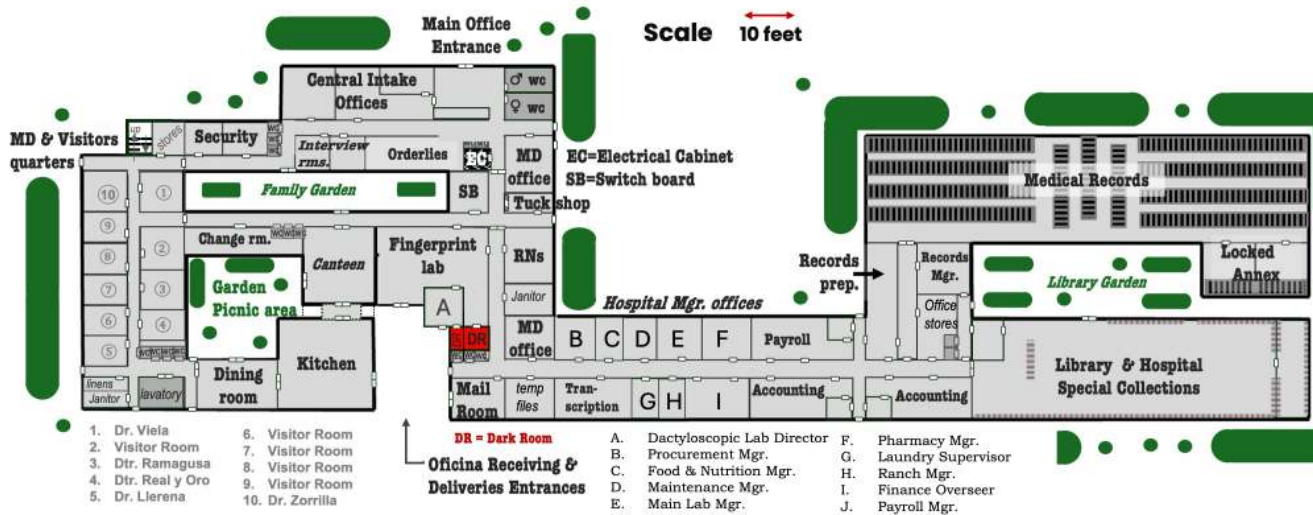


Viewed from above, the eastern end of Mazorra opens like the gaping jaws of a great Cuban crocodile, poised to bite down on all who enter. To continue the metaphor, *Avenida Álvarez-Cerice*, is the name of the long east-west roadway internal to the Mazorra, is named in honour of its legendary early-1900s Director of the hospital, acts almost like the alimentary canal of the facility

The **northern jaw** holds the fenced in Children's Pavilions, their school, the nursing school (empty this time of year) and the nurses' quarters. It's grassy, well kept, and is peaceful arc overlooking gardens and courtyards. The Mazorra Chapel is located such to be the eye of the crocodile.

Opposite it, the **southern jaw** forms a lighter if more secretive curve of buildings: the Director's Manse, the Superintendent's headquarters, the doctors' quarters, and "La Oficina."

Mazorra La Officina Map



La Officina [Mazorra's Main Admin Complex]

This cluster of green-roofed buildings is the bureaucratic heart of the hospital: offices, records rooms, reception halls, and narrow corridors stitched into a single overworked system. This section also contains a small colony of specialist medical clinicians and junior doctors who stay over live here week after week, some by choice, others because circumstances leaving the Mazorra during the General Strike has proven more difficult than expected.

Staff call it simply *La Officina*. If the medical pavilions are Mazorra's body, this block is its central nervous system; its eyes, ears, communication and (flawed) memory. It's offices and corridor are never truly quiet or calm during working hours. Some patients arrive with families, and separations quickly escalate into tears, shouting, blows and the hasty arrival of guards and orderlies. Others arrive with a police escort with much the same response. Clerks hurry between Armed Mazorra guards wheel in the locked mail trunk on a rattling cart each morning from Habana and out again at night to convey mail back to the capital. Nothing here ever stops moving, and nothing feels fully under control.

Mazorra Reception & Patient Intake (R)

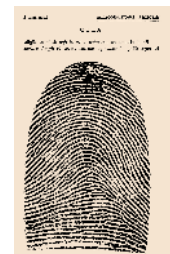
Outside to the east is a small parking area with space for five private vehicles, two ambulances, and one omnibus used to transport visitors to and from the nearby town when rail transport is not used.

The main front entrance opens into the *Central Intake Offices*, which serves as the primary entry point for all new psychiatric admissions. The lobby

interior consists of a wide, high-ceilinged hall furnished with wooden benches and ceiling fans. A main reception desk handles intake paperwork. A crucifix is mounted behind the desk, and a wall clock runs approximately ten minutes fast. Clerks behind the scenes process commitment orders, family petitions, transport documents, medical intake forms, and telegrams delivered from the mail room throughout the day.

Usual intake operations are conducted until 4:00 p.m. During operating hours, families may be present under supervision, and orderlies are stationed nearby to escort new patients as they arrive either to M1 or M2 hospital pavilions, or sometimes directly to forensic units. After 4:00 p.m., normal patient intake stops. Clerks close their ledgers, families are cleared from the area, and the doors to the main entrance is locked and unstaffed until the following morning.

The Dactyloscopic Laboratory (Fingerprint Lab)



Near the Patient Reception Hall is one of the strangest anomalies in Mazorra: *Licenciado Israel Castellanos' Dactyloscopy Laboratory*, a modern and well-funded forensic fingerprint suite created as part of Director Machado's ambition to "scientifically

classify the insane.” It feels less like a hospital department and more like a university annex, or a police bureau in a police state. It opened in 1931, predating J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI forensic fingerprint lab by a full year.

The main itself laboratory consists of tiled work counters with fingerprinting stations, photographic equipment, drying racks, and locked cabinets holding thousands of edge-notched fingerprint cards cataloguing patients, staff, guards, and select visitors. These cards are indexed using a mechanical sorting system that allows rapid classification without written ledgers. Locked cabinets containing edge-marked perforated patient ID and fingerprint cards for thousands of Mazorra in-patients, day-patients, staff, guards, and even visitors.



Information fingerprints classification (e.g., arch, loop, whorl patterns, etc.), would be coded by cutting notches into specific holes around the card’s edges. Invented in 1890s, such edge notched cards they acted as a mechanical database sorter. To search for specific characteristics, a user would insert a sorting needle through a particular hole position in a deck of cards. By lifting the needle, all cards that were *not* notched in that position would be lifted out, leaving the desired cards behind to be examined.

An odd electrical machine in one corner with a drum and a series of metal brushes is a wireless photo-radiogram (which pre-dates the telephone facsimile machine) uses a radio transceiver sent to a pre-set wavelength to send and receive photographs fingerprints and even photos of involuntary incarcerated patients from Habana’s Main Police Station as well as the Presidential Palace. It still works when the telephone lines are down, even if the power is down due to internal batteries that can run for about 18 hours but needs about 15 minutes have its vacuum tubes to fully warm up.

¹ Spanish prefix **Lic.** means *Licenciado* (male) or *Licenciada* (female), indicating someone who holds a university degree, equivalent to a

A rear darkroom is used for photographic film development and chemical processing and enlargements.

Castellanos works not only for Mazorra but also on retainer for the Cuban National Police. His skills are quietly lent to the *Ministry of Gobernación (Interior)* whenever Havana needs an expert to identify a corpse or verify incriminating prints. This arrangement gives him political protection, an oversized budget, and freedom to run the lab exactly as he pleases.



Lic.¹ Israel Castellanos

Director Mazorra
Dactyloscopic Lab

42 yo M, Cuban

Brilliant self -taught
criminologist, forensic
specialist, reluctant
Machado government asset

STR 45 **CON** 55 **SIZ** 50 **DEX** 50 **INT** 85
APP 40 **POW** 60 **EDU** 85 **SAN** 55. MP=12
HP 11 **DB/Build** 0 / 0 **Move** 7 **Luck** 40

Skills: Science (Forensics / Dactyloscopy) 90%,
Science (Photography) 70%; Library Use 80%; Spot
Hidden 60%; Anthropology 40%; Law 40%; Occult:
45%; Psychology 45%; Persuade 35%; Credit Rating
40%; Spanish (Native) 85%; English 50%; French
40%

Combat

- Brawl 30% (15/6), dmg 1D3
- Dodge 25% (12/5) (avoids physical confrontation whenever possible.)

Pulp Talent (*Fingerprint Savant*): Castellanos can identify, classify, and cross-reference fingerprints with uncanny speed and accuracy, even when the patterns no longer resemble anything human. Once per session, Castellanos may *automatically* achieve a Hard success on any one of his professional skill rolls when the task involves fingerprints, physical identity, or forensic comparison.

Background

Lic. Israel Castellanos is Cuba’s foremost expert in fingerprint classification and forensic identification. Largely self-taught and trained in Argentina, he was recruited to Mazorra in 1931 as part of Director Machado’s effort to modernize the institution and align it with European criminological science. Since

Bachelor’s or Master’s level, often in fields like law, engineering, or administration, used as a respectful title for professionals

then, Castellanos has also served quietly as a consultant to the Cuban National Police and the Ministry of Gobernación, identifying bodies, verifying evidence, and authenticating records that never officially pass through Mazorra.

Earlier in his career Castellanos published extensively on criminal anthropology and Afro-Cuban popular religion, studying figures labelled as *brujos* during moral panics and witch hunts. He rejected the idea that such practitioners were simply insane or innately criminal, instead treating them as distinct cultural types “shaped by African survivals within Cuban society”; living fossils in other words. This conclusion makes him believe such persons are dangerous because they represent cultural regression that threatens national progress in Cuba. As a self-taught scientist, he recoils from superstition, yet he knows more about *brujería*, *Palo*, *Vodou*, and related traditions than most physicians in Cuba. He approaches them not as faiths, but as evidence to be catalogued, measured, and neutralized.

Castellanos is sane but strained. He rationalizes his cooperation with the authorities as damage control. Increasingly, however, he is disturbed by how his work is used to control, disappear, or retroactively condemn individuals. He keeps copies of sensitive records others would destroy, telling himself this preserves truth, even if he lacks the courage to act openly.

Roleplaying Notes

- Polite but socially awkward
- Speaks precisely, often distracted mid-sentence by technical thoughts but becomes animated when discussing fingerprint classification systems or anomalies AND when discussing Afro-Cuban religious spiritualism.
- Avoids political statements but clearly disapproves of cruelty and corruption

[Keeper's Notes: Castellanos knows that some fingerprint records marked “deceased” belong to people who were executed or vanished by the Porra. He will not volunteer this information, but can be persuaded with careful logic, ethical appeals, or proof that the Investigators can protect him. Castellanos' vast knowledge of Afro-Cuban spiritualism and religious practice is something he doesn't talk about now but others are aware of his feelings and opinions]

Lic. Castellanos' Inner Private Office: This is approached only inside the lab is meticulously tidy and unnervingly quiet because its walls are soundproofed. A steel desk sits precisely cantered, its surface arranged with inkpads, magnifying

lenses, callipers, and blotting paper laid out in careful alignment.

Tall filing cabinets line the walls from floor to ceiling, each drawer neatly labelled by year and fingerprint classification system. Above them, enlarged photographs of fingerprints cover the upper walls, mounted like anatomical charts, ridges and whorls enlarged until they resemble abstract topographies rather than human marks. A narrow bookshelf holds technical volumes in Spanish, French, and German, most notably an autographed copy of *Dactiloscopia comparada* (1904) by Juan Vucetich, the foundational text of fingerprint analysis in the Spanish-speaking world.

[Keeper's Notes: A concealed inner panel door behind a floor to ceiling panel covered in blown of photos of inked fingerprints connects to a second dark room. This contains a locked safe in the floor under a rubber mat, inside which are the restricted fingerprint records of forensic (political) patients officially listed as deceased, implying government involvement in extrajudicial killings. Also inside here are microfilmed duplicate copies of all official Mazorra patients as his personal backup, in case of fire, theft, or political insurance.]

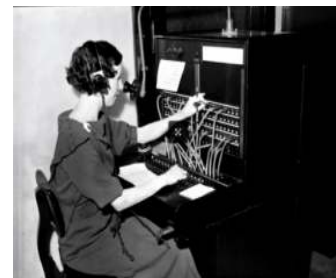
One drawer of the desk remains locked at all times. Inside are case files and print records connected not to Mazorra patients, but to Castellanos' discreet work for the government, material that is never logged in hospital archives and never discussed outside this room.]

Main Mazorra Switchboard ☎

In the early 1930s, a large institution like Mazorra required a central switchboard to manage all internal and external communications.

Direct-dial telephones were rare and unreliable, and nearly every call had to be manually connected by an operator. The switchboard linked administrative offices, medical wards, guard posts, kitchens, and outlying pavilions, allowing staff to summon doctors, report emergencies, request supplies, or alert guards within minutes.

While telegram messages were typically received and dispatched through the Mazorra's Mail Room, urgent telegrams were often phoned in by the telegraph office to the switchboard, read aloud to the operator, and relayed immediately to senior staff before the physical message arrived. As a result, the



switchboard frequently learned of crises, political orders, and deaths hours before anyone else.

Senora Teresa Pacheco rules the switchboard room like a gossip queen. In charge of three other young women, she sits inside a glass-fronted booth that faces the corridor, surrounded by tangles of cables, plugs, and rotary dials. Every incoming and outgoing call at Mazorra from Habana passes through her hands, with less important calls routed by the others. She also controls every loudspeaker announcement across the Mazorra campus. Because she listens to nearly everything, Pacheco “knows all” and cultivates this reputation with almost theatrical satisfaction.

Electrical Cabinet (EC): A narrow service room lined with bundled electrical cables, ceramic fuse blocks, knife switches, and handwritten circuit labels. This cabinet controls electrical power for the entire *Officina* complex, including the switchboard, records rooms, and administrative offices. Individual room and floor sections can be powered down or isolated from here. Blown fuses are common, particularly during storms or heavy telephone use. Spare fuses and basic tools are kept in a locked metal locker bolted to the wall. The space is cramped, poorly lit, and usually unattended except during maintenance or emergencies.

Keeper's Notes: A successful *Electrical Repair* or *Mechanical Repair* roll at normal Difficulty allows controlled outages or other subtle sabotage rather than total blackouts. Failed rolls risks sparks/fires, damage, or sudden loss of power in unintended areas.

Mazorra Mail Room: This one of the busiest administrative spaces in the institution. It receives, sorts, and distributes enormous volumes of correspondence each day. Here arrive medical reports, X-ray envelopes, pathology samples, railway parcels, boxes of drugs, telegrams, and medication deliveries. Twice daily the train brings a heavy locked mailbox which is processed by a small team of women.

Othello's Tuck Shop Window: Set into the back wall is a barred service window opening into a tiny tuck shop. It is run by *Señor Othello Romero y Barbero*, a blind Afro-Cuban man in his fifties. Although sightless, he identifies the value of coins and banknotes by touch alone and never makes a mistake; he drops all change into a little wooden bowl carved with worn symbols. Othello sells cigarettes, cigars, pipe tobacco, chocolate, candies, razor blades, combs, and other sundries that keep the *Officina* staff functioning.

He is cheerful, talkative, well-liked by staff, and swaps gossip freely with Sra. Teresa Pacheco at the

switchboard. Between the two of them, most secrets in Mazorra surface sooner or later. Staff sometimes remark that Othello “knows things before he should,” and he is quietly treated with a mixture of affection and unease. At the rear of the tuck shop is the *Perdida y Encontrada* (Lost Property Locker), a tall locked cabinet. Anything unclaimed on the grounds eventually finds its way here for storage and possible later claim. <list omitted>



[Keeper's Notes: Othello is also secretly a former Santeria Voudan Brujo deeply concerned re Baron Kriminal's incursion into the Mazorra.]

Doctors' Quarters 🏠:

A. Visitor Suites: These rooms are hotel-like, polished wooden floors, nice furniture, mosquito nets without holes, an en-suite toilet, and slightly better linens. Surgeons from Havana, wealthy donors, and high-ranking visitors like the Investigators use these during week-long residencies or “inspection tours,” and are regularly cleaned when in use.

B. Semi-Permanent MD staff: These are occupied by long-service, unmarried, or other physicians whose circumstances have them reside both at the Mazorra and in Havana. All have a twin bed, a desk, two chairs, a wardrobe dresser and closet. To this each will add their own flourishes.

A. Dr. Vilela's room is tidy at first glance, but closer inspection reveals a man living under strain. His desk is crowded with several untidy stacks: clinical notes, medical and psychiatric journal articles, and a disturbing bundle of anonymous death threats, some crudely written, others disturbingly articulate. A desk drawer holds both blank and used Dictaphone transcription cylinders, along with a half-used cylinder still mounted in the machine. If played (Spanish), the recording captures Vilela speaking in a low, controlled voice about Hermes, a gifted young boy under his care. He notes that a recent visitor from the Spanish Embassy showed an “unusual and inappropriate interest” in the child, then abruptly stops mid-sentence. “Strike all that

out. Better yet... I'll start a new recording." The cylinder ends there.

[Keeper's Notes: Beneath the mattress is Vilela's personal journal, filled with anxious entries about threats against him, some clearly exaggerated or paranoid—but also references to several odd adoptions of orphaned 'special children', expedited with surprising speed. He notes these were quietly facilitated by Capt. Gandia, often following visits by foreign nationals, including at least one from the Italian Embassy. A narrow bookshelf above the bed holds medical texts & a hollowed-out copy of *Don Quixote*, inside which a loaded derringer has been carefully concealed. A 2nd revolver is braced in the window, its trigger wired to the door so that opening it would fire the weapon point-blank into the room if the door is opened and the wire in place. A dresser drawer contains a bundle of warm, handwritten letters, most from Dra. Gilda Real y Oro, affectionate & encouraging in tone, along with a smaller number from RN Beatriz Montalvo, more guarded but clearly concerned for his wellbeing.]

Dr. Zorrilla (*Forensic Psychiatrist*), maintains a meticulously neat suite, everything arranged by geometry: scalpels in parallel, smoking pipes in their racks, books squared, specimen jars aligned. A faint oddly cloying herbal smell clings to his linens; clove and marihuana?

[Keeper's Notes: Beneath his bed: a locked case containing corked glass vials filled with dried herbs, and ethnobotanical notes. There is a calendar chart commenting on plant growth (this from his private on the roof of this building, reached by a roof hatch from a ladder in the same stairwell to the 2nd floor).]

Dra. Ramagosa (General Psychiatrist), keeps a tidy room decorated with colourful Cuban embroidery brought from Habana. Her desk has a typewriter and cover, and looks out the window into a enclosed garden and eating area. Her closet contains both medical attire (lab coats with her name embroidered) and other clothing. In her closet at the bottom is a trunk that smells quite badly when opened; there are rubber boots fouled with something dried 2/3 up, dirty overalls, a miner's helmet with light, two flashlights, a loaded revolver (!) a gas mask (!), along with a map to the asylum's underground sewer system with several points marked by red X's.

[Keeper's Notes: The map was drawn by *Tambor*, and to be used to help evacuate the pavilions of the Female Dept. of the Mazorra if ever needed. One sewer entrance seems to be quite nearby via a manhole located in the garden and picnic area right outside her room's window.]

Dra. Real y Oro: Her quarters are unusually personal: chintz curtains, flowering plants on the windowsill, and a view onto a small garden rather than an internal corridor. She officially works at Mazorra only 3/7, but lately has been staying longer, lingering under the excuse of helping out. The real reason is Dr. Viela and the hope of a private moment with him and to persuade him to leave before someone makes good on their death threats. A small packed suitcase is in the bottom of her closet which contains her passport, \$240 in USD and an unused open use sailing ticket entitling her to travel by steamship from Habana Harbour to Miami Florida.

[Keeper's Notes: Inside the lining of her suitcase is a duplicate set of microfilm containing sensitive medical records her contact Ricky helped her obtain through *Lic. Castellanos*, "just in case." If events at Mazorra turn openly dangerous, she intends to leave immediately and make for Miami to alert the foreign press, preferably with or without Dr. Viela.]

Dr. Francisco Llerena's quarters are a chaotic embarrassment. Dirty laundry, half-eaten fruit, and empty rum bottles clutter the floor. His briefcase contains half-completed charts and crudely forged signatures.

[Keeper's Notes: His suitcase hides incriminating correspondence: bribe receipts, correspondence with Porra intermediaries, and a typed letter requesting "the removal of certain staff obstacles," never sent.]

C. Junior Physician Rooms (not shown): Located on the second and hotter floor directly above the other rooms, these are more spartan rooms than those below. These rooms are all empty of students currently, with the university having been shuttered since last spring. Hospital cleaning staff have been erratic in their presence since the General Strike, especially with the main *Habana University* closure. Staff may secretly bunk here rough at the end of a hard shift, or use these rooms for romantic trysting.

Kitchen / Dining Room/Admin Canteen: A small, clean dining hall for office clerks and administrative staff, separate from the more elegant medical staff Dining Room. Kitchen supplies meals for both, the Director's Manse (DM) and events held at the DM.

Medical Offices & Secretarial Block (MO): This is a warren of small rooms arrayed with wooden desks where medical secretaries and business clerks here manage medical correspondence, requisition forms, manage dictation cylinders (passing them on and receiving patient reports from *Medical Transcription*), appointment ledgers and whatever paperwork every doctor without a private office sends their way.

Hospital Operational Manager's Offices: This block of offices housing Mazorra's non-medical

leadership. Details removed due to lack of space but see map for manager roles on each door.

Hospital Payroll & Accounting: A long clerical room filled with desks, adding machines, and wall-to-wall filing cabinets. Ledgers, requisition slips, and carbon copies pile everywhere. Several clerks work here balancing accounts, managing supply orders, and preparing staff pay packets. At the rear sits the Controller's private office. *Don Ricardo Menéndez y Valdés*, Overseer of Finance and Payroll, keeps this room locked whenever he leaves. It contains payroll ledgers, sealed account books, and a false-bottom cabinet where he hides duplicate records.

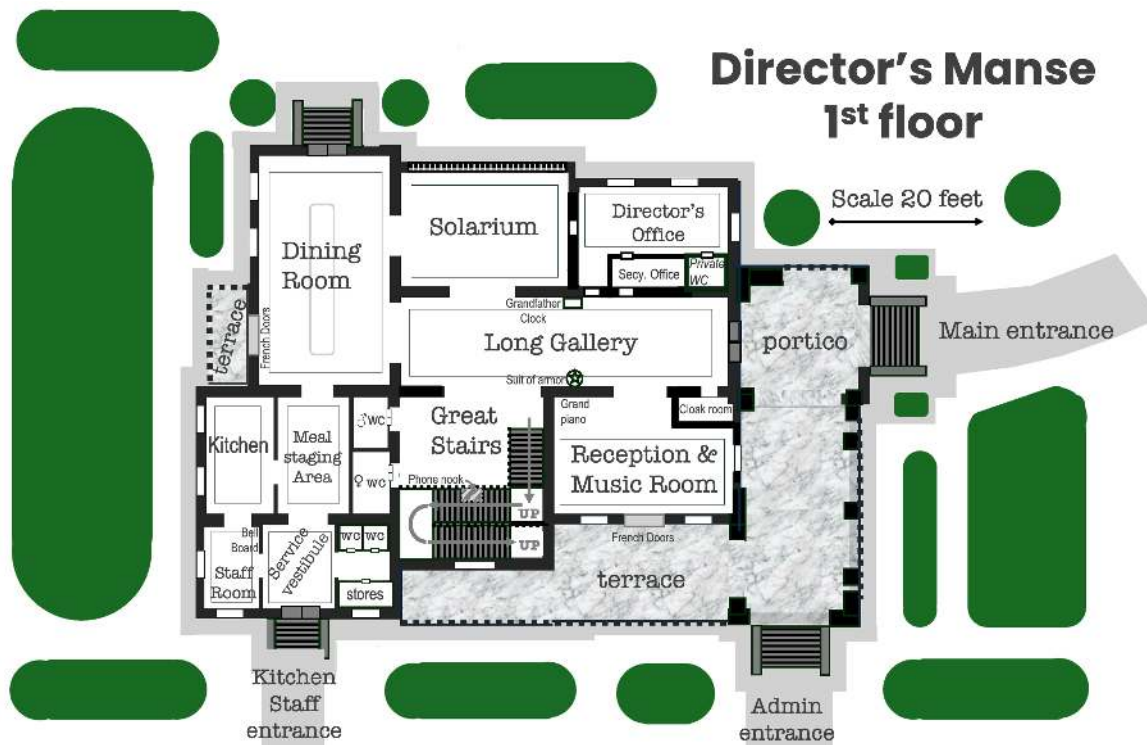
[Keeper Notes: A successful *Accounting* roll reveals irregularities in the payroll. A *Hard* success uncovers several non-existent employees whose salaries Menéndez has been siphoning for years. Evidence is stored in his locked desk drawer or in the hidden cabinet.]

Medical Records Preparation Here work Sna. Marina Suárez and Sna. Hortensia Ignaza, the quiet stewards of Mazorra's institutional memory. Suárez's handwriting is precise; Ignaza's recycling habits ensure anything "unimportant" vanishes forever. Together they make the archive both indispensable and yet dangerously incomplete.

Medical Records (MR): A large archival windowless chamber filled with tall wooden filing cabinets for the oldest records, while fireproof metal cabinets hold materials dating from 1920 onwards. The two form canyons of paper: brittle admission books dating back 40+ years from the 1890s, fingerprint sheets, typed case notes, hand-written addenda, and patients reduced to folders bound with twine.



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the grounds of a forensic psychiatric asylum. Painted in glistening wedding-cake white, the two-storey mansion blends Spanish Colonial Revival grace with the crisp lines of Art Deco modernity. Its broad façade rises behind a row of columns, with arched doorways, and wrought-iron balconies.

The lower main level is designed for display and controlled sociability. The Upstairs has private quarters, lavish but rarely used, as Director Miguel Rodríguez Machado spends much of his time at his primary residence in Habana with his wife, visiting the Mazorra only one to two weeks each month

Director's Manse: 1st (Main) Floor

A. East Entrance & Long Gallery: Visitors enter via climbing steps to a covered portico, where the east main entrance opens via one of a set of double doors into the Long Gallery. This a wide marble-floored corridor running westward the length of the house. It is opulent with intricate geometric patterns. There is a cloakroom to the left, and on the right two closed doors which leads to the Director's secretary's office, and his own office directly.

Furnishings and features of Long Gallery include:

- Tall potted palms & rubber plants in ceramic urns.
- Framed B&W photographs of the Mazorra's "modernization"
- Narrow console tables holding ashtrays and shallow crystal bowls of sugared almonds.

Anchoring the *Long Gallery* are two facing objects:

1) A full suit of late 16th-century Spanish jousting armour is displayed upright against the south wall (star in circle on map). The armour is of the *Almorzar* style associated with Castilian workshops of Toledo. A shield at the base depicts Argent, a lion rampant sable, armed and langued of the same. If asked, the arms are traditionally attributed to former Director Álvarez, though no paperwork confirms this.

2) Directly opposite, against the north wall, stands a 18th Century tall Spanish grandfather clock, crafted by *Hijos de J. Blay y Fàbregas* of Barcelona. Its polished walnut case rises nearly to the ceiling and the dial face is of antique ivory with Roman numerals. The pendulum inside is covered by a walnut door adorned with curious fantastic carvings.

B. Reception & Music Room: Opening off the long gallery, the Reception & Music Room serves as the social heart of the Manse and of the Mazorra. The walls bear carved wood panelling, etched glass depicting palms and tropical flora, and leaded stained-glass windows that scatter soft, coloured light across the floor. Ceiling fans stir the air beneath ornate plasterwork. A polished *Ortiz & Cussó* (famous Spanish brand) grand piano occupies one corner, its lid raised and sheet music carefully arranged. A phonograph player with a large brass horn is upright on a stand with a small selection of modern music long playing records; festive traditional Cuban, opera, and classical music

records dominate. Low sofas and upholstered armchairs are arranged to encourage proximity rather than ease. Side tables hold crystal glasses, lacquered cigar boxes, and heavy silver cigarette cases engraved with unfamiliar initials. Tall drapes are pulled back from the windows leading to the terrace, allowing warm night air, tobacco smoke, and insect noise to mingle freely when parties are held.

C. Solarium: This room opens off the gallery toward the south. Enclosed by arched windows and glass panels beneath a glazed roof, it remains warm even in the evening. Wicker chairs with floral cushions are arranged clusters around marble-topped tables. Numerous potted orchids and tropical plants soften the space. Several empty birdcages serve as decorative curiosities.

D. Formal Dining Room: Adjacent to the Solarium, formal room is dominated by a massive mahogany table capable of seating twenty. High-backed chairs line its length. If a dinner is being held, the table is laid with starched linens, polished silver, and heavy glassware.

E. Esperanza Hidalgo-Gato's Office: Located on the north side of the lower floor, this room functions as both administrative hub and informal antechamber to the Director's office. Esperanza, when here, acts as an ornamental and memorable gatekeeper to her employer. A polished desk faces the door, topped with a typewriter, blotter, appointment book, and neatly stacked correspondence. There is an upright cylinder style Dictaphone & a small typewriter desk to one side. A small sofa and upholstered chairs accommodate waiting visitors. Shelving holds files, ledgers, and correspondence to be followed up on. On a lower shelf are carefully arranged some of Esperanza's personal items; expensive perfume bottles, a compact mirror concealed in a box, & an elegant *Chanel* silk scarf.

F. Director Machado's Office: Adjacent to Esperanza's office, the Director's office is designed to impress rather than invite.

A heavy dark-wood desk dominates the centre of the room, its surface ordered but never cluttered. Tall bookcases hold legal volumes, administrative records, and select medical texts, many chosen more for symbolism than reference. An upright Dictaphone with blank wax cylinders stands nearby. A Cuban flag stands in one corner; a framed photograph of President Machado hangs prominently. Two leather armchairs face the desk, positioned slightly lower. A direct telephone line on his desk connects to the Mazorra switchboard.

G. Grand Stairs & Stair Hall



At the far end of the *Long Gallery*, the space opens into the Grand Stair Hall. The staircase rises in a crooked path to the upper floor, & is lined with painted iron railings. Dangling overhead is a large chandelier. Guest washrooms are located discreetly off the hall. Under the stairs is a recessed pair of telephone nooks, enclosed by a narrow wooden door. Inside each is a simple chair, a small shelf, and a telephone connected directly to the Mazorra switchboard. The partition is thin and eavesdropping is possible.

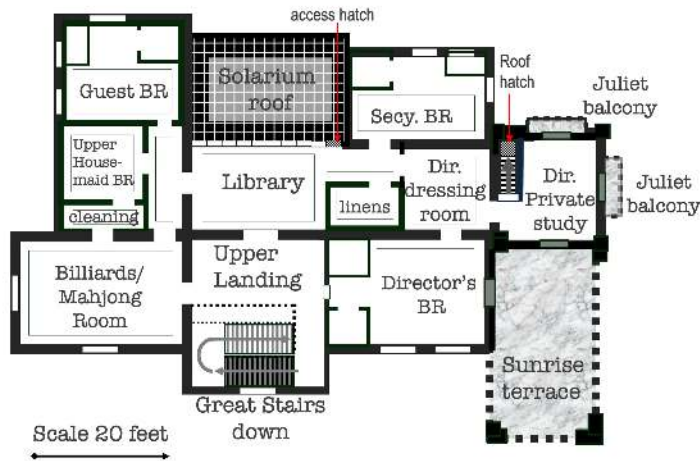
H. Terrace: Broad doors from the reception room open onto this outdoor social area. A half dozen iron café tables and mismatched chairs are scattered across the tiles. In the evening when social events are held, paper lanterns are set out which cast uneven pools of amber light as dusk deepens into night. From here, the distant sounds of Mazorra, voices, cicada insects, and the occasional train drift across the grounds.

I. Main Floor Service Wing: Occupying the south-west corner of the lower floor, the service wing is compact, efficient, and tightly organized. It is designed to support formal entertaining while keeping staff movement discreet and largely invisible to guests. Circulation here is direct and practical, with little wasted space.

I-a. Kitchen: This is functional finishing kitchen rather than a full production space. Most bulk cooking is done in an external service building, with prepared dishes brought in for plating and service.

I-b Meal Staging Area: Adjacent to the kitchen this is where food rays are assembled here before being

Director's Manse 2nd floor



carried into the dining room. Hot dishes are kept covered and organized by course.

I-c Dining Room Storage: This holds items used only during formal meals: Extra chairs and folding tables. Serving platters, specialty glassware, and reserve linens.

I-d Staff Room: This serves as a small break and coordination space. Benches or simple chairs line the walls. Hooks hold jackets, aprons, and hats. A small table holds ledgers, duty lists, etc. Mounted prominently near the staff room entrance is the bell board. Brass indicators correspond to rooms throughout the lower level of the Manse only. When a room summons service is made by pulling a velvet hanging cord, a labelled marker drops. The system allows staff to respond quickly without lingering near formal spaces.

I-e Service Vestibule: At the heart of the wing is this compact circulation space connecting kitchen, staff room, storage, and the formal areas. Staff washrooms (WC) are just off of this to the east, as well as a locked pantry that contains rum and other liquors for cocktails. Secondary doors lead toward the dining room and reception spaces. Staff wait just out of sight until called.

I-f. Kitchen Staff Entrance: At the southern edge of the wing is the kitchen staff entrance, opening onto a service path leading to the external kitchen building and supply routes.

Director's Manse — Upper/2nd Floor

The upper level of the Manse is noticeably quieter than the rooms below. Sound is softened by rugs and floor runner. Although this floor is fully furnished, it

bears signs of periodic occupation rather than daily domestic life.

Director Miguel Rodríguez Machado spends much of his time at his primary residence in Habana with his wife, visiting the Mazorra one to two weeks each month. When present, he arrives by automobile with his personal chauffeur, who customarily occupies the guest bedroom when he visits the Mazorra. This arrangement explains both the regular readiness of that room and the absence of accommodations for other senior staff.

Upper Landing of Great Stairs

The Great Stairs rise to a broad upper marble landing lit by exquisite lamps and potted greenery to soften sharp edges.

There is another velvet rope barrier to politely dissuade nosy guests who wander up here. At the top is a low table for gloves or keys on which is refreshed daily with cut flowers. The landing functions as a junction rather than a place to linger. A door on the east wall (locked) leads directly to the Director's bedroom.

Library: A formal room lined with bookcases holding legal, medical (both human and veterinarian works), and administrative volumes alongside well-bound novels. A central writing table and armchairs suggest intellectual use, though the room feels little used.

Guest Bedroom: Comfortable room with a double bed, wardrobe, mirror, and mosquito netting. It is maintained in readiness for visiting officials or more often the Director's personal chauffeur.

Upper Housemaid's Bedroom & Cleaning Closet:

A small, plainly furnished servant's room adjacent to a narrow closet holding cleaning supplies and spare linens, allowing discreet maintenance of the upper floor.

Billiards / Mahjong Room: A leisure area dominated by a convertible billiards/mahjong table, with cues, tiles, and chairs stored neatly along the walls. One of the few upstairs rooms that sees regular social use during the Director's visits.

Solarium Roof Access: A reinforced section above the solarium with a maintenance hatch. Normally kept closed and not intended for casual access.

Linen Storage: A compact walk-in closet essentially, with neatly folded sheets, towels, and table linens, carefully labelled and organized.

Director's Secretary's Bedroom: This is a refined personal space occupied by *Esperanza* with furnishings reflecting both professional duty and femininity. A well-made bed and wardrobe conceal carefully chosen dresses and shoes; a dresser holds perfume bottles, cosmetics, hairpins, & jewellery. A small writing desk supports a portable typewriter, shorthand notes, and folders for dictation.

Director's Dressing Room: This space is arranged with almost military neatness: tailored suits, formal wear, hat stands, shoe racks, and grooming items. Fresh flowers on side table brighten the room.

Director's Bedroom: Large and well-appointed but remarkably restrained. Heavy drapes; solid furnishings and expensive. This room has very little of Director's personality and is feels and functions almost like a boutique hotel-room.

Director's Private Study: The most actively used space when the Director is present. A substantial desk, shelving, and locked drawers dominate the room. A steel safe, concealed within cabinetry, holds documents, cash, and sensitive materials. The terrace off of this room is for early breakfast in peace and solitude. A steep stair/ladder leads to a roof hatch for maintenance.

Horrors of the Mazorra: a 1930s Pulp Cthulhu scenario (cont.)

The 6 Investigator PCs/NPCs



Dr. Margaret Ellery



Sr. Alejandro Vargas



Insp. Lionel Hargreaves



RN María del Sagrario



Charles 'Flash' Duvall



Dra. Isabela Coutinho

1. Dr. Margaret Ellery (36F, American psychiatrist (& undercover League of Nations reformist))
2. Señor Alejandro Vargas 35 M, Cuban philanthropist returning from S. America, looking for ½ brother (secret A.B.C. member)
3. Insp. Lionel Hargreaves 58 M, UK P.I. ex-Scotland Yard hunting a missing woman (supernatural experience)
4. Hermana María del Sagrario (42 F, Spanish RN, former Nun seeking truth/vengeance on behalf of her late sister)
5. Mr. Charles "Flash" Duvall 27 M, US photojournalist seeking a juicy/lurid story.
6. Dra. Isabela Coutinho (41 F, Mexican researcher (tracing spread of *La Desvaneciente*))

Recap: *The Tour of Mazorra Turns Deadly:* The Investigators touring the Mazorra met a host of uncanny patients whose abilities defied reason, & crossed paths with staff hiding secrets of their own. Their tour ended in the North Operating Theatre, where Baron Kriminal's influence turned a dead patient into a murderous strangling revenant, leaving the staff shaken, suspicions rising, and the evening's formal dinner poised to become either an uneasy sharing of information, or an ambush.

The Investigators are finally escorted to their rooms in the Visitors' Quarters of La Oficina to wash and rest before dinner at 7 p.m. They are told not to wander the grounds without an escort, but remain free to move about and explore the public, unlocked areas of La Oficina, including the Canteen, Dining Room, Library, Switchboard Office, and Tuck Shop.

Their allotted rooms are clean, tidy, and comfortable. All contain a dresser, twin bed, polished wooden floors, intact mosquito nets, an en-suite toilet, and slightly better linens; one room has two single beds in case Investigators must double up. A successful Spot Hidden roll reveals that all suitcases have been opened and their contents neatly put away—after being searched by Ricky, later by the Spanish military attaché, and again, less carefully, on Captain Gandia's orders by Dolz (see Encounter table below).

A Gunshot & Dr. Arturo Vilela:

While freshening up, a sharp gunshot cracks just before 5 pm, loud, unmistakable, and close. Moments later, *Dr. Arturo Vilela* appears in the corridor, striding away from the direction of his quarters. He is pale and tight-jawed, one hand clamped to his upper arm. Blood seeps steadily through his shirt, darkening the fabric. He does not slow, but his eyes flick sideways; he is angry, alert, and unmistakably afraid. If stopped, he bristles at first, insisting it is “nothing.”

With firm reassurance, and a successful *Persuade* roll, his control slips and his voice drops. “Someone set a gun on me. A trap. A pistol fixed in my room, aimed at the door. When I opened it, it fired.” He claims the weapon was braced in the window overlooking the *Family Garden*, with the trigger rigged to the door. The shot only grazed his left arm, “...a miracle, really”. He says he is heading to the M2 Infirmary for a dressing, quietly, before word spreads. He refuses to name suspects, but his anger is unmistakable (*Psychology*, Regular).

[*Keeper's Note:* Any attempts to use *Fast Talk*, *Charm* or *Intimidate* are Hard, with a Penalty Die; on a failure, Vilela clams up entirely.]

If the Investigators later examine his quarters, with or without him they find the pistol still braced in the window frame. A crude triggering mechanism—a stiff wire running from an eye screw fixed into the door—would have fired the weapon the moment the door was opened. At first glance, it looks like a deliberate assassination attempt.

[*Keeper's Notes on What Really Happened:* The truth is both accurate and incomplete. Weeks ago, during mounting paranoia and poor sleep, Dr. Vilela secretly set the gun trap himself as a night-time defence. He assembled and aimed it from the Family Garden, bracing the pistol in the window of his ground-floor room. His memory of this is unreliable, but physical evidence remains. Each morning, Vilela automatically deactivated the mechanism in his sleep, a routine action he no longer remembers performing. Sometime earlier today, *someone else* entered via the transom above the door and maliciously re-armed or altered the trigger wire. When Vilela returned to his quarters near 5 pm and opened the door, the trap fired. Dr. Vilela did not intend to shoot himself, but *someone malicious* intended the pistol trap to go off.]

Clues indicating Vilela set the gun trap himself:

- Looking inside his desk drawer are suggestive tools in his desk drawer (wire snips, spare eye-screws, sketch of room in his handwriting) → *Spot Hidden*, Regular

- Footprints in the Family Garden beneath the window match Vilela's shoes → *Track*, Regular or *Spot Hidden*, Hard
- The pistol's alignment matches Vilela's height and stance exactly → *Firearms (Handgun)*, Regular

Clues indicating *someone else* re-armed the trap:

- Disturbed dust on the transom window above the door → *Spot Hidden*, Regular
- Fresh fingerprints on the transom glass and pistol (not Vilela's) → *Forensics / Dactyloscopy*, Hard (or Castellanos' lab for auto-success if he helps)
- Trigger wire re-tensioned more tightly than necessary—or possible—from outside the room → *Mechanical Repair*, Regular

[*Keeper's Notes:* If a snoopy Investigator tries to opens his room door without inspecting it, the trap is live. A *Spot Hidden* or *Mechanical Repair* (Regular, choose the better) notices the trigger wire in time; otherwise resolve a single point-blank handgun attack using *Firearms (Handgun)* 35%, dealing 1d10 damage on a hit; DEX ×2 allows the PC to flinch back and avoid the shot. Or they can spend *Luck*.]

Additional Officina Encounters (Pick 2 or 3)

1. RN Yolanda Heres: A striking but visibly tense Afro-Cubana nurse in a crisp uniform approaches the Investigators in the Visitor's/MD quarters, her composure strained. She nervously asks whether they have seen *Dr. Ramón Zorrilla*, explaining that he missed a scheduled meeting with her earlier that afternoon. If not, she looks worried, and to herself she says will visit him at his lab under M1.

[*Keeper's Notes:* A Investigator using *Persuade* or *Charm* learns that Zorrilla keeps a small private laboratory in the old **M1 basement** off the E-W corridor & works closely with a laboratory technician named **Lic. Gil**. A successful **Psychiatry** roll reveals the two are romantically involved, and that *Heres* is increasingly worried about his recent behaviour.]

2. Lic. Israel Castellanos: Wearing a white lab coat and carrying a fingerprint kit and camera, Castellanos strides past at speed, muttering to himself about “...patterns... not matching human dermatoglyphics...must enlarge...” If stopped, he brusquely waves off questions. “I will see you all at tonight's gathering. I must get all this ink off myself and change into more proper clothes.” He moves on before further questions can be asked.

[*Keeper's Notes:* Castellanos has just returned from documenting *Baron Kriminal's* handprints in the M1 theatre. A *Spot Hidden* roll (Regular for native

Spanish speakers, Hard otherwise) catches his muttered comments. He will not elaborate further here, but this encounter foreshadows revelations to come.]

4. Mazorra Guard Jorge Dolz: A thick-set Mazorra guard with a five-o'clock shadow stands on a step-ladder in the corridor, ostensibly checking ceiling lights & transom latches. His uniform is oddly dusty at the shoulders and knees, as if he has been crawling. He pointedly ignores the Investigators, and subtly shifts position whenever they move. A faint metallic clink from his pockets suggests something heavy is inside. If confronted, Dolz denies everything and affects bored indifference, but will start to fold up his ladder and move to walk away.

Jorge Dolz: Mazorra Guard / Leopard Man Cultist

STR 70 **CON** 65 **DEX** 60 **SIZ** 75 **POW** 55
HP 14 **DB** +1d4 **Build** 1 **Move** 7 **LUCK:** 55

Combat/Related Skills:

- **Brawl** 65% (clawed knuckles +1d4+DB); **Firearms (Handgun)** 55%; **Dodge** 30%; **Stealth** 45%; **Intimidate** 50%

Attacks:

- **Clawed Knuckles** 65%, 1d3 + 1d4 + DB (*impaling on Extreme*)
- **Punch / Kick** 65%, 1d3 + DB
- **Revolver** 55%, 1d10 (if drawn)

Armor: None (heavy uniform = no real protection)

Traits:

- **Leopard Cult Brutality:** On first successful hit, Dolz presses the attack recklessly (no Dodge next round, but +10% Brawl).
- **Coward at Heart:** If reduced to **5 HP or fewer**, Dolz attempts to flee, surrender, or bargain.

Gear: Clawed brass knuckles, revolver, skeleton key, wire snips, stolen PC item

[*Keeper's Notes:* Dolz is not merely a guard but a Leopard Man cultist and Porra informer. He is the one who entered Dr. Vilela's room via the transom and re-armed the gun trap earlier today. He reports to Captain Gandía and Jeremías "El Persian" Yohama, though he has not yet passed on what he learned. His dusty clothing, attention to transoms, and possession of tools all quietly implicate him—if the Investigators connect the dots. His fingerprints on the inside of the room on the gun confirm this.]

If they persist in trying to stop him, or mention items stolen from their room, or mention the gun trap in Dr. V's room, Dolz will first use *Intimidate* to deflect,

then snaps his stepladder open and throws it sideways, blocking the narrow Visitors' Quarters corridor wall-to-wall. He immediately bolts. Investigators who stop to move the ladder automatically lose Dolz. Any Investigator attempting to pursue that round *must* do one of the following:

- *DEX* (Regular) to vault or twist past it at speed
- *Jump* (Regular) to clear it cleanly
- *Fail:* PC is slowed & loses their movement/action
- *Fumble:* the PC falls prone or **1 HP** from the spill

If Investigators fail or fumble while clearing the ladder, the delay is enough for Dolz to escape: either slipping outside into the grounds, or racing up a service stair to the 2nd floor and fleeing across the roof to descend on the far side.

If an Investigator succeeds immediately and gives chase, Dolz will abruptly wheel into a doorway and then suddenly slam it into the lead pursuer. Resolve as an *improvised Brawl* attack (65%). If the attack hits and causes any damage [1d3 + 1d4 (his DB)], the target must make a Regular CON roll. Failure leaves the Investigator stunned for 1 round, unable to pursue or attack (they may only defend or stagger); Fumble means stunned for 2 rounds. If the Investigator is stunned, Dolz automatically breaks away and flees via service corridors, stairs, roof, or sewers. Dolz may spend up to 10 points of his Luck *once* to automatically hit. His goal is always escape and he will not fight to the death unless cornered or acting under direct orders from a superior cult authority.

5. Teniente Coronel Francisco Vives (Spanish Embassy Military Attache): Impeccably dressed and clearly accustomed to being noticed, this is a suave middle-aged man with erect bearing in a black silk suit despite the heat, offset by a narrow red diplomatic sash worn diagonally across his chest. On his lapel is a small enamel pin: a black St. Andrew's Cross within a yellow diamond in a red square. Vives greets the Investigators warmly if approached, introducing himself with polished charm and impeccable manners. He casually remarks that he intends to catch the morning train back to Havana "before matters in the capital become too lively," suggesting both foreknowledge and careful timing. He expresses mild curiosity about their presence at Mazorra, asking polite but probing questions about their interests and sponsors, then adds that he looks forward to seeing them again at the dinner in the Director's Manse at 7 pm. He gives nothing away directly, but listens closely, watching reactions more than words.

[*Keeper's Note:* He is aligned with Spain's **Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas (CEDA)**, a powerful right-wing Catholic political

coalition which advocates authoritarian order, Catholic nationalism, and close ties between the military & the state. He is quietly assessing Mazorra as a potential intelligence and leverage asset, particularly the so-called “special children” under Dr. V’s supervision, whom he views as a possible unconventional strategic resource. He is also evaluating the Investigators, testing whether they represent rival foreign interests, particularly from Italy or Germany, and will adjust his tone accordingly.]

6. Senior Clerk Marina Suárez: Carrying a stack of charts, she nearly collides with a PC and apologizes while muttering about chaos in Records.

[Keeper’s Note: One chart she drops contains a name the Investigators will recognize. A Spot Hidden at normal difficulty reveals it is the chart of the Brujo Mateo Derosiers, and across the front of it is stamped in red ink **FALLECIDO** <DECEASED>].

Investigating Baron Kriminal at the Mazorra

Investigators seeking information about Haitian Vodou, the brujo Mateo Derosiers, and the entity known as *Baron Kriminal* uncover several overlapping sources within the Mazorra, though none provide a complete or wholly reliable account.

Medical records and foreign patient registries list a small but notable number of Haitian nationals admitted over the years, many following arrest for “religious mania,” public disorder, or violence attributed by authorities to Vodou practices. Unclaimed belongings include confiscated ritual objects, gris-gris, bone charms, beadwork, ash bowls, which were quietly stored rather than destroyed.

The Mazorra’s official **Medical Library** in La Oficina offers little immediate help, as most relevant volumes have been signed out by Dr. Ramón Zorrilla and not returned. However, overlooked among the personal effects of the **archives of Dr. Álvarez y Cerice** are several older works on African Diaspora religions, including Haitian Vodou, Cuban Santería, and New Orleans Voodoo. These texts provide basic background and emphasize sharp theological distinctions largely ignored by current staff. **Dr. Álvarez y Cerice himself** is still alive (or will be until 1940) living in Habana, and could be contacted by phone or telegram if anyone asks.

Further clues can be found in **Lic. Israel Castellanos’ dactyloscopy lab** and **Private office**. Court records forwarded from Havana identify multiple Haitians found not guilty by reason of insanity, explicitly citing Vodou belief systems, and are still alive in long-term wards for interview.

Derosiers’ own arrest file notes that during interrogation he invoked *Baron Kriminal* as a punitive death-spirit, threatening vengeance on his captors. **Castellanos** himself has a long-standing academic interest in the subject, dating back to his 1914 work *El tipo brujo*, copies of which can be found in both his office and the M-1 hospital library.

Dr. Ramón Zorrilla possesses several French-language books on *Haitian Vodou*, heavily annotated with interpretations of Loa possession as psychosis, hysteria, or ethnobotanical intoxication. He has confiscated several of Derosiers’ ritual items for “study,” viewing them as curiosities rather than sacred objects. While Zorrilla recognizes names such as *Baron Samedi*, *Baron Kriminel*, and the *Gede* spirits, he does not understand their religious roles and rejects the idea that the entity itself is real.

Monsignor Bruno Aurelio, the visiting Catholic priest, whom the Investigators encounter at the Director’s dinner, provides the clearest folkloric context if he is talked to. He explains that *Baron Kriminal* is understood in Haitian Vodou as a Petro (“hot”) Loa, associated with violent justice, fire, punishment, and retribution, distinct from the more restrained spirits of *Cuban Santería*. Such entities are traditionally drawn to places of confinement, suffering, terminal illness, and overcrowded graveyards.

Finally, **Mateo Derosiers** himself, or what remains of him confirms that he is neither the first nor likely the last Haitian Vodou practitioner to arrive at the Mazorra under such circumstances. If still alive, he describes *Baron Kriminal* as an avenger who “rides the breath of the dying,” insisting that at least five Porra members must die to avenge his own impending death. He claims the Death Loa has already been uncaged and, once set in motion, cannot be recalled. If Derosiers is dead or unconscious, his confiscated notes and ritual objects echo the same themes with unsettling consistency.

To be continued

COMMENTS: E&A #5

JIM VASSILAKOS: Please see my previous DM on Severe mental illness, such as schizophrenia, can no longer be meaningfully framed in terms of Id versus Ego versus Superego.

LISA PADOL: I had not realized you had split up your comments and questions to me lastish, so here are a few more. *RYCTM on masked facies*: Oops, some medical jargon slipped in. In clinical language *masked facies* (aka *hypomimia*) refers to reduced

facial expression, most often seen in parkinsonism and a few other neurological conditions. A person with little facial movement can still be strikingly beautiful, just as a still photograph or statue can be beautiful. But what most people interpret as true beauty includes *animation*: the subtle play of mobile facial expression, the shifting micro-movements that signal emotion, and the sense of being vividly *alive*. A perfectly sculpted face without expression may be lovely, but it lacks that spark of vivacity that makes a living person's visage truly compelling and beautiful.

COMMENTS: E&A #6

MYLES CORCORAN: *RYCTM on T. Kingfisher's Sworn Soldier novellas*; I've read the first two and I'm half-way through the third as I write this. But this is the first I have heard of the "The Hollow Places"; thank you. <> RAE your *Mausritter* write-up. LOL at the line "*We are literally as quiet as mice*," Ambrose remarked. Is Philbert's middle name "Leroy-Jenkins"? (grin). RARE your *Kriegsmesser* write-ups from sessions 5-7 run back in 2022. This campaign comes across very gritty and begrimed with all sorts of shades of grey for both PCs and NPCs. I also RARE your *Solo Traveller-adjacent Game* write-up. Your explaining the rolls and your interpretation of them was compelling.

ROGER BW: RAE your detailed instructions on how you game remotely.

PATRICK RILEY: *Re "The events of The Train Journey South seem both gratuitous and superfluous."* Thanks for your comment, and to be fair, from one angle you're not wrong. Some RPG scenarios do over-engineer their openings with big set-pieces when a simpler hook could do. The train scene was indeed a late addition on my part, but it's there to establish tone, foreshadow the supernatural escalation, and onboard this manifestation of *Baron Samedi (Baron Kriminal)* early as something more than a vague atmospheric presence. It puts the PCs in danger within a controlled, manageable space before Mazorra's huge sprawling chaos hits them full force. The engineer possession also signals how the Dead Loa actually operate; through machinery, briefly through possession of the living, and more commonly through the newly dead.

The scene also gives the players shared trauma to bind the otherwise unconnected Investigators, and if/when the Mazorra officials start to look for a shared scapegoat. If the Loa merely lingered like a bad supernatural odour, much of all that would be lost. That said, I may still rework the pacing of the scene depending on how my scenario develops, along with further feedback like yours and from others.

MARK A. WILSON: Huzzah on the new job; boo on slow to fix your HVAC landlord. *Re your photos with John Barrowman*; by any chance were you *both* challenged to do Mick Jagger impressions by whomever took that photo? ☺

ELF: *Re "I'm not entirely sure that includes solo games, where the line between "game" and "just fiction" gets pretty thin sometimes."* I'd personally would be very interested in this kind of thing. <> *Re "I got my Black Lotus card ... signed. I still have it."* I think my heart skipped when I read this; it's like casually mentioning you have a single Bitcoin on an disused computer's hard drive. I'm not a MTG player or even a fan, but I recall last year hearing about one [pristine BL selling for \\$3M USD](#). Looking up current values, if your BL card is an *Alpha* version signed by *Christopher Rush* with the provenance authenticated AND your card is in in excellent condition (possibly never played and graded high) the value could be hundreds of thousands \$USD, or more.

JOHN REDDEN: *RYCTM:* Unfortunately, I suspect another 2 to 3 sessions focused on the Mazorra, before moving on to other *Habana Horrors*. I've already written and set aside for a future AoM write-up on E&A another essay on the crazy politics of 1933 Cuba focused on the *Pentarchy*, the Sergeant's Revolt, the siege of the *Hotel Nacional*, the *100-day Government*, and finally the rise of Batista who would dominate Cuban politics for the next quarter century both out front and behind the scenes.

MICHAEL CULE: "*The inspiration of immersion*" quote you attribute to your friend John Dallman resonated with me immediately. It captures something distinctive about why many of us enjoy role-gaming: the experience of becoming so fully absorbed in an imagined setting that it sparks sudden, unanticipated *eureka* moments; new ideas, insights, or perspectives that seem to arise on their own fully fleshed. As you note, this phenomenon is often observed in actors, but it is just as familiar to artists, writers, educators, stand-up comedians, and others who work creatively. I recognize it in myself, particularly when I am trying to understand a subject deeply enough that I can explain it clearly to both medical laypersons and domain experts alike.<> *RYCTM:* While I've read everything else about Professor Challenger, including an authorized collection of short stories featuring Doyle's character ("[Professor Challenger: New Worlds, Lost Places](#)") I much sheepishly admit I have *not* read the short story you mention. And now I must add it to the list!

BLASTED HEATH ROW: I very much enjoyed your lavishly photo-illustrated Lake Geneva pilgrimage. I was struck at how modest *Gary Gyga's* grave-marker was. I would have expected something a little larger and more like the memorial paver stone in front of the Riviera dedicated him.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: So sorry to learn that after ~25 yrs of you working for various incarnations of original employer, that after *Zeta Global* acquired *Cheetah Digital* by Marigold, they let you go as they aspire for “loyalty solutions” as they focus on “enterprise customer engagement.” <> *Re AoM having odd formatting*; I had no idea, and offer my profuse apologies (and the comment I’m unlikely to change how this is formatted from before due to a combination of *inertia* and *no time!*). <> *RYCTM on my variant B/X ideas*: Yes, I think you’ve put your finger on the historical through-line nicely: hits as an abstraction for durability rather than anatomy, scaled down to something more legible at the table. I agree you could layer some of that back in with multi-hit blows & class-based scaling per level, especially if you want to preserve traditional spellcasting/level linkage. My own instinct was just to push harder toward minimalism: collapse level & durability into one visible number and let weapons/fighters express lethality via hit bonuses/spillover, rather than per-level hit accumulation. But your approach feels like a very workable midpoint that keeps more of B/X’s original scaffolding intact.

LISA PADOL: *RYCTM*: You were the 2nd person to mention T. Kingfisher’s “What Stalks the Deep” with Myles being the first. Naturally I purchased a copy the from *Bakka-Phoenix Bookstore* in Toronto a few weeks ago. <> *Re CoC 7e Pulp Cthulhu stat-block error*; thanks for catching that for me Lisa!

MATT STEVENS: I remember you talking about that bonkers 75 level D&D game at *GenCon* when we shared at room at the Marriott, and how exhausting you said it was but well it ran in the end. ☺

BRIAN ROGERS: I finally received my KS copy of *Draw Steel* that came about after Hasbro/WOTC leaked OGL changes debacle, and was also struck all by the similarities to D&D 4.0. It’s no wonder the kids didn’t feel thrilled by the focus on tactics and board-game-like elements. <> I also blame you Bri for my impulse purchase of the ten V&V modules I picked up on my last trek into Toronto. <> *Re that photo taken in our hotel room at the final 2002 Milwaukee GenCon*; OMG! Déjà vu all over again! I used the same photo of my very first *GenCon* in my contribution to Lisa Padol’s “Something Completely Different”. :D

PATRICK ZOCH: *Re the Conflict of Gold & Experience*: I’ll point out your DM’s frustration and ire was entirely self-inflicted: by rigorously enforcing a rules system that converts gold into XP and XP back into gold through training (i.e. AD&D/OSRIC rules), he ensured that progression and training costs would dominate table time meta-game discussion Even in HS our group quietly ignored the mandatory training costs and later AD&D 2e removed them as you mention. <> *RYCT Matt Stevens and Tags in Two-Fisted Tales*: I don’t want to put

words in his mouth, but I am pretty sure Matt was inspired by the author of the ‘Doc Savage’ stories, *Lester Dent*, from their essay [“Wave Those Tags”](#).

JIM VASSILAKOS: *Re Order of Zines in E&A*: I ruefully/publicly admit to being one of those persons who often submits with just minutes to spare. I am in awe of the persons who submitted their sub-zine before the 15th of the month.

RYCTM on the arrival of the Death Loa BK: Thank you, I’m really glad the imagery landed. Your question about the consequences of not stopping the Baron is one I had not explicitly considered, largely because none of the sketched pre-generated Investigators are likely capable of destroying or permanently repelling the Death Loa, only delaying his manifestation at best. I included Baron K. to serve a dual role: first, as foreshadowing of the supernatural forces already at work within the Mazorra; and second, as a dangerous, unpredictable wild card that might later be turned against the forces unleashed by the Twsha elixir.

That said, your question is an excellent one. If the PCs meaningfully interfere with the Death Loa’s passage, I would allow that to blunt or delay his influence on the Mazorra. They may later regret having cast aside a possible supernatural weapon, and might even attempt to invoke him deliberately themselves, especially if Derosiers has been killed early by bloodthirsty, gun-happy Investigators. Conversely, if nothing checks the Baron, the Mazorra becomes saturated by Haitian Vodou menace far more quickly. His presence grows harder to dismiss as hallucination or coincidence; fear and panic rise, violence increases, and rioting or even a mass break-out becomes a natural outcome. In this light, the Twsha “transparenting horror” may function as a counterweight to the Baron’s influence. The scene is therefore less about success or failure than about how bad things become, but how quickly they escalate, and how overt the supernatural manifestations are. All of this can be dialled up or down at the Keeper’s discretion.

And, much as in my comment to Michael Cule on “The Inspiration of Immersion,” I am discovering some of these plot elements only as I furiously plot/write, often little more than a month ahead of everyone else.

Everyone Else: RAEBNC

Dec 21st 2025. BCM



SMR Issue #3 for E&A #7, Jan 2026

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

GMless Games

Wanderhome

My Tuesday night game has now had two complete Wanderhome sessions, after about 3 “session zero, or maybe a little before that” sessions of “well, not everyone can make it today, but we can start working on things.” We chose playbooks and made our picks from them, but didn’t do the “ask one question to your right and one to your left” until we had Actual Official Session Zero.

We’re still short two players. One of them is a manager and has to keep covering for people who don’t show up; we’re hoping he’ll have more time after the holidays. The other has been sick. Between that, and the general schedule for the next few weeks, we’re taking a two-week break and picking up in January.

People are happy with the sessions so far yay. Wanderhome was my suggestion, and some people had the mistaken impression that that meant I’d played it before. I haven’t; we’re all learning this as we go along.

It’s slow. There are times when it lags, when we’re all stuck at... “um, what happens next? What do we do?” The two usual GMs are being careful not to take over, and the other two of us aren’t used to deciding what’s in the world and how it reacts to us. But we’re enjoying the exploration.

Our characters:

- Raenisa “Rae” Diver, Firelight platypus, who travels with a firefly and a tiny god in love with it – this is my character,
- Piper “Pip” Fox, Ragamuffin fox, daughter to The Fantastic Mr. Fox,
- Tavi Copperpelt, Smith red panda, who refuses to work with glass,

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- Drey Tumblebranch, Pilgrim squirrel, who keeps a cloak of endless pockets where he collects keepsake memories

Then we have the two characters made by players who haven’t made the games yet:

- Wilburford, a Veteran badger, carrying a sword stolen from a powerful god,
- Dorrin Tam, Caretaker mole who carries small lost & forgotten gods in little shrines.

Beneath Pirate Flags

My Friday night group is trying [Beneath Pirate Flags](#), a gmless game about, well, pirates. Or something like pirates.

This one is moving much quicker, probably because we share a notion of what pirate adventures are like. We’re starting with pre-crew details – one of the characters is on the run, escaping from an unwanted engagement, and we’re rescuing her (liberating her) on her wedding day.

We’re having fun sorting out the lines between “just declare what happens” and “oops, no, that action needs a token... what do I have to do to get tokens?” (I’m playing The Monkey, who is, in this case, a small dog. What I have to do to get tokens includes “bite someone.” I am not going to have a problem acquiring tokens.)

Glitch (the MMORPG) Locations for Wanderhome

Glitch was the [MMO of my heart](#); it shut down in 2012, and later released almost all of its assets into the public domain. There are a couple of revival projects; I’m somewhat involved with those.

It was an explore-the-world, no-combat not-really-adventure MMO. There was farming and crafting, and seasons with celebration items only available in those seasons.

And I'm dragging it into Wanderhome. (I've already dragged it into other settings; I have a solo TTRPG based on it and have brought bits and pieces into other games.)

I wanted a map for Hæth, the world of Wanderhome, or at least... some locations. Places we could know about; places we could explore; places we could reference in passing as "oh yeah I've been there" or "I've heard of that place; it has a library, right?" Because the Wanderhome book is very good at giving you the aesthetic and tone of the world, but there's no actual content – no list of towns, no NPCs, no map, no nations/regions, no rulers. No government info. (Are there elected officials? Noble bloodlines? Religious orgs?) No currency info – we had to have a discussion about money. (Does it exist? Is there barter? Are there regional currencies?) No tech info – is this medieval fantasy? Renaissance-ish tech level? Steampunk – are there trains? We know balloons are sometimes used for travel. There are ships. Are there doorknobs? (Doorknobs as we know them were invented in the 1700s.)

...We are ignoring most of the tech questions, and will be making up gov't info as it occurs to us. However, I happen to have a [handy list of locations](#), and very fond memories of exploring those maps. I guess my descriptions were compelling; I was declared the Official Cartographer, in the sense of "if you want locations, go ahead and add them."

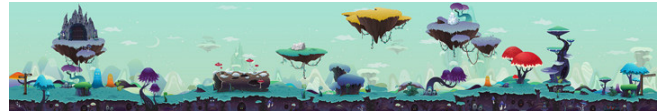
I've converted 20-ish "streets" from Glitch to Wanderhome locations, each with 3 natures and a picture. A few used the Glitch pictures; most were created with AI. (The Glitch pictures are low-res long-thin images. There are better images available in some cases but it's a hassle to go find those.)

The goal isn't to write up locations as if I were running a game in them. It's to write them up a bit more sparsely than they would be in the average adventure module or location expansion book, to leave space for the players to make additions or changes based on what's been going on recently.

I'm trying to give us some details to play with, without making it **my** gameworld, grabbing some of my favorite features from Glitch's world of Ur without trying to dictate all the options of where we can go. It's possible other players will invent other places, although that's not likely to be soon because none of us know what we're doing yet.

Things I want to bring in include:

- The metal-obsessed sloths dressed like leather daddies,
- Uncle Friendly's grocery (Uncle Friendly was a... slug creature? Sort of? I'll have to decide on a creature type for him.)
- The Rube, who wanders around offering trade deals... which are all terrible for him. Like, he will offer to trade a Cauldron for a sprig of gandlevery, or an Awesome Stew for a single stalk of grain.
- Cebarkul, the meetup-spot everyone visited because (1) the tool vendor had literally the best prices in Ur and (2) it was easy to reach from almost everywhere... and it was pretty. So pretty.
- The [smugglers](#) who offer you strange packages and a reward if you get it to a certain place before the dreaded bureaucroc catch you and take it away.
- Bureaucroc who work at government buildings. (And apparently also chase down smugglers.)
- Psychedelic flora. Also stunning sunsets in forest areas. And bouncy mushrooms on mountain cliffs.
- We'll see if I can drag in butterfly milk. (In Glitch, milk came from butterflies. You needed lotion to milk them.) Wanderhome has lots of strange buggy livestock; it shouldn't be too much of a stretch to have butterfly milk since we certainly aren't using cow or goat milk.
- Purple flowers that cause hallucinations.
- A general feel of abundance: The whole world had endless resources; you just had to figure out where they were and make time to go get them. Challenges were skill-based, not conquest-based.



In lieu of game writeups of the GMless games (which I may do in the future, but right now, I'm not the note-taker for either game), I'm going to include some of the locations here. I have more locations than I'm including in this issue (and I probably need to write them all up somewhere; I need to pick a format/layout thing for that). I've included a list of what I have in Roll20, followed by the ones we've actively brought into the game (...three of them) and a handful of others we might visit or mention.

**Ajaya Bliss****Bokkeum Habitat****Cebarkul****Clamber Crag****Gregarious Grange****Inari Deeps****Jethimadh Tower****Kaavin Kit****Konka Brink****Lotha Harte****Maaku Mills****Marrakesh Meadow****Mmumawwa Wala****Sabelli Ochre****Semsan Simile****Shinso Elio****Thornfad Layers****Shimla Mirch Herb Gardens****Sliding Skimmers****Unnu Slight**

Our first location was Marrakesh Meadow, because we needed a starting place so I picked one where I liked the image and had no strong memories about it in Glitch. It was pleasantly neutral.

Marrakesh Meadow in Groddle Meadow

Farm - Hallow - Bridge



Marrakesh Meadow has the Farm, Hallow, and Bridge natures and is part of the Groddle Meadow region.

- A farm is a comfortable place where people live unremarkable lives, deeply rooted in the turning of the seasons and the work that must be done.
- A hallow is a sacred verdant place, where gods and mortals mingle.
- A bridge is a liminal passage from one place to the next.

Aesthetic elements:

- Rapsallions and merry-makers
- Peaceful livestock
- A well-tended shrine (to Pot, the giant of Prosperity)
- Well-traveled paths leading to several other villages
- Churning waters far below (the bridge)
- A mighty creature hiding underneath (the bridge)

This was our starting location; I had set up a nice (public domain) pastoral image just so we'd have something to look at while we poked at the game concepts and character sheets (one of our players setup Wanderhome character sheets in Roll20), and when we got to "so... where are we?" I picked a Glitch location that seemed to more-or-less match the image. The description of Marrakesh Meadow is weak because it's the first spot and I was (and am) still figuring out how much/what kind of description is useful.



The getting-started section in Wanderhome involves four questions:

- What sort of place did we just travel from?
- Do we feel our journey has been long?
- Is there somewhere we hope to go?

We will then spend a quiet moment and each answer this question silently, in our heads:

- *Where is my home?*

We decided that we had come “from” Marrakesh Meadow; our journey has not been long (it’s just started!) and we plan on going to a bigger city next, somewhere with activity and rumors and maybe jobs/tasks that might fit our skills (one of us is a smith), so I wrote up...

Gregarious Grange in Groddle Meadow

Metropolis - Market - Cave



Gregarious Grange is the big city we are traveling to. It has the Metropolis, Market, and Cave natures (there are some underground travel routes, just outside of the main section of town), and is in the Groddle Meadow region.

- A metropolis is a sprawling place where a lot of people live and where many communities sit side-by-side.
- A market is a comfortable place where near-anything can be traded and bartered, and where people from across the Hæth gather with supplies to exchange.
- A cave is a lonely place fundamentally connected to the core of the earth, its wisdom, and its tenebrous secrets.

Aesthetic elements:

- Tall Ramshackle Apartments
- More People Than You’ve Ever Met Before
- Show-Stopping Livestock
- Street stalls with coffee, honey, and beer
- A Bridge From This World To The Next
- Petroglyphs

Gregarious Grange was a major activity hub in the original game, and even moreso in one of the revivals, where it was everyone’s default starting location. We all had unlimited free teleports to get to it. The devs left piles of resources for us (since many of the game elements weren’t yet active), and players set up note boards and left messages to each other. It also had a town hall and a set of apartments, and a connection to the subway.

...This means the original game images are terrible. They’re either boring and empty (because the location itself doesn’t look busy if there’s no people in it), or horribly cluttered with junk that makes no sense in Hæth. Fortunately, “medieval-ish animal folk marketplace” is easy for the AI image generators.

While we intended to travel to Gregarious Grange (and maybe still intend to), part of our adventures on the bridge in Marrakesh Meadow opened a portal to another location. Something about dancing in a particular pattern to set up a resonance; I don’t remember who mentioned the portal, just that it was dark and swirling. And maybe he was thinking “and you’ll go through some changes when you step through to the other side of the bridge,” but I was already thinking of places a portal might connect to.

So we wound up in...

Inari Deeps in Chakra Phool

Swamp - Glen - Labyrinth



Inari Deeps is in the darkest part of Chakra Phool, with layers of swamp and hanging vines, a swarm of

fireflies, and rumors of ghosts in the dark corners. It has the Swamp, Lagoon, and Labyrinth natures.

- A swamp is a verdant place where the air is as thick as the mud.
- A lagoon is a verdant place of contemplation, introspection, and self-reflection.
- A labyrinth is a desolate tangled maze used to trick, imprison, and confuse.

Aesthetic elements:

- Muck and Mire
- Wriggling Worms
- A Hidden Grotto
- Mossy Stones
- Unexpected Hazards
- Tangled Paths

Hey look, a place where I can use the original image! I think I managed to spook the other players by describing this place; we'd been so focused on the "pastoral" aesthetic – we met an elderly duck with a love of apple pie, a grumpy sunbear mayor, a sneaky alligator – but nothing that seemed dangerous.

Hæth doesn't have the violent-adventure focus of most TTRPGs, but that doesn't mean it's 100% safe. And while the firebogs were not dangerous in Glitch (...nothing was dangerous in Glitch), they certainly looked spooky the first times you visited them.

Hopefully this will encourage the other players to look at the other locations and consider which might be interesting places to visit. I've had fun converting some of my favorites.

Bokkeum Habitat in Sura

Glen - Wilderness - Briar¹



Bokkeum Habitat is one of the many red velvet ant sanctuaries scattered around Hæth. The Park Ranger makes sure everyone who visits has been trained in approaching and brushing the ants to gather their fur.

- A glen is a verdant place overflowing with creatures and bugs, alive with movement and presence.
- A wilderness is a lonely place that holds nature close to its heart, closer than any mortal that dwells within.
- A briar is a verdant thorny thicket that's rewarding yet tricky to navigate.

Aesthetic elements:

- Chittering Mantises
- Furry Red-Velvet Ants
- Tangled Undergrowth
- Territorial Bugs
- Prickly Vines
- Something Beautiful Yet Hidden

This was difficult to figure out. Glitch had "Fox Preserves" where players could learn fox-brushing skills, set out bait, and then try to brush the foxes quickly when they came through. This was the only source of thread, which could later be woven into fabric and was important for creating furniture and sometimes other crafting.

...You can't have fox-brushing habitats in Wanderhome; foxes are people. But you have bumble(bee) farming, presumably for fur. (And bug meat. Bugs are livestock in Wanderhome) So I went looking for "fuzzy bugs that might be in nature preserves for fur-gathering" and found... red velvet ants. Which are not ants; they're flightless wasps. They're terrifying. They work very nicely as "somewhat dangerous creature that you might be able to gather fur from" in Hæth.

The AI generator was very hard to work with, here. It does not want to make knee-high ants. It does not want to have ants mostly hidden behind bushes. It took several tries to get the animal folk to not carry cameras.

The habitat locations are likely to all be identical: the same three natures, same aesthetic elements, and so on. Probably the same site image, unless someone else can come up with different pictures.



Original Bokkeum Habitat pic is not at all useful.

¹ From a [fan-made expansion](#), not the original.

Ajaya Bliss in Ilmenskie Deeps

Mine - Cave - Labyrinth



Ajaya Bliss is a legendary mine hidden away in the Ilmenskie Deeps. It's said it's nearly impossible to find the way in, but the veins never run dry of precious metal or gems.

- A mine is a shaft deep into the earth, digging up all manner of things.
- A cave is a lonely place fundamentally connected to the core of the earth, its wisdom, and its tenebrous secrets.
- A labyrinth is a desolate tangled maze used to trick, imprison, and confuse.

Aesthetic elements:

- Mineral Deposits
- The Hot Breath of Heavy Labor
- A Bridge From This World to the Next
- Bioluminescent Moss
- Stone Walls
- Chalk-Marked Directions

(The original Ajaya Bliss imagery doesn't work well, because the options are either "empty platforms" – the rocks were generated in-game – or "video of players in the game" rather than Wanderhome's animal folk. www.youtube.com/watch?v=bt2PGB9X8rk has examples.)

Kaavin Kit in Bortola

Dhaba - Hillock - Camp²



Kaavin Kit is in the eastern corner of the Bortola region, a former sanctuary during the war, now a campsite with enough activity that there are always food stalls and a few merchants around. It rests in the foothills of mountains to the east, and while it gets travelers both from the mountain mines and Groddle, it's too deep in the forest to become a trading hub.

- A dhaba is a rest stop for weary travelers, merchants, and caravans looking for a hot drink and a quick meal, no more, no less.
- A hillock is a verdant place in the foothills of a great and looming presence.
- A camp is a liminal place of rough comfort, often made while on the journey from one place to the next.

Aesthetic elements:

- A Spicy Meal, Piping Hot
- An *-Inquisitive* And Gossiping Merchant
- A Sheltered Valley
- Strange Piles of Stones
- Broad Shade Trees
- Wood Pile of Gathered Fallen Branches

This is one where I'm getting pretty far from the original. Kaavin Kit in Glitch was a minor dead-end street, not particularly notable. In the Eleven Giants

² From the [version by Affinity Games](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bt2PGB9X8rk), instead of the other "Camp" natures made by other fans.

revival, however, it was my home street – we didn’t have houses like the original (we got them later), so the alpha-test players got to pick locations of our choice as “home,” and the devs would throw resources at us if we wanted. (Gardens didn’t grow in normal streets usually, but they’d set one up for us, and so on.) We mostly picked dead-end streets instead of thoroughfares, so other players wouldn’t be tripping over our stacks of supplies. (We were never worried about theft. Glitch-the-original was barely worried about theft, and the revival projects are heavy on “hey I had fun making 300 bottles of hooch so I have left them here for anyone to grab.”)

So this is “the Kaavin Kit in my mind, which never existed in either the original game or the revival projects.”



The [original location](#). Not awful, but not evocative, either.

Shimla Mirch Herb Gardens in Shimla Mirch

Garden - Commune - Root Cellar



Shimla Mirch, Rae’s homeland, is the northernmost region of the firebogs, and its herb gardens are located to its south, as far as possible from the dry and sunny lands of Groddle Isle. Anyone is welcome to help with any part of the gardening; even visitors are welcome to take whatever is fully grown (although it’s appreciated if they re-plant after harvesting). They grow medicinal and flavorful herbs, and sometimes hallucinogenic purple flowers.

- A garden is a comfortable place where everyone has plenty and the world is overflowing with gifts.
- A commune is a place of community and cooperation, where everyone knows each other and everyone pitches in to help.
- A root cellar is a place that with careful planning in times of bounty can provide during the meaner seasons

Aesthetic elements:

- Outrageously Large Gourds
- Prismatic Butterflies
- Eclectic Community Gardens
- Friendships With Gods Forgotten By Most
- The Cold Smell Of Pressed Dirt Floors And Stagnant Air
- Racks of Herbs Set Out to Dry

The herb gardens in the firebogs (3 of them, one in each region) and the community gardens in the sunnier places, were garden zones where anyone can plant and anyone can harvest, unlike the gardens you could set in your own backyard, which were not public-access.

This meant people could come through and steal all the ripe foods/herbs and not replant anything, and it’d be the next player’s job to decide if they cared to replant.

...Most people replanted. Players left piles of seeds so it was easy to do so. (Could people just steal the seeds? Yes, but they *didn’t*. It was that kind of game.)

The image is, of course, AI-generated. The original herb garden images are horrifically boring and nothing about them says “garden” to people not in the game:



Shimla Mirch Herb Gardens. I promise that, even zoomed in as we saw it in play, it’s hard to parse as “community garden zone.”

Cebarkul in Uralia

Glen - Lagoon - Carnival



Cebarkul, on the island of Uralia, was once a major hub for festivities and market exchanges. It's quieter now, and its beautiful and surreal landscape lends itself to contemplation – but there is always a party somewhere in Cebarkul.

- A glen is a verdant place overflowing with creatures and bugs, alive with movement and presence.
- A lagoon is a verdant place of contemplation, introspection, and self-reflection.
- A carnival is a sprawling place full of celebration, decadence, and excitement.

Aesthetic elements

- -*Watchful* Caterpillars
- Soaring Dragonflies
- A Rare And Mysterious Flower
- A Well-Worn Path
- Extravagant Displays of Excess
- A Mysterious Performance

I mentioned this one above. Cebarkul was a favorite gathering place for mass quests and any personal quests that involved other people. Also, it's one of the few places where I have a high-res image from the original, and, although it's more empty than I'd like, it at least captures the correct mood. I cropped it down to just a partial image.

And it has a caterpillar:



Glitch did not have dragonflies; those are a Wanderhome thing. It'll work well; Cebarkul was the kind of place that should have dragonflies, even if they didn't exist elsewhere in Ur.

Shinso Ello in Sura

Port - Market - Tavern



Shinso Ello is a port city connecting the regions of Jethimadh and Sura. Its market is a mix of goods from the firebogs, fabrics from the ant-farms, and occasional gems from distant mountains.

- A port is the liminal gateway through which the whole world opens up to you.
- A market is a comfortable place where near-anything can be traded and bartered, and where people from across the Hæth gather with supplies to exchange.
- A tavern is a liminal place of simple comfort, often settled into while on the journey from one land to the next.

Aesthetic elements:

- Jetties and Docks
- Smug Captains
- Foreign Wares
- A Familiar -*Crafty* Merchant
- Huge Fireplace With A Big Pot Of Stew³
- Dry Places To Sleep

Glitch didn't have ports. Glitch had regions that connected at some streets, and if you traveled to the connecting street in different region, poof, there you were. Some places were labeled "island," but that had no effect at all on gameplay.

...We have islands and we're gonna need ways to get from the islands to the mainland and such. So I

³ Capitalization per original. I don't like it. I'm too lazy to fix it now.

invented port cities. (I have two so far; Semsan Simile is also a port.) I have no idea what we'll do with them.

The above is more AI imagery. Shinso Ello was a random forest street in Glitch; it looked like dozens of other streets near the fox habitats. (And the fox habitats themselves looked almost the same.)



Each of the locations is going to have some changes from Glitch, from the world of Ur.

IgTheme: The dumbest/ silliest/ craziest things the players ever did

This is an interesting topic, in that it seems to assume the writer is/was a GM. Not that players don't ever reminisce about their dumb activities, but the way the topic is phrased doesn't seem to assume "the players" includes "you, the writer."

I am basically a never-GM. I have GM'd once in the last 20 years – a one-shot game of Fate Condensed, for my regular GURPS group. It went okay; I might like to do more like it, but I never seem to have time. (I actively want to learn to GM Brindlewood Bay, so I'll be looking into that in my, sigh, copious free time over the next few months.)

So, hm, stupid things the players did.

Do I talk about That Guy who apparently decided his reason for playing was to mess up everything the other players accomplished? (That seemed less "dumb" and more "hostile." He was bored with successful adventuring so decided to steal half their magic items and run off in the middle of the night – leaving them stuck with trying to explain to the Dwarf King why his magic axe was not being delivered on schedule.)

The other That Guy who said, literally, "I pick pockets until I get caught?"

The Head of Vecna incident? (I wasn't there for that; the GURPS group mentioned it as part of their D&D history.) It went exactly as badly as you might think: Apparently the players convinced themselves that if they could just cast healing fast enough, they could get the head to stick. The GM watched the whole party commit suicide via decapitation over Vecna's head.

I, of course, have always been the voice of sweet reason, and never had a Javacrucian priestess interrogate prisoners by giving them endless coffee until they couldn't shut up. Rumors otherwise are propaganda by the teasophists.

Comments on E&A #6

Limited comments because wow the month flew by. It's... holiday season. Half the office is on vacation. The other half is rushing to get things done before all our clients go on vacation. My main coworker was off several days in the last few weeks, and is now off through January so I'm covering our department alone. It's been very busy.

An Unlooked For Zine #5 – Lisa Padol

I can share the files for Fate-ified Shadowrun and D&D 3.5; contact me elsewhere. The author would love for more people to get them and try them. Much of the text is just copied straight from the source material and then adapted, so they're both clunky in spots. At my request, he eventually split the D&D one into several volumes, so the "rules" section is not in the same file as the bestiary or world info sections. (Word starts choking at about 500 pages and this was well over 700 for a while there.)

I keep wanting to put together a good set of solo TTRPGs for writing exercises. (I have nobody to share them with.)

Haven't played *Fiasco*; I keep hearing about it as a narrative-heavy game.

For *Sense8* as a game – it'd be (relatively) easy to balance if all the characters are sensates. It gets harder if you have some PCs who are sensates and some who are their normal-human friends/family/etc.

For *Midnight at the Well of Souls* – I go back and forth between "something like GURPS, with detailed point-cost writeups of dozens of species" vs "something like Fate, with a description, sample aspect, and short list of potential stunts for each species." Either way, I'd want writeups for all the species directly encountered in the books, and location details for several of the hexes, including some details of the enforced tech & magic levels.

The actual gameplay has two main options: One, re-create one of the novel plots or something like it – the Well World is somehow under threat and your intrepid (unwilling) adventurers are stuck trying to identify it and fix the problem, or Two, Standard Fantasy/SciFi Adventure Setting, with basically a few hundred mini-worlds to deal with. The second would require more detailed worldbuilding in advance, something to let the players know what's available.

It was mentioned in the books that cross-hex conquest had been tried a few times, and usually collapsed fairly quickly: Low-tech hexes just didn't have the resources to take over high-tech ones, and high-tech conquerors couldn't get used to the

restrictions of the low-tech ones. But there would no doubt be attempts again, and the players could find themselves involved in some part of that.

I looked up *Session Zero System*, which seems to be very hard to acquire currently. (However, it's on Scribd, so... easy enough to look at.) Looks like it's got a lot of good ideas for how to build character backgrounds and connect them, but doesn't have a specific structured approach. That makes sense; there's not going to be a one-size-fits-all option.

I didn't realize Apoc World's "1 player per playbook" was based on external-to-game considerations. I know that a lot of PbtA systems are built with the base premise that only 1 of any playbook should be active at a time, and it could cause game-balance problems otherwise. (I wonder how it'd work with Blades in the Dark and other games that are pretty removed from the original PbtA setup.)

Denizens of the Library #5 – Brian Rogers

Draw Steel has been all the rage in certain parts of Bluesky recently, and I don't remember the details but I remember that there were posts that I looked at, and immediately thought, "I am *never* playing this game, especially if you think that's the pitch points."

IIRC, it was something like "it's like D&D's combat only BETTER with MORE RULES and DETAILED TACTICS using the map grid all the time!"

And my reaction was, *twitch*, um... no.

Firedrake's Hoard #4 – Roger Bell_West

Thank you for the Apatools link; I've bookmarked that and will be sharing it with people.

Re: Length of TTRPG sessions – my GURPS group (which is supposed to be monthly; was originally weekly before COVID) is an all-day event – meet at 9am or so; game lasts until 3 or 4, could go later. My weekly online games run 2-3 hours; it's harder to schedule longer than that (1) on weeknights (2) across international time zones. But they're also continual games, not one-shots, where I'd like the option of more than 4 hours.

Quasipseudoludognostication #6 – Patrick Riley

"Here in the Bay Area"... hey you're local! Or I suppose "I'm local" since you've been at this longer. (Wanna join a mostly-monthly GURPS game?)

I attended DunDraCon a few times in the distant past, but then it was opposite PantheaCon, and later often too close to Escapade for me to attend both. KublaCon was opposite BayCon for a long time, so

I've never attended it. Also, it's a very frustrating trip on public transit from the East Bay.

It does now look like a *possible* trip; when I first looked at it (many years ago), it was a nightmare. BART has more stations now.

Maybe I should learn to drive. I'd be willing to attend more local conventions if I didn't have to deal with transit back and forth, or the horrible cost of a hotel room for a place that I think of as "local."

I'm going to have to extract your Wildcard System (yep, not actually a game; no setting info) and look at it.

Going to be Ad-Libbed #4 – Avram Grumer

Thank you for the Dream Askew playthrough; I'm now in two GMless games and there is very little online about how these work, or how they can work. (Neither of the games I'm in has the strong moves/weak moves dynamic, but they both have "costs a token/gain a token" moves.)

We expect them to be a bit clunky for a while as we get used to trading off "I declare a Thing exists," or an event happens, or whatever.

RYCT me re "cop voice" – I hadn't thought of it that way, but yes. "You roll 3 dice" and "Player rolls 3 dice" are both better than "3 dice are rolled"... by whom? The player? The GM? Someone else at the table, perhaps? And phrasing like that often comes with other ambiguities – it may not be clear when these dice are rolled, and when the effect of them resolves.

RYCT Patrick Riley: Emdashes are all over LLM output because they're grammatically correct in many settings where people are prone to using the shorthand of hyphens or endashes (which they use because Word autocorrects to them). They are also endemic to advertising copy, and LLMs were largely trained on (1) public domain works and (2) ad texts. (They were also trained on misc blogs, twitter, and so on – but those don't have *consistent* formatting or communication styles. Pre-1950 texts and ad copy both have consistent enough styles to strongly shape how LLMs work.)

Attacks of Opportunity #5 – Dylan Capel

I agree that columns can be annoying to read. However, the other choice involves either "very long lines of text" or "larger font; fewer words allowed per issue." (Not that I've hit the 16 pg limit, but I could, and I don't want to switch around formats based on how much I'm writing.)

I know I'll want to add maps at some point, so I'll have to play with the settings, because those often won't look good when crammed into a 3.25" column..

The Dragon's Beard #91 – Patrick Zoch

Re: Just needing gold, not monster-slaying, to go up levels: One presumably wouldn't need to steal the gold; could you invest instead? Or offer loans with an interest rate until you had 3000 gp in excess of your starting point, and go up levels that way?

The Phoenix Nest #6 – Michael Cule

RYCT me: I've met several solo TTRPG fans who have not clicked with *Thousand Year Old Vampire*. There may be an amazing solo game for you out there. (But you are not obligated to look for it or keep trying solo games. There is no shortage of other gaming material, and time is always limited.)

I will probably occasionally recommend solo games that I like, and perhaps one of them will catch your interest. Sometime soon, *Tales of the Kthonic Waters* is going to be out of its beta stage and I'll be crowing about it, and maybe you'll take a look just because I'm so obviously hyped for it.

RYCT George Phillies: I expect *Brindlewood Bay* needs both a group of players who are good at conspiracy theory from packs of random clues, and a GM who is supportive of those theories instead of trying to nudge the game into a particular answer.

I've lost some interest since realizing it's not designed for long-term campaigns; you can't do *Murder, She Wrote* or Sherlock Holmes or Nancy Drew Mysteries, because your characters eventually tap out as they use crowns. But maybe that's okay, and most players don't go into games thinking "can I play this character for 30+ sessions?" Hm.

Age of Menace #243 – Brian Christopher Misiaszek

RYCT me: Thank you for the compliments! The art from "Lost World of Ur" is from the game Glitch; and I had help with the inverted NASA image (I can do very basic art editing but a friend helped attach it to the "Lord Moon" picture, grabbed from Deviant art under CC rights). I am very happy how the layout came out on both, so I'm glad you enjoyed that.

"Lost World of Ur" was intended to be enjoyed by all, oh, 30 of us who still love and remember Glitch, and anyone else whose interest it catches; I didn't (and don't) care if it reaches anything like fame. (And if someone can enjoy it for the art and layout, that's fine. Part of what I loved about Glitch is that there wasn't any "you must play the game THIS way or

you're doing it wrong." So a memorial solo TTRPG that's enjoyed in ways other than "got out a deck of cards and character sheet" is also fine.) And "Lord Moon's DIED" is, ahem, also likely of limited appeal.

The second Fighting Fantasy set on Kickstarter recently finished, and I'll be getting those. I got the first set. I haven't had time to play them, but I remember making a map for the Firetop Mountain book so I could re-play it and avoid the troublesome areas.

I am considering trying to make a solo game like that – an adventure with pre-determined options, with likely limited replayability once you figure out the "correct" route & choices. The hard part (err, other than the "lots of writing etc" step) is trying to incorporate role-playing/journal/character development options as well as the "choose which door you open" parts, that now feel like video-game elements to me.

Accidental Recall #5 – Joshua Kronengold

RYCT me: The GURPS group I'm with used to be a D&D group, long before I joined them. (Or more accurately: The GURPS group I joined used to have 3-4 players who used to play D&D together. It's now down to 2 of them from "back then," and I am now part of the "original players" group when we're bringing in new people. More than 20 years of gaming history together will do that.)

The settings/game premises used to be D&D-ish. They are now much more human & low-magic than D&D; I'm not sure we've ever had an elf or dwarf character. There's a vaguely D&D feel to the worldbuilding – there are taverns; there are knights; there are castles here and there across the landscape; villages are harassed by goblin types (maybe goblins, maybe orcs, who knows; you have never seen them up close and your sole understanding of their culture is that they attack towns you're in, and you need to kill them to survive).

I think once we encountered mind flayers. We have definitely encountered orcs, goblins, and a troll. But the characters are entirely human, and, other than the New People, players are no longer prone to building characters around D&D class concepts.

We didn't have a problem with "so, this isn't D&D... what do we do?" because the approach was "let's have a D&D like game only without all the parts of the D&D system we hate." And eventually that became "and without the parts of the D&D official gameworlds we don't want to bother with."

Current game: Hundreds of years ago, two kingdoms were at war, and utterly destroyed a small

kingdom in between them. However, the family of the rulers of that kingdom were allowed to survive, kept in place for... some reason, we don't know. Now, the heirs to the lost middle kingdom have been kicked out of their home and told to go away – into the area that's always been forbidden to them.

So we're working to re-establish a kingdom in the "wastelands" (which have plenty of people and a functional economy), figure out why the orcs-or-goblins are occasionally doing "swarm attacks to the death" on human settlements, and hopefully someday figure out why we've been kept alive and hidden all this time.

Not too different from a D&D game premise. Very different in activity & options, because our characters don't fit in D&D classes.

Everyone else

RAEBNC. Or maybe not quite read, because I left this later than I wanted and skimmed a lot of the issue.

Wow this looks like a ridiculous amount of empty space. I will find something to fill (most of) it.

Map of our corner of Hæth,
stolen/adapted from Ur, assembled from various resources. (We weren't given a high-res world map when the game was over – but a partial one appeared on the OST released later.)



Accidental Recall #6

For Ever & Anon #7
© 2026 Joshua Kronengold
eaddr: mneme@labcats.org

Dreamwidth: <https://mneme.dreamwidth.org>
Gaming blog: <https://labcats.dreamwidth.org/> (with Lisa Padol; defunct-ish)
Tumblr: mneme / Mastodon: [@mneme@dice.camp](mailto:mneme@dice.camp)
Bluesky: mnemex.bsky.social

Well, my big news is that after 22-23 years in the same job (note quite half my life, but close enough), that chapter has come to an end and I have to both figure out how to get unemployment and health care (for both myself and Lisa) during my period of unemployment, but also start my job search. It's no fun at all, and while I'm not in a terrific hurry to get a new job (I mean, I just had 22-23 years of uninterrupted employment, and also it would be nice to learn some new things while I have time, but also we have several projects I could devote more time to while between jobs if I could spend less time and attention on health care and trying to fix unemployment), it's certainly a shock.

Which isn't to say I haven't sent out resumes, and the rejection letters have been piling up particularly for some of my more "stretch" applications, but I'll try to get a bit more serious in mid January if not before and bring down my expectations since it would be nice to have a new job going into the spring, plus it's nice to think that I could be doing some *new* coding that isn't tied to work I did 20 years ago, whether it's using a programming language I've been using for 29 years or learning some new stuff (and maybe making some new mistakes) and hopefully coding in a different domain entirely.

And, of course, it would be nice to wrap up some ttrpg projects and larp projects we've committed to. In addition to revising and running Ghost Fu (our larp where nearly all the PCs are dead and in the afterlife before the game starts) to run at Intercon X (the 24th letter Intercon, not Intercon 10; the next one will be Intercon Y) in early March, I want to finish a good draft of Dangerous Refuge with complete rules, a revision of my

Witch and Cat (two player freeform letter writing RPG where one PC is an established witch and the other a prospective apprentice hoping to learn from them) with more guidance and probably some choice-enabling tables, and also do a full design for my ideas of a Puerto Rico (the board game) near-clone that's about a farming witch's collective (with NO SLAVERY).

Igtheme (the dumbest/craziest things the players did): Since I play more often than I run, most often the things are stuff I did. For instance, in D&D I initiated a time loop, taking a princess away from her kingdom intending to loop back and return her shortly after she left. And the other players went along with this, and moreover, while there were some complications, while we had to cut the wanderjar half a year short, IT WORKED! She's the queen now (see my zine in a previous E&A; I don't want to look up which one).

In Cthulhupunk (Lisa's first long game for which she gets her handle, written up in A&E), one PC killed a big bad by tricking her into walking into a room under his control and SHOOTING IT INTO SPACE, an up and down trip which was designed to, and succeeded in killing all aboard (she came back via magical reincarnation later, but it did make for a more interesting more complicated relationship with the PCs and delayed any horrible plans rather considerably).

In general, I'll lean into doing wild actions in RPGs. After all, if you can't manage courage in a game where no consequences are real, how can you manage it in real life? Plus, doing wild, or at least interesting/surprising things is part of how you make a memorable game without planning it ahead of time.

Comments on Ever & Anon #6

Cover: Gotta admit, "took some public domain art and manipulated it a bit" certainly looks a lot better than the years of clip art covers when A&E was (relatively) obscure and wasn't getting (I presume) a lot of cover submissions.

Myles Corcoran: "We are literally quiet as mice!" I know this was probably what the player said converted to in character dialogue, but I have this vision of tiny enthusiastic mouse knights sneaking, not discovered, until one particularly enthusiastic mouse delivered this line in a high loud voice, and it was on. Shades of Seanan McGuire's aeslin mice (pronounced "ash-lynn, like the name), who, too, are despite their inherent unseriousness, probably survival conscious enough to not actually make this mistake when someone dangerous was around.

Re Amber: How did you GM a player being body swapped with an NPC in a PVP-focused game like Amber? Did you have the player play Dworkin, or did you play Dworkin with the player

giving instructions via note (and, presumably, the player play Dworkin in their PC's body based on your instructions, if you were going the full player secrecy route).

Re Matt and storygames: What's fascinating there is that while Matt clearly didn't like the first wave of Forge-inspired games and this was very clear at the table, he was also experimenting himself with new styles of game that I never really saw work until storygames provided another way to do them. Even aside from the interesting experiments in Two Fisted Tales (like players having a lot of influence over whether their characters succeeded and failed in at least some versions of the rules; I don't remember what was published but playtests included at one point players having a hand of cards; put down the one you want for the result you want...), Lisa and I have talked about how one of the Two Fisted Tales long running playtest games was a "normal" family with normal plots and aspirations, where part of the issue over time is "OK, so what are we doing here, though?" But a game like Hillfolk or Good Society adds enough tech to focus on what's going on in normal people's

lives rather than having to rely on players' literary aspirations.

So it's reasonable that Matt would be frustrated that despite according with some of his ideas on what RPGs could be if we broke down the wargame-shaped box we started with, he doesn't actually like modern storygames he's tried.

Re monsters not using the treasure in their possession: I suppose you could also have enemies "drop" items when they are defeated that they didn't have before-hand (and which, in many cases it would make no sense for them to have, like wolves still dropping gold). Of course, in computer RPGs, where this originated, this is intended as a convenient shorthand to making sure players can get gold to play with and (for MMORPGs, where this is often complicated to a ridiculous degree) so powerful gear can be made available to players at a level that never has it become common or easy. But what if the game world really did have, like a surprising number of gaming-inspired isakai webnovels/manga/anime do, core reality that reflected this, with "monsters" dropping treasure when they were killed (or just defeated?) what does this even say about the world?

Re em-dashes: I started out using spaces around em-dashes by habit, but eventually trained myself out of it.

Re Brindlewood Bay: I think the "post-defined mystery" is absolutely in the whodunit mode, not the howdunit. It just requires, for players to enjoy it, that they be up to creating the mystery as they go, not simply experiencing it, which certainly requires a different methodology. For a Columbo-style howdunit, you'd want a different mode of play entirely—at minimum, the players would need to know who the killer was from the beginning (as Columbo, not just the viewer, generally knows, catching tells to catch him up with the viewer who got to see the murder happen; of course, a game could easily do both, with a narrated scene of the murder that identifies the killer, and then during play, either the GM can point out why the PC detectives know this from the beginning even if they can't prove it, or the players come up with those details). Then, the mystery can progress as it plays out—the GM probably has a specific manner figured out for how the mystery happened, and play's going to be about players figuring this out and/or tricking the perp into revealing how things happen. It solves some of the same problems that Brindlewood Bay does—in that the players don't mostly have to guess who did it—there might still be mysteries—there might be a twin plot where only one of the twins (or, yes, both) did the murder, or it might be that the person who was obviously guilty and thinks they did the murder actually didn't for some reason and clues will drop about that while they're trying to work things out. But it does avoid a lot of the traditional guessing games.

Brindlewood Bay, though (or Apocalypse Keys, or other Carved from Brindlewood games) is different; the GM might have a strong idea of the events from the beginning, but the players don't, and as such, it's always possible that the GM is wrong and the players come up with a different that works for the table, contradicts the GM's ideas, and that the mechanics dub correct; completely different than a Columbian mystery where the GM and players all start out knowing who dunit.

In any case, the reason the Brindlewood model works for me (as a fantasy/SF fan who also likes mysteries) is that playing it, particularly in the slightly modified Apocalypse Keys model where there can be several failed guesses before there's a successful one, is much more similar to the process of *watching* a mystery story than it is to being a detective in one. You'll see various clues pile up, and then at some point, decide to guess (to whoever is around) at how they add up, looking at the actual clues, but also metadata like screen time, "why is this character even here", etc. And often, you'll find that your answer was in the right direction, but wrong in some important respect, as it turns out that your perp was the new murder victim (pretty common actually!) or otherwise exonerated. So when you're ready you

make another guess, and the process continues until eventually you get it right and the story proceeds to a conclusion!

ryct Lisa on Brandon Sanderson: I don't think I've ever seen koi (the ying-yang fish in Avatar the Last Airbender) in his books? But I wouldn't be that surprised if the one-shot novel (but still Cosmere, technically) The Nightmare Painter, with a painter in a shadowed city dreaming with a sculptor in the desert, had an equivalent.

Re Escape room/RP crossovers: I think it's a natural fit! But there are some issues—often, escape rooms have a fair amount of expensive special effects, which scales much less well if you're only running a game a few times, as many LARPs do. And meanwhile, LARPs ask a lot of the players, who aren't simply asked to solve puzzles, but also play characters (often characters written by the game designers), maintaining their characters and being part of the fun even while trying to figure out the mechanics and/or puzzles in the game. So the issue is that you need to appeal to a mass market audience if you're going to market yourself like an escape room, but if you want roleplaying as a core activity you need a more sophisticated audience, which makes for some hard choices. Of course, you could build a roleplayed escape room where the game was designed to be fun even if the players scaled down the RP, so a group could play it more like a normal escape room, or they could invest heavily in the characters which they were assigned.

Re percentile systems in RP: Yeah, leaning heavily into the "didn't I mention I had" points approach and letting players bump up a skill right before rolling would at least guarantee that they could get *some* use out of the skills they invested into. Not sure it would fix the issue in the longish term, but it would help!

Attronarch: Re puzzles: We've hit a number of puzzles in D&D games. Sometimes someone has a flash of inspiration and they get solved quickly (it helps if they're a riddle in essence; riddles have a lot of advantages as puzzles in that it's usually pretty clear whether you have a right answer or not, and also what kind of puzzle it is, which isn't always obvious with more physical types). And we've hit some interesting positioning puzzles in, say, the Strixhaven game which we figured out enough of to be able to use them to manipulate a fight even if we didn't figure out all the details.

On the other hand, sometimes it's clear that there's a puzzle but there's no clear direction it could go (or goal). Sometimes these get solved anyway, but a lot of the time they get played with, logged, and then moved on from without ever really figuring out what that was. Particularly if a game is pretty sandboxy, the group can always just ignore a mystery puzzle until and unless it becomes urgent.

On the other hand, the two mystery games I played at Time Bubble both had a puzzley nature. Obviously, Dead Dog (being an escape room cross) had the puzzle nature—in addition to the classic escape room types, there were personal puzzles to unlock memories, and most of the keys to open new information in the game often inside purses or other kinds of containers that could be locked) were numbers hidden behind puzzles of a variety of types, from an interesting pathing puzzle (solving the paths correctly resulted in 4 "paths" that spelled out the numbers needed for a combination lock).

But even the Blues Clues game was full of puzzles, of a sort—the mystery solving mechanic was to state two "facts" about the mystery you wanted, and then you'd either be right (and get a conclusion that was clearly True) or wrong (in which case you'd know that something about your facts wasn't true or wasn't relevant). So getting those "facts" was all about looking through people's statements and actions and solving them as a puzzle, of sorts (we solved all but one mystery in the game, I think).

Re comments vs text: I've been able to say substantial

things while commenting, so I tend to prioritize comments, but honestly we really need both. Without original content, an APA doesn't have anything to talk about and isn't really about anything; without comments there's no community.

Re high levels, high stakes, high danger: Stephen and Dan (of the Thursday night D&D game) will talk about how back in the day, multiple players gained access to time travel magic and unaging, and, playing wizards, used it to grind out rings of wishes, using most of the rings to make wishes that anyone wishing them dead would die instead. At late stages of the game, one of the wizards had 30 of such wishes hanging around and the other had maybe 18. They never did come to blows, but if they had, what fun would have been had!

John Redden: TLDR means "too long, didn't read". It's used to say you didn't read something because your eyes glazed over, but I'm more likely to use it to summarize a long block of text with a shorter, pithier line that includes the gist.

Re politics in gaming: Even when someone doesn't make a game (or other work explicitly political, some amount of politics will often leak out, particularly if it's set in the far future where assumptions about how people will interrelated with one another can be telling. That said, that's different than a game that's intentionally political.

Gabriel Roark: We had at least one discussion on different early D&D rules for gaining XP after reaching enough to level. Different ones used different rules, but of course GMs would mix and match—I know AD&D's rule (because I looked it up) is that once enough XP has been awarded to level, no more XP can be gained at all until training happens, which implies that if the group somehow beats a high level enemy they might be able to go up several levels (if they can afford training). But other editions (Basic/expert/Master I think?) had the "never more than next level -1" rule, where you could never get XP enough to go up 2 levels at once, but had to go into training and then do at least *some* adventuring to gain the next level. Or have a random town encounter I guess.

Lisa Padol: re Desires in Good Society: have to agree that they're optional—I mean, we totally forgot to use them in at least one Dangerous Refuge playtest and the game ran fine! The key thing there is that it's important that every player be clear on what their MC's main goal is at any given time, but it's also fine if it changes a lot. Whereas a Drive has a real purpose—establishing why the character goes into danger (well, not Serpentine drives. Serpentine Drives—also known as Best Things in Life—are more there to establish what kinds of things a character does again and again.

Re Feng Shui: I think active dodges were one token, not 3, but I think you expressed the gist elegantly. Of course, we actually had 3 pools of tokens—clear tokens for Shots (initiative), green tokens for Chi, and red tokens for Health. But since you manifestly avoided playing characters that used Chi, you mostly had to worry about Shots (which, again, were for initiative. If the players playing an abomination and Transformed cop hadn't graduated and moved out of NYC, we might have seen people also keeping track of Bullets (but IIRC the Feng Shui mechanic is that you either have Enough Bullets or on a failure your gun is jammed or out of bullets and you have to deal with that somehow) or whatever Demons and Abominations use. Sorcerers can also spend Magic to enhance their spells, but almost never do, because doing so reduces *all* your Magic die rolls for the rest of the story, and almost nothing is worth that.

Re periods of D&D: There are more books in the Library of Strixhaven than one can find in the entire Renaissance world. Of course, that kind of ahistorical library porn is endemic for modern fantasy—because "a lot of books" for us is tens of thousands (or more) books, we massively inflate the sizes of

libraries (or personal libraries) even in medieval settings where such a library would be an incredible treasure. It's enough to want to add low level magical printing press spells to such fantasy worlds, just to make the "medieval culture and attitudes with modern sized libraries" vibe make any sort of worldbuilding sense!

Re Kerberos Fate: Yes, the first campaign blended action, philosophy, and society into a whole. The second one did too, but it was a different mix.

An interesting point about the CoC Fast Talk skill potentially applying when saying true stuff in a fast paced style. Peter Venkman in Ghostbusters is, I think, a good illustration of that—Bill Murray has him use a "fast talk" style in most social interactions even when he's saying true things, to, for instance, get into a building where there really is a ghost and his team really has been sent to clear it out. It might very well be that the thing you're trying to persuade someone of something true—but as long as the methods involve the tactics Fast Talk focuses on—raising pressure/stakes, getting someone to make a decision before thinking it through, etc, I think Fast Talk is justifiable.

Re Lord of Mysteries webnovel in English: Well, I found 9 volumes of it in translation on archive.org! <https://archive.org/details/lotm-full-english-novel-translations/Clown%20-%20LotM%20Vol.%201/page/n21/mode/2up> Naturally, even the first volume is 2k pages so it might take a bit of time to read, though, but it seems to read pretty fast.

Forged in the Dark: FitD, as a "mission-centric" model, has the issue (to a lesser or greater degree) that a lot of mission centric games have that there's a very clear flow of the mission—the GM presents a problem, the players take turns (more or less) describing how they'll help solve the problem, and then the overall mission is resolved or there's a new problem (or multiple problems). I don't think this has to rule out emotional roleplay, particularly in a structure like FitD where the beats on a mission are fairly loose and flowing (a number of games I've playtested had a much narrower mission structure where it seemed harder to do something that didn't serve the mission, but in FitD games, there is both play that isn't part of the mission and plenty of space during a mission for players to roleplay with one another...which doesn't mean people have the sense to let things breathe so that kind of play can happen, of course).

Re "make a sanity roll": The best I can imagine is that the GM read aloud the text from the adventure, and that the player pointed out that it didn't say they had to succeed on a sanity roll, just that they had to make one. But while it's not good game-writing, the player was also wrong—games are much more like law, where you have to assume that every rule is there for a reason and not intended to do nothing at all, than they are like programming languages where you have to assume that a given keyword will have the same meaning in (almost) every circumstance and that if it doesn't work with another construct, then maybe they're just not intended to work together. If the game says "make a sanity check to do X", then there has to be some consequence for making the check, or they wouldn't specify that. They might say "make a sanity check and lose 1d20 san if you fail to [do the thing], in which case it's reasonable to rule that not being able to do the thing isn't a consequence of failing the check. But if they say "you must make a sanity check to do the thing" and specify no other consequence, then obviously, the consequence for failing is that you can't do the thing.

Re Phoenix Dawn Command: I wouldn't say that the designer "didn't do the math" or "doesn't expect the players to do the math"—if anything, the deck-based ttrPG Baker came up with is intended to be played with; that's the point. But also, he put in some superior options and didn't succeed at counterbalancing them, rather like if wizards in D&D were *also* the best at skill checks because the designers hadn't noticed that wizards

were already a very strong class.

Re Cthulhu and sanity: One of the issues with appreciating a Lovecraft style story or taking an existential horror story seriously is that it's impossible to actually describe an experience that would break a character's brain in the way Lovecraft implies. The whole point of the concept is that knowing/experiencing something unimaginable will push us one step further than our limits—so if such knowledge does exist, of course we're not going to be able to directly imagine it. The closest I can think of is Asimov's *Nightfall*, where the aliens in the story had no concept of "Night". Of course, we know what night is, but since we don't know what it is to not even have the possibility of the absence of light in your worldview, we can to a degree empathize with how being confronted by something beyond their worldview breaks them. But, like Abbott's *Flatlanders*, this is an attempt to treat something we have problems imagining by having the fictional characters be smaller rather than trying to get the reader to imagine something larger—at least directly.

Brian Rogers: Good to know that *Draw Steel* is a love letter to D&D 4e! The tactical combat in 4e was a joy, but it also tended to bog down, particularly as the PCs got more options; the right answer (as you describe in your play) is to open things up more and let the players play with the boundaries of their abilities rather than treat them as a menu, but that is, of course, much harder.

Re Iron Skull: I could take him seriously, until we get to the part where since he's called Iron Skull he's all about the headbutts! (yeah, I'm sure it's part of the original comic but it's also ridiculous).

Re Smallville: My blocker there was the same as my blocker for *The Shadow of the Century* (the early *Fate* game): it had a complicated and deep structure, but it also had a pile of fiddly abilities you had to pore through to build/use a character. If the game has that kind of deep structure, tacking on fiddly abilities is generally going to make it much less approachable for those who like that sort of thing, and while I can like a game that has a lot of fiddly abilities, that will generally work better when the abilities are the point, not an extra subsystem. *Faith Corps* (for *Demon Hunters*) was a nice example of a fixup here—since it was based on both *Cortex+* and *Fate Core* (*Fate* 3rd edition), it uses a lot of *Cortex's* die pool building, but it doesn't have a list of complicated abilities; instead, you have 6 approaches, 6 skills representing core directions of activity (or rather, 5 such skills plus one skill representing use of your weird monster powers, if you have weird monster powers, which serves to balance weird monster powers a bit since anyone with them has to allocate bumps across 6 skills instead of five), *Fate Aspects* and *Stunts* which, like other *Fate Core* inspired games, are created by the players around some loose constraints and approved by the GM for not being completely over the top.

If one wanted a similar take on *Smallville*, you'd probably drop the Approaches and Core Skills, replacing them with Values and Contacts, thus reducing the importance of professional competence in comparison to What and Who you're fighting for. Of course, powers and the like would still be in the game, but they'd be represented by what Aspects you took and what Stunts you gave your character. You couldn't fly or breathe fire without an appropriate Aspect or Stunt, but how good you were at it would tend to depend more on What and Who, since *Smallville* is that kind of game. (or, of course, you could also have a third set of dice assigned to...probably not specific powers but using a *Leverage* style division would work well—Communicate, Move, Fight, Sense, Defense, Alter? Maybe not; that feels like it mostly maps onto the different *Fate* actions, and Alter feels vague (but I want something covering stuff like inventing things, or using your freezing breath to make an area slippery; it maps a bit onto

Create Advantage or Overcome, but so do Communicate, Move, and Sense, just in different ways. IIRC the *Smallville* answer is that all Distinctions have (or start with) a d8, but of course you're going to use your powers, so giving them dice doesn't really matter.

Re Legion of Superheroes World 10: Yeah, me too; I really enjoyed that game and miss it. I also really liked the hacked version of V&V you used and think it could be something really special if you distributed it in a way where others could use it.

Re getting your mind out of "firearms are punching people at a distance:" Gotta watch the right movies. Which doesn't, of course, mean all Wuxia movies—there are whole swathes of wuxia where firearms represent modernity and absolutely do trump traditional martial arts, but also ones where firearms are, well, punching people at a distance (and also American action movies where this is the case).

Re APA lengths: Sadly, 200 pages a month is entirely imaginable. Insupportable, possibly, but imaginable.

Re RWBY: Yes, given how much *Diskette* from the Legion PBEM was inspired by Weiss from RWBY, I could hardly leave it off!

Roger BW: Nice tools! I appreciate using perl for the tooling, though I wonder exactly how many packages need to get installed (from CPAN) on top of the basic tools to get things working. A quick install shows 5, which....could be a lot worse. I've never really gotten over how the Moose (or even the smaller Mouse) structures relied on a giant forest of non-standard modules, as, as a consequence, did anything that used them.

Re Jitsi not having a die roller: I mean, it's open source. I'm sure if you really wanted a die roller you could add one (I don't know whether it's extensible; if it's not I'm not sure why not).

We did use Jitsi for a while for some games, but at the time it wasn't really ready for prime time, so I think every remote game I'm currently in uses Zoom, AI slop and all. Maybe some day.

Re Single Sin (good name) in *Brindlewood Bay*: Yes, exactly! Ideally, an improvised murder mystery would have a lot of suspects with good motives and opportunities for murder. As play went on, players and the GM would eliminate those, making it clear that only one person could have done it (in the "solving" scene)...or eliminate all of them and then show that someone who had previously been eliminated was actually the murderer after all and their prior confession was a blind.

Re ttrpg direction: Yeah, "you work for an agency" (or patron or whatever) is a useful way of letting the GM steer things...and if the GM wants to give the players the reins eventually they can find a way to introduce a plotline that causes the PCs to go their own way.

Re me on rule zero games: yeah, absolutely I was waxing hyperbolic at times to make my point clearer—among other things, illusionism is often associated with rule zero, but they're not joined at the hip (in effect you do need a "rule zero" attitude to justify illusionism but you can also run a game with a lot of "rule zero" and zero illusionism). I have a lot more issues with illusionist games (partially because I don't think it's needed to run good games) than with games where the GM has primary authority and doesn't abuse it this way.

I'm being too lazy to read back, but I don't think the question about whether the game artifacts are in-narrative artifacts is pertinent to the overall question of Rule Zero vs Group Consensus vs Rules are Rules. Of course, some games will have the mechanics more directly map to the narrative, and some explicitly won't do this and the mechanics are just a model. But that's orthogonal to the question of how the rules are interpreted (and what the *actual* rules at the table are; you could run a "littrpg" style campaign with extremely loose rules; the

characters use the highly mechanical rules, not the players).

Re the player arguing over the rules with the GM: Yeah, this is very much a question of player and group maturity. I am Very Good at Rules and often know the rules (particularly for recent editions of D&D) I'm playing better than the GM, but I'll try to be a good sport and only point out an error if I think it matters *and* will be appreciated, because the game matters more (and anyway, maybe the GM's doing it on purpose).

Patrick Riley: Re ignored subplot: I have to wonder what's going on there. Maybe the player doesn't expect the GM to interact with their carefully crafted backstory—they write it because it's expected, but in other games it gets ignored, so they expect that to happen in every game? That kind of root assumption without realizing that your game is different might also explain why the player thought it was ok to entirely ignore the festival—after all, it's just flavor, the Real Plot will be around sometime and that's what they should really be waiting for. Which doesn't excuse any of it, of course.

Re Bardic Inspiration getting reduced down to its bare mechanical effects: I'll try describing my actions rather than the mechanics a lot of the time, but then the GM will often ask me to explain what mechanically happened and it slows everything down. It's easier at the table, where you can pass someone a card or something to represent the mechanics and stick to describing the narrative effect.

Re Vrax's players other plans scuttling the chance of a two session game: I mean, you could have just planned to kidnap Vrax and had it happen between sessions. :)

Who provided the notes on the quests?

Re rolling bonus dice: One of the things I noted when I suggested the "mastery" hack in Gumshoe is that while a +1 on a d6 or 2d6 is generally a smaller effect than adding in an extra die (that you can still only keep the best one of), that the scaling on adding an extra die slacks off pretty steeply (whereas stacking +1s eventually moves you straight off the failure curve), *and* having more dice rolled decreases the effectiveness of individual +1s. Which might be another reason not to like it; the extra dice both seem too powerful and not enough.

Weirdly, Luck has always been a factor in Call of Cthulhu. It's just that in prior editions, it only mattered for "luck rolls" where the player rolled to see if something good or bad happened to their character, while in 7e, the *same* luck can be saved for the purpose, or can be spent to guarantee success on individual rolls (but then you have less luck to make a luck roll, since the spend is permanent). It's also an optional rule, so it depends a lot on whether the GM wants PCs to be able to guarantee success on some rolls (like, say, "roll to not have the adventure end in the first session").

Regardless, spent luck is much *more* of a factor in Pulp Cthulhu. In regular CoC, as said, spent luck is permanently gone. Characters can make experience rolls to boost their Luck, but those work like any other experience roll—as your luck gets higher, you're increasingly unlikely to get to add d10 to your luck at all. But in Pulp Cthulhu, those experience checks are supercharged—if you fail the experience check, you still get 1d10 luck at the end of the session, to a maximum of 99 luck, so you're incentivized to spend luck on important rolls even in a longer campaign. And if you succeed on the experience check, you gain *2d10* luck at the end of the session.

There's another rule regarding luck spending in 7e you might have missed: If you're playing with Pushing and Luck Spending, you can't spend Luck on Pushed rolls (or fumbles) and don't get experience checks if you spend luck. So, when failing a roll, the player has a choice: They can accept failure. Or they can spend luck to turn a failure into a success. Or they can push the roll, possibly even earning an experience check if the push succeeds, but then they're accepting a consequence on a failure—

and even if the pushed roll fails by 1 point, they can't spend luck on it at all.

You also push rolls in combat, so in the really dangerous situations, some tools aren't available at all.

What's the joke (to you) in Paranoia?

Re my text: Weird. I didn't change font or anything.

Re weapon masteries in 2024 D&D: Weirdly, players who heavily invest in masteries (by leveling up as fighter or whatnot) do eventually get the ability to combine multiple masteries on a roll, so eventually they do get some ability to go "I'm going to slow *and* topple with my longbow" or whatnot. I think they wanted to make the weapon type matter more (which is a laudable goal) but also wanted these individual powers and while it kinda works, it also sort of doesn't gel.

Re AD&D "not being a full roleplaying game": What I mean is that it's hyper-specialized in some of the same ways (albeit in a more complicated fashion) as games that focus on a specific plot arc or sports match; it's just that this is perhaps less visible because the hyper-specialization of original D&D and AD&D is combat and dungeoneering. Of course, you could still use it for your regency romance or coffee shop AU if you wanted, just like you could bring Good Society characters into the dungeon (more easily, in fact; Good Society is actually not a good example of a hyper-specialized game at all; just one with a different mode of play), but the rules wouldn't give you much guidance for that; if you're not killing dudes and your performance has much more to do with interaction with NPCs (so reaction checks? High-charisma characters are OP) and not dropping the coffee. And the game will probably stop for an hour when a fight breaks out and you need to decide whether *only* dragons can be subdued or you can do subdual damage on your patrons.

I think the line to roleplaying system vs game is related but not quite the same. GURPS (or Fate, or PbtA) isn't a game in and of itself, because you have to make far too many decisions before people even make up characters; it's once you've made those decisions (deciding to play GURPS Fantasy in Yrth or some set of books that lets you do GURPS special spy ops) that the result becomes a game. It's a system or meta-system. But even once you've made those decisions, GURPS is a pretty generalist system. You might need to let some new rules if your GURPS Fantasy game morphs into a GURPS Supers game in your fantasy world (or not), but if the GURPS Fantasy PCs decide to go spy hunting it will probably work out just fine, because nothing in the system or mode of play ties them to a specific narrative, whereas the primary factor for a hyper-specialized game is that, well, it does and that's intentional.

Re my math being off: Maybe. I did round. I was back of the enveloping it, and I know there are tables people have built out somewhere. The chance of failing a 14 or less is 216 minus that of rolling a 15 (3+6+1=10), 16 (3+6=9), 17 (3) or 18 (1), so 89.35%; if I calced 90.7 I was somehow off by 2. 9 or less is, of course, close to the 10.5 inflection point so yeah, it's pretty likely, but still basically a 1/3 success chance; better than 3/9, worse than 4/9.

Re "whatever the players want to play" vs the game's core design: Part of the question is what happens when there's a temporary genre shift. Obviously, if the players decide to retire from adventuring and open a coffee shop, D&D (and certainly AD&D pre dungeoner's survivor guide, with no skills) may be a bad fit. But one can still loosely group games into ones that can handle genre drift with the same characters gracefully, and those that most certainly can not. Or at least put games on a continuum—something like Mountain Witch or Bluebeard's Bride, with a preset plot arc and agenda, isn't going to drift far at all.

The not-evil Lucifer is very much a fixture at this point, from Brust to Gaiman. Part of the question is what world that

character exists in? Is God their enemy? Heaven which follows a Plan but doesn't communicate with the Almighty directly at all any more? Or perhaps the mortals have entirely misunderstood Divine/Demonic relationships, and both sides are following a Plan of sorts.

Re T Kingfisher being Ursula Vernon but for adults: Very true. Her early works (Black Dogs and Digger) used her real name, but once she'd made a name as a children's author, it made sense to use the T. Kingfisher pen name so it was less likely that children would accidentally get (or be gifted) her more challenging works. That said, *A Wizard's Guide to Baking* is decidedly YA and written under Kingfisher.

Re investigating and questioning NPCs in large groups: Yes, exactly. It makes perfect sense that you could get useful input talking to a given NPC without giving away your deal, and maybe if you come accompanied by two friends with a good story, but with a party of 6? I think part of the problem is when players expect a combat to break out any time, so they want the whole group just in case, but interaction makes more sense if they split up.

Re detect evil/good: the same question comes up with the Wand of Enemy detection. What determines an enemy? Is it someone whose goals are inimical to yours? Who specifically intends you harm? Who intends a group of people harm if they go into harm's way and you're totally in the group? There are lots of situations where the GM is going to have to make that call; the PCs might even use it *after* seeing NPCs to test whether they are an "enemy".

Avram Grumer: LOL at your describing the standard mode of play for tTRPGs as "letting the GM frame scenes while {hunting} for something flammable" I mean, not wrong.

The Brooklyn gaming group sounds great, even if they haven't read *Iluminatus!*.

IT' interesting to see the group using Belonging Outside Belonging (and Dream Askew at that) to do PVP play. Of course, as a GM-less game, BoB requires that players generate opposition and adversity; if they don't, who will? But Dream Askew's focus seems to be on communities in the face of adversity, which would make it seem like you'd be generating adversity with the setting elements and mostly acting more cooperatively with the main character playbooks, whereas here, it seemed like the setting elements were used mostly to interject twists into the narrative and people just went at it with moves off their playbooks. Which...well, it seems to have worked, for this session, at least, and the game certainly leaves the possibility open that there will be big conflicts among main characters—in and around a "close knit group of queers" having to deal with, well, the psychic maelstrom, gangs, scarcity, ruined landscapes, and turbulent skies. (Is the fierce queer community also intended to generate adversity? Well, maybe! I've played Grand Guginol and Yazeba's B&B (which doesn't have setting elements but does have adversarial NPCs that can take the place of them), which are also BoB, but I haven't played Dream Askew yet.

That Monster Hearts setup was fun to read. I was waiting the entire time to find out who the mortal picked as a love interest, so I was tickled...but not entirely surprised when they picked popular Stephan! Which, of course, lead to your building Stephan as more Hot than Volatile, which totally makes sense given the choices people were making, but is atypical; I've played a lot of Monster Hearts games (I mean, I think the only playbooks in MH1 I haven't played are, um, the Hollow, the Angel (which didn't make it to 2), the Fae, and the Infernal; I also haven't played the Cerberus or the Discipline but those are MH2-only), and I don't remember seeing a Hot-focused Werewolf even though it's an option.

Re Scum & Villainy: Wait, so Harmony should be a troublemaker just like Vary/Verity lies (or at least disguises

herself as someone else, depending) as a primary tactic? Ok, yes, that totally makes sense.

Re the escape; There was an actual fight with Von, I think, below, and, yes, Vary, having blown her disguise, left her arm behind (not a wound; just cosmetic/inconvenient...well, and it presumably means they get a sample which couldn't possibly be bad) and dove for the air ducts (or the like).

The reveal about House Malakuth wanting to develop shape-changing clones tied in nicely to the next session's reveals, but I think we did find out in this session that the reason they were trying to take in Magpies was that they thought they could be used to do something to unlock Way artifacts (which explains a bit about why the ambassador had no arms or legs when rescued).

And yeah, I totally didn't catch the Black Friday reference; it's not a song I know well, though I've listened to it now. Good song!

Soulslike, yes, is a video game sub-genre—for challenging games with rpg advancement but arcade/action mechanics, challenging bosses, and where dying is both frequent and has a cost (unlike roguelike games, doesn't end your current run). I'm not sure how you use it as part of a tTRPG chassis, except possibly with the boss design.

Re portrait in E&A: If you wanted to stretch the point, submitting your zine in 8.5" x 5.5 half-pages that were of course stacked onto 8.5/11 pages divided in half could give you a portrait feel (albiet with a less extreme portrait ratio than actual portrait, with a ratio of .64 rather than .77) without breaking the actual boundaries of the digital APA.

From what you've said, I wouldn't be surprised if Fiasco was in the Park Slope group's wheelhouse!

Re Gareth's Blades in the Dark game and how Heat and Wanted worked: The PCs did end up committing some crimes—sometimes you do have to steal some books if you want people to help in your detective work! But honestly, it never got that far; we lost too many players after the second job. But to my memory, it was largely based on what the PCs actually did during the session; they didn't commit crimes during the first session, and no heat built up in that session; in the second one, they did commit some crimes, so they probably should have gotten some heat (and they also got some cash in that session whereas in the first session they just got neighborhood cred, which was useful for the territory system but not for increasing their level).

Honestly, you could either have Heat and Wanted in Cthulhu Blades representing attention from the enemies—but you could also have it represent attention from the authorities. After all, the authorities don't know or care that you stopped the waking of Great Cthulhu, but they do care, very much, if you set a dock on fire in so doing. Night's Black Agents uses heat the same way; the PCs enemies are vampires and those who work for them, and they'll also run afoul of spies from their old lives—but Heat is used to track how much the mundane authorities are noticing your nonsense and when an area has gotten too hot for your shadow war to remain under the radar.

Re Cortex+ and Dogs in the Vineyard: I'm not convinced that they're directly related; certainly, what they do with the dice is very different, but they do both have something interesting happen when a die rolls a 1 and are both designed to let you use most of the dice lingering in your dice bag.

Re Scum and Villainy: Thanks for pointing out you could have two vices! That's useful for my roleplaying, and somehow I'd gotten the impression you could only have 1 without a move that granted an extra.

Paul Holman: I should really try out Brass Birmingham. I did try the original Brass, and didn't have any real opinions of it, except that I shouldn't have let anyone leave the table with a

drink precariously put on the side (it was someone else's copy of the game, and having noted out loud that the drink was a bad idea, I was the one who knocked it over on the way back).

Re wizards achieving MAD: See my comments elsewhere on an early D&D game where two Magic Users had spent in-game years (via time travel) to establish a similar detente.

Re background colors: I do wonder if it's worth compiling both a "for print" and a "for electronic reading" copy of each issue. This would allow contributors to, if they chose, submit variants of their zines, so if they were doing something that worked better in print copies (like landscape view) or electronic viewing (like background colors), they could do so without burdening the other style of consumption. Of course, the current assumption is that everyone reads it on a computer or reader, but that might not be true indefinitely.

Mark A. Wilson: I'm afraid we'll not see eye to eye on live action Comics stuff. Logan is fine as the Mutants live action adaptations get, but *The Batman* was laughably bad, far worse than Keaton, Bale (even the really, really bad Bane finale) or for that matter the Gotham tv show. I wanted to like it, but I did not. I don't remember exactly what I didn't like, but...I liveskated it here: <https://bsky.app/profile/mnemex.bsky.social/post/3kofrrku3jg2z>

Quick summary: it was a mess? Information got passed around the plot telepathically, Batman's intro was kinda snooze (but at least it wasn't another origin story), the plot is functionally circular and comes down to the entire plot being Bruce Wayne's fault without ever addressing it, and it approaches some big themes and then drops them on the floor. It's like they did the Iron Man trilogy but never thought about the implications of Tony's feckless vibe at the beginning. And the movie is just too long; it has a solid conclusion at around the 2 hour mark, and then they decide to do a disaster movie thing for the last hour rather than addressing anything that happened earlier.

And, the movie has a lot of bang zoom whoos (why is this happening? Who knows? Apparently, who cares?)

On the other hand, I like a lot of the MCU movies and TV shows. Sure, yes, there's a lot of fatigue, and they lean far too much on the idea that everyone's going to watch *all* the movies and TV shows (they won't). But there's a lot of good stuff there, and even the weak stuff is usually not that weak. (well, *Eternals*. Which they want everyone to forget about and which does have some nice bits).

Re D&D5 barbarian monk: yeah, starting at level 8 and with some chosen magic items clears up a lot; you can just start with a dex-focused build and an item (gauntlets of ogre power) that makes the whole thing pull together nicely! Still, I'm sure the GM is looking forward to the one fight where your character gets Charmed or Dominated and he can deploy him on the group.

Re Brindlewood Bay: I'm afraid that Brindlewood is the same mechanical space as World of Dungeons (where nearly every action rolls Defy Danger), in that the moves aren't what happens; they're just a mechanical frame for whatever happens. If you are addressing the mystery, sure, that's Meddling and can generate clues and/or complications. But since you can roll Meddling with any stat, it's not like that constrains you—if you break into a house, that's Meddling with Vitality. If you follow someone into a graveyard, that's Meddling with Composure. If you read through the paper to find clues, that's Meddling with Reason, if you talk to someone it's Meddling with Presence, and if you're trying to find clues involving the supernatural, that's Meddling with sensitivity. But what turns it into "almost everything is a Meddling Move" is that your goal is to find clues, so of course you roll (with whatever stat) the "find clues" move; otherwise you'd have no chance of finding clues! If, instead, your

goal is to accomplish something in the narrative despite risk, that's a Day or Night move; if you're experimenting with the occult that's the Occult move, and if you're proposing an answer to the mystery, that's the Theorize move, but...that's it. If it doesn't involve risk, the occult, or the mystery (or someone's cozy activity, but that doesn't involve a roll), it's not a move at all; you can do it, but the result doesn't nudge any of the core mechanics so it just happens. Unless, of course, the GM looks at it and thinks it's worth making a custom move for. But ultimately, Brindlewood is a cozy occult mystery game, so the mechanics follow that. Functionally, the characters could totally have a dozen different skills they use—but if the result you want is to move the mystery along, then of course the move is Meddle regardless of which stat and activity you're using (but the stat is going to very much determine whether the roll is likely to succeed or not), just like in D&D all attacks will be resolved with an attack roll, not your Sword or your Axe skill. Similarly, the result of a Meddle roll might be very different narratively depending on what is rolled and what the action is, but if the goal is getting a clue, then obviously the main question is "do you, in fact, get a clue? Do you get an extra clue? Does something go wrong?" Which is what Meddle is intended to resolve. Of course, if the situation is already dangerous (physically or just to your social standing or dignity) and a clue isn't on offer, maybe a Day move is more appropriate.

Matt Stevens: Your risk system is pretty cool—it would also help with combats between characters with very low skills, and lets players get a nice bump if they're doing something really easy. The current CoC7 system does avoid the issue substantially at high ends, but not the "and nobody can hit" one, by having 4 gradations of success. That said, to do more or less the same thing without having to swap dice all the time, you could just have different difficulties be multipliers around PC abilities—Simple is a x5 multiplier, basic is a x2 (means it's a d50 but that's better, actually; d40 was always clearly a hack around there not being d5), standard is a straight roll, expert is a .5, master a .25, and GM a .1. Of course, if abilities really did get well into the 400s, a d1000 would have more nuance, but one can burn that bridge later.

Dylan Capel: Interesting, another person who uses Google Docs to create your zine! (I mean, Lisa uses Word, so the Google Docs users are hardly alone in creating their zines with word processors). I mostly don't because, having gotten into the habit of using a plain text format I'm loath to change this...well, and the old Atari ST Calibre has gotten me into the mindset that there are better tools for DTP than a word processor.

I switched this month from writing my zines in vim to writing them in Emacs (which I'm better at, but I've written them in vim long enough that I forgot I had Emacs installed and occasionally enter the wrong keyboard command), so I had to go through Some Steps to add real-time spell checking in Emacs the way I have it set up in vim.

Erica L Frank: I've been hearing about Wanderhome for years but never got any details so thanks for that! It does sound like a lot of fun with the right group.

Lisa and I are both Untamed fans; the D&D builds was a bit slow, but I did like that he found ways to give Lan Wanji Silence and a low charisma, and Wei Wuxian a way to do fun paper doll tricks.

Patrick Zoch: If I were running the OSRIC game (which, fortunately, I am not, as I would likely hate it) my first try to fix the issue would be a combination of grabbing fixes from AD&D (whether or not they're in OSRIC...which they might be, I don't know?) and environmental changes to mitigate the issue.

To start with the AD&D fixes, AD&D doesn't allow the

kind of loop the PC group is using for two reasons:

First, if one or more PC gains enough XP to reach the next level, that's it. If the XP pool is big enough to go even further, they will get the extra XP (which might give them multiple levels at a time), but that's it; any further adventures they go on, or other sources of XP they gain will be wasted, as they are locked at their current XP until they finish training for the levels they've already earned. That alone would fix a lot of the issues (even without also stealing the BECM rule I've been told about and which at least one high school DM implemented that the maximum amount of XP you can hold is enough to reach two levels up, minus 1, so even if you have capped out on XP, you're never going to be able to go up two levels without adventuring in between, as after training, you'll be one XP short of the next level.

The other rule, straight out of the AD&D PH, is that not all gold PCs gain is equal. If you get gold and other monetary treasure in an adventure, it turns into XP right away, yes (subject to XP caps, as above). But magic items? Their primary value is that you can use them as, well, magic items—you do get a modicum of XP from getting magic items, but you don't get XP equal to their gold cost value, and you ALSO don't get any XP if you sell them and use them later.

So what about magic items that you don't want? Yes, you can immediately (as soon as you return from the adventure) sell them and get full XP value from the gold so gained, just like you can sell any art or other non-monetary treasure to lock in the gold->xp value of those treasures. But here's the thing: That sale has to be immediate, and if you're capped out on XP at that point, you can't gain any XP from that gold; waiting and selling you later doesn't help as at that point the gold doesn't earn you any XP at all.

So, with these fixes (circa Gygas in 1977), PCs who returned from an adventure with enough XP to level but not enough gold could sell magic items to pay for the training costs, but wouldn't earn any extra XP from the sale; once they notice they've earned enough XP to level, that's it; they can't earn any more. Or, they could go out adventuring to get the gold needed to level, but there, too, they won't end up earning extra XP, because they're capped until they finish their training.

As for the environmental change, if the GM is frustrated because PCs who have earned a level and don't have the cash to train it would rather find hook or crook to get the cash rather than going out adventuring without the level they technically have the knowledge to gain, then decide why the NPC trainers in town are generally willing to take payment in lieu (or debt) rather than requiring payment up front. After all, if they pay their debts, adventurers are an excellent investment. The most obvious payment in lieu is a favor—they can ask that in exchange for payment (that adventurers can't afford), that they instead go on an adventure of their choosing; doing stuff like this allows a game to stay sandboxy but feel more alive; the NPCs will ask for adventures or other favors that displays their goals and interests, and if NPCs are at odds, the PC may find themselves in interesting competitions (without truly being at odds) in order to propitiate their respective patrons, without the GM having to plan anything.

One potential pitfall here is NPCs letting PCs go into debt to fulfill their training: It is tempting, but mathematically, it's similar to letting PCs earn XP on adventures to get gold to train while they're capped on XP—it puts PCs into a similar loop to the item sale crack you've found. As such, I'd argue that gold earmarked to pay down a debt does NOT count as treasure; it is never truly the PCs gold so while it clears a debt (and makes it more likely the NPC will be willing to train the PC in the future) it is never worth XP because it's never the PC's gold (and thus will functionally act as an "advance" on the earned level, kindly allowing the PC to adventure *with* the earned level to get the

gold needed to pay for training rather than than forcing the PC to adventure *without* the earned level in order to amass the training costs. Of course, monsters are still worth full XP, but avoiding the loop-back helps keep things under control almost as much as AD&D 1 did.

And, in case it isn't clear, the reason I don't thank that "training for favors" has the same issue that "training for debt" (if the gold needed to repay the debt can earn XP) is that the math on the former is completely different—the PCs aren't in the hole for their training; just doing an adventure or two of the NPC's choice instead of their own, so any gold they earn can help pay for their training, just like as if they were free and clear after a few adventures that earned gold but no XP for them. It's a faster option, but the math, I think, works out.

Chocolate covered ginger is generally candied ginger, which gives ginger a very different flavor than *raw* ginger and combined well with (usually dark) chocolate. It's not a novelty like bacon chocolate, but a candy store classic.

Michael Cule: I don't say it every time, but I always adore your writeups.

Hmm. So, as we all know (or at least I know; I've played Heroquest with a Lunar party!), the Empire tolerates Chaos. But, in this case, the Chaos is potentially a problem. So, what determines whether Chaos in the empire is a problem or not? Is it whether it's causing problems or not?

I admit, I was somewhat concerned when the PCs went up against a Warrior Woman who was "Rune Level". Then I remembered that that just means you can operate Rune Magic, not that she out-scaled the PCs, and it seemed more like a winnable fight.

Re GURPS: While I've looked at GURPS 4e, I admit that what I think of when I talk about GURPS trends towards 3e, since I'd ceased playing GURPS before 4e came out. So I know about higher point total PCs as "average" and wildcard skills, but not so much directly.

Re more "modern" designs being more a straitjackets than a vehicle to do wonderful new things: That's a telling and interesting observation. I think a lot of why people make new games these days is wanting a specific idea/storyline/concept—"I want magical girl teams with FitD" becomes Girl By Moonlight, "Feng Shui but with playbooks to give yo a quicker start" becomes Feng Shui 2, etc. But since there's a core concept to differentiate it from other games, it can be harder to add sense of wonder, and focus on possibilities that the designer hasn't imagined to the mix. Which isn't to say that other games did focus on sense of wonder—arguably, the issue is that many newer games are better at communicating their core concept, so there's less vagueness at the edges, so if you want possibility, white space for players to write their own story and ideas, etc, you need to deliberately leave space for it. My experience is also that more recent games have less time devoted to playtesting—back in the day, people were somewhat less scientific about playtesting but boy did they do a hell of a lot of it, but these days people doing game design are often doing it as a hobby that pays a bit, so playtesting tends to feel a bit minimal (except, of course, for big companies that can devote a budget to playtesting, of course).

Jim Eckman: Yeah, Norton's mix of SF and Fantasy are part of the appeal (and yes, like Vance as well). The big thing tended to be Forerunner tech—it's always mysterious and only sometimes inimical, giving her worlds a big sense of humor. Even the Witch World, which is pretty pure fantasy, has relics of ancient magical civilizations for characters be empowered by, explore, or be imperiled by. (or all three). The much more modern (and ongoing) Liaden books by Steven Miller and Sharon Lee (and now continued by just Lee as Miller passed) have their own types of forerunner tech, but there, the oldest

tech tends to be a pure peril, as (as shown in the Crystal Dragon books which are set in the prehistory), they often are works of the Great Enemy. And while I like Liaden quite a bit, I find that having had the pre-history explored can damage the wonder—if we get a full explanation, there are still plenty of white spaces for the authors to fill, but we still know the broad outlines in a way we don't if it remains mostly a mystery.

Brian Misiaszek: Re fiddle and violin: Yup. People will tend to use "fiddle" more often in trad situations and "violin" more in classical or formal music, but in truth they're the same instrument, just with different styles (not just of music—baroque music came out of a longstanding culture of improvisation over a basso line, but most classical performance has only the notes on the page get played, although of course the performer makes plenty of choices of emphasis and exactly how to produce the notes if not specified. But with trad music (fiddle in this case), the tune tends to be more of a guideline (subject to the specific tradition involved); the performer picks which ornamentation to use, including but not limited to double stops (playing another note on a different string in chord with the main note), rolls (trills), slides (starting slightly off the note on purpose and sliding the note into place as a transition), cuts (taken, as far as I can tell, from wind instruments where you can't easily stop a note entirely without transitioning between notes [particularly bagpipes], using a brief other note as an ornament either to provide rhythm to a long note or as an ornament when transitioning. And also, for at least some styles of fiddle, often the bowing is a rhythmic structure—you'll have a bowing pattern that acts as a baseline for the music and tends to stay constant throughout the tune, with the ornaments you chose partially to act as a bridge between the bowing pattern and the tune (my impression is that this is certainly true in Bluegrass fiddle). Whereas in classical, you're going to pick the bowing that best lets you play the music, which might very well include some periods of even bowing (it's not like classical and trad players won't learn or steal from one another), but it's not a regular thing. I don't remember if I've written about it recently but I play fiddle (studied violin as a kid for years) and harp (took classes and lessons as an adult).

Harp, too, has some interesting divisions between traditional and classical styles. Aside from the concert pedal harp in fact being a distinct instrument, with 7 pedals each of which controls 1/7th of the strings on the instrument (vs a traditional instrument with no sharpening mechanism, or a lever harp with one lever on some or all strings to let you bring them from tuned flat to natural or tuned natural to sharp), trad players are more likely to refer to themselves as "harpers" while classically trained players are more likely to use "harpist".

Jim Vassilakos/Plankwell Collective: There seems to be a lot of tension between the GMs throwing romantic prospects Plankwell's way, and the player insisting on being professional and fending off almost any of them (whatever a certain protocol officer might think).

As much as one might criticize the model, it is reasonable to put "simulationists" in a different box than "gamists" who want roleplaying games to play more like a tactical war game. Obviously, both tend to like more complicated rules, at least in their most archetypical form. But the kinds of rules they like tend to vary substantially—gamists tend to like having lots of ways to min/max their character, to make their character's performance match their own performance, etc. On the other hand, simulationists are all about the game feeling "realistic"—whatever that means to them, with worlds that extend well beyond the PCs, rules that can generate all plausible possibilities even if those possibilities don't make for good gaming, and that generate a "living world" which makes sense in all its particulars (D&D 3e, where all NPCs were generated in much the same

fashion as PCs were, was something of a simulationist's dream, even as it wasn't all that great from a gamist perspective). I remember back in the Forge days, people wrote about an "El Dorado" of a system that was perfectly gamist and also perfectly simulationist, and I don't think it's as impossible as all that, but the two ideas do have a fair bit of tension; what you seem to be talking about is how people who describe themselves as simulationists may actually be more gamist than they pretend. But as much as we make fun of it them in some quarters, Rolemaster, Chivalry and Sorcery, and Phoenix Command are very simulationist (Rolemaster with critical hit and fumble tables that can generate almost any conceivable result, C&S with detailed medieval rules, Phoenix Command with extremely detailed firearms rules down to determining the exact path a bullet takes through a body to (usually) kill it).

But I wouldn't describe any of them as gamist. People into treating a RPG more like a game don't gravitate to these "high-realism" games—they gravitate to games like World of Darkness, D&D, Shadowrun, GURPS, Hero System, or almost any OSR game—popular games with abusable mechanics—popular because unless players can invest in being *good* at a game and expect that more than ten people will care, it's not going to attract the gamist crowd.

But back to simulationism, it's about feeling more than being realistic to the point of unplayability (which is why Phoenix Command isn't a very popular game). The Forge descriptions weren't very useful because simulationism wasn't actually popular on the Forge, but I think it's reasonable to talk about both reality simulationism and genre simulationism (which has some goals in common with narrativism, but not fully—the rules tend to push for outcomes that match the simulated genre, but don't tend to push story and choose the way a nar storygame does (Feng Shui is genre simulationism; Monster Hearts is a nar storygame).

Re dungeon HOA: I mean, the idea was that the players were playing the HOA! We need to come up with a plan to deal with these adventurers that are destroying the local property values (and also the actual property). The magic store a little ways into the dungeon has been getting a lot of business but also lots of visitors, should we raise their rent? Barry the Beholder is just a really rude neighbor and there are many complaints, but do we have to do anything (particularly since Barry is a member of the HOA). And the Red Dragon [also a member of the HOA] is beloved, but...he has a massive hoarding problem. We need to figure out how to stage an intervention, but we don't want it getting out of hand. (Kory the Kobold has this plan involving the adventurers, but others really aren't sure about it).

Some years after we worked on it (but wrote a different larp, an all cats game called The Night That Queen Princess Fluffykins Passed), some other group, apparently unrelatedly, wrote a larp to this concept at a different game building weekend: <https://larp.v.egetabl.es/larp/1382/?run=3432>

Re Lady Alise being titled: Yeah that became clear when it came out that she owned a planet. The "Lady Alise" titling confused me at first since in some systems that's used for someone who is noble but doesn't have a "real" title.

Re psionics and your Traveler universe: Yeah, it seems like you're taking the approach that psionics is powerful and common enough in YTU that all of human politics is significantly influenced by it; either because the powers that be are psychic or because they're the pawns of interested psychics.

Re "the PCs get a job": I'm fine with it too in some circumstances; it's an easy, no-hook way of getting PCs involved in an adventure. What gets me is when published scenarios assume that, in a non-military setting, that PCs will still be paid investigators or mercenaries even late into their career. Sure, provide "you get hired" as one in-ramp, but also add some other suggestions for groups that tend to follow the interests of their

members more often than they take on jobs—if you look at, say, the cozy mystery genre, sure, Poirot or Holmes get most of their cases from clients. But someone like Jessica Fletcher, Peter Whimsy, or Ms Marple tend to get their cases by being around when they start, or by being acquainted (or related to) the principles, not because of a job—and even some Holmes and more Poirot cases proceed that way too. This isn't really about direction—if a GM introduces a case by "you've been invited to a party", or "your cousin Andy who helped you out in the last adventure sends a letter asking you to visit; it seems he's run into some trouble", that's no less an invitation to an adventure than "meet the clients; this is what they want and who it needs to be taken from—an why you sympathize enough with them to take the job," but it doesn't assume a very specific party agenda—and, of course, once the events start happening, there's no other NPC that has a prevailing opinion on how to respond; that is up to the PCs.

This also leads into your ideas about scripts vs sandbox—where I'm off in the corner going "timeline, please". Scripted games tend to be *very* scripted—starting with Dragonlance, you'll have a sequence of scenes the PCs are supposed to experience, with mechanisms that shepherd them between the scenes and make sure they stay on the railroad, but usually some freedom in what, exactly, the PCs do during the scene. Whereas a sandbox is generally going to be either a dungeon-style sandbox (where the GM has built a bunch of NPCs and a location and the PCs can go wherever they want...and yeah, if they stray off the map the GM needs to expand the map), or a Lee Gold style sandbox where the GM presents a bunch of characters and events and then expands on whichever ones the PCs decide to follow (and may also have some default actions for the stuff the PCs decide not to do so the game feels more alive), building along with the PCs expansion but not having specific directions in mind.

But there's also the largely unscripted prepared adventure—something like Masks of Nyarlathotep, where there's a single scripted scene (the one at the beginning of the multi-location adventure) and a bit of scripting in most locations to make sure the PCs have a default way to meet the important NPCs, but what the PCs do in a given location isn't scripted at all; of course there are better and worse choices, but ultimately the PCs plans are their own, as is their possible doom.

And then there's an unscripted and often largely unprepared game like Masks or Monster Hearts (or our own Dangerous Refuge, and Good Society in general), where the

group improvises some NPCs and figures out some basics of how the game world looks (or maybe borrows some bits from the designers of the game or some other source) and then, depending on how things were built, the GM (if any) and players basically just do stuff, relying on the system and other players to have it feel like a plot-like object by the end of it, but with nobody necessarily having a plan until 2/3 of the way through, and that largely because the play that's already happened has its own weight and logically, it's going to lead in one of several directions. This kind of game is what I was referring to earlier as your typical narrativism storygame, and it's most certainly not scripted at all, while if it's a sandbox, no single person is curating the toys in it at all. If you consider this kind of game "unscripted, role-players", then there are rather a lot of people crowded into this box, even if not nearly as many as the D&D and OSR people crowded into the SW box by virtue of D&D having its own gravity (and being the majority of new roleplayers' entry to the hobby).

Timothy: Re Tian Deng: Lisa's also responding to this, but since I also did the research, the issue isn't that it's not out any more but that it's not out -yet-. Everyone writing about it was a playtester, but they changed direction a few times during playtests (they were originally following the traveler start of "you're all in debt on your first ship, go" with a more nar, collaborative system, but decided that the debt train wasn't thaty interesting and that plenty of other games have done young space-faring protagonists, so instead they're pivoting to protagonists on the cusp of retirement, doing a few final jobs to pad their next egg.

Yup, Foundation, like a number of other novels at the time, was a fix-up. Book publishing was really different during the days where magazines were the primary way people got their science fiction!

Re the Remarkable/Paper 7: The issue I have with the current CRLCD (reflective color LCD) models is that they're so damned dark. I love the idea of a color device that doesn't shoot light at my eyes, takes less battery life, can be seen easily even in very bright light, and unlike an e-paper device, updates instantly (and thus can be used to play games and such) rather than quite slowly. But with these screens being, at best, light beige, you need quite a lot of light to be able to use them comfortably. Once the tech matures a bit and they can have their background color be much closer to white, they're going to be incredibly impressive.

Traveller Play-By-Email

Plankwell Campaign, Ch 52: Captain's Mast

GMing: Jim Vassilakos & Timothy Collinson, Playing Capt. Plankwell: Conrad Rader

The character of Capt. Plankwell was conceived by Phil Pugliese

Unfortunately, being a ship's captain wasn't as glamorous as portrayed on the viewy. Even documentaries focused on those harrowing moments of life and death, but most of the time, it was mainly logistics. There was all sorts of paperwork; I thought about the word as I thumbed my approval for a transfer of miscellaneous foodstuffs. Paper was certainly easier to read than holograms, dependent, of course, on the magnification, but how did people keep track of it all back when paperwork was all done on actual paper? My suspicion was that there was a lot less of it. Only a paperless society could generate this much paperwork.

<Beep>

A priority message appeared from some agency I'd never heard of, the IHC-CoJ. It was blinking red, more or less demanding my attention, so I focused on it, and the full header appeared. *Imperial High Court for the County of Jewell.*

We have received your preliminary petition for an expedited hearing entertaining your request for an investigation into the policing practices of the Heron Public Security Service as relates to the Imperial Navy and the incident of 120-1114, which involved the attempted arrest of the requesting party, Captain Plankwell of the 213th Fleet, Imperial Navy.

There was more, of course, but that was the essential bit, and, of course, there was a signature line down at the bottom. The question they were asking was whether I still wanted to go forward.

I stared at the spot on the page beckoning for my signature. The HPSS was in desperate need of review. That much was certain. And, well, why not? I invoked a virtual stylus and signed, then went back to my requisitions and transfer orders.

Ah, finally the document I've been waiting for. It was the schedule for the exploration pod replacement, projected to take... *several weeks?* I squinted. No, not several... seven. *Seven weeks?!*

I paged through the schedule and thought some sharp words about General Products and whoever designed this ship. It was a *frelling modular ship*, for Cleon's sake! How

does it take seven weeks to plug in a new module?¹ If we were repairing the battle damaged pod, I could understand, but this was a simple swap. There would still be testing, of course, but no repairs should be necessary. I peered at a few of the checklists and made notes about where I thought I might be able to push them to accelerate their timetable. Then I checked the schedule for the fusion barbettes. Firing tests were planned for this coming Senday.²

For the next few hours, I burrowed into the minutiae of paperwork I could have been doing from the privacy of my quarters. The problem with that idea, however, was that my bed was there, and after spending half my sleep period yanking weeds out of the recesses of Reggie's brain, it would be too tempting.

I thought about the way his eyes narrowed when I first entered the palace dining room, almost as though he was trying to remember who I was. Maybe he'd sensed we'd been all too close for a time, as I rifled through his memories, looking for anything about the Eye of God, which was the name they'd given to their psionic orb.

"I heard it came from Beck's World," one of his fellow clergy by the name of Shiish confided to him several decades earlier, so long ago he'd practically forgotten.

I'd spent some time on Beck's World³, brushing up on my Gvegh thanks to some unusually cooperative vargr POWs, so although I could have ripped this memory out by its roots as soon as I latched onto it, I couldn't resist taking a little peek before doing so.

"Where did you hear this?" Reggie had asked.

"Oh, don't quiz me about my sources and methods," old Shiish said. He was a little bitter, Reggie would later theorize, bitter about having never been invited to join the Exceedingly High Council of Supreme Stoners. "All I can

1 I thought the same thing, but page 13 of *Element Cruisers* clearly states, "Installing pods is a dockyard job requiring several weeks of work, as they become an integral part of the final design and are not a detachable or breakaway component," and this is reiterated on page 20. Yes, it's a real drag, but it was stated so clearly I didn't feel right ignoring it. Granted, seven is an over-estimate, but I figured General Products would prefer to give itself plenty of time. And, as Timothy pointed out, they can look good in "Scotty fashion" when they work miracles and do it sooner.

2 Senday is the seventh day of the week in the standard Imperial calendar. See

https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Imperial_Calendar

3 [https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Beck%27s_World_\(world\)](https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Beck%27s_World_(world))

tell you is they keep sending the most fervent of our fellowship there to search for more.”

“More? There are more of these... Eyes of God?”

“Definitely not maybe,” Shiish replied before becoming uncharacteristically laconic. He’d said too much, and now he regretted it, Reggie had surmised, or *perhaps they’re testing me*, the thought blowing through his brain like a chill wind. *It doesn’t matter. If the universe will reveal itself, I will bear witness, and if not, so be it.*

There’s an Ancients site at Beck’s World, Josefeen had sent, since we’d been linked at the time.

I know, I’d replied. I knew, at least, it was suspected to be from the time of the Ancients. I went on a tour of one of the upper levels and came away with a severe migraine.

“Sir,” Commander Nizlich said.

I turned my head so fast I almost sprained my neck. I hadn’t realized she was on the bridge. She must have just entered. Had I been dozing?

“Do you want me at the Captain’s Mast?” she asked.

I glanced at my schedule. Nizlich was saving me again, as I was supposed to be there in five minutes. *Where?* Oh, what did it matter? How was I going to get anywhere on this ship in five minutes?

“Yes, please, Commander,” I said, removing my earbuds. “I’d appreciate your insights on the crew under review.”

Several new faces were on the bridge by this point, so I checked the duty roster and selected the Tactical Actions Officer, Lt. Erik Gurukar, to take over while I was at the Mast.⁴ Aside from being the TAO, he was also the Senior

4 Conrad initially wrote that Gus “selected the Weapons Officer to take over while I was at the Mast. Judging by the look on their face, bridge responsibility usually went to Ops or Engineering. Too bad. Everyone needed to learn to conn the ship in an emergency. Better start learning when there wasn’t one.” (https://groups.google.com/g/plankwell-pbem-s1/c/Y72wCd_jjGI/m/V8CNVQ3mAAQAJ) This raised two questions. First, is there a weapons officer on the bridge? I looked at the bridge personnel chart in *Element Cruisers* (page 47) but didn’t find one. I then remembered that little Gunnery Command Center on Deck 1 (see Chapter 16 in A&E #564). LtCdr. Furtle’s “end of the narrow chamber was for target selection and kill authorization, and she did this for every gun on the ship, from the PA cannon and fusion barbets to the beam lasers, and, of course, the missile launchers,” which explains why there is no weapons officer reporting to the Senior Bridge Officer (SBO) on page 47 of *Element Cruisers*. I decided to “solve” this issue by assuming the SBO is also a weapons officer, but I called the position Tactical Actions Officer (TAO) to convey that this is someone trained in space combat tactics. The book says the SBO is a lieutenant, so I went with that, but as I discussed previously, all the ranks seem a bit low (see footnote #26 in our zine in A&E #560), so maybe Erik Gurukar should have been a LtCdr? But that would put him at the same rank as Ansi Furtle, the Chief Weapons Officer (CWO), and I wasn’t sure if the TAO/SBO

Bridge Officer, but, of course, having never been introduced, I had no idea which one of these strange faces belonged to him. There was, however, a very easy way to find out.

“SBO, you have the Conn.” I got up from the command chair.

“Aye aye, sir,” a young man said. “I have the Conn.” He approached with his shoulders back and chin high, his blond hair cut high and tight like he might be moonlighting as a marine. As per my general instructions, he held back his salute.

I nodded to Stefani, and as we exited the bridge, I motioned for her to lead the way. Presumably we’d be doing this somewhere near the brig, which was about as far aft as you could get without being inside some part of the jump drive. However, instead of leading me back to one of the main corridors, she simply walked to the nearest iris valve, and we entered what was essentially a suite of offices. Moments later, I found myself following her into a small conference room, one where the conference table had been shortened and turned sideways, creating what was effectively a desk. Two slates were there as well as two seats, both of them empty.

I looked at Nizlich as we sat but kept my psi shield up. I didn’t need to add the private thoughts of my first officer to the swirl of other peoples’ memories in my brain.

“Demicredit for your thoughts, Sauerkraut?”

“Make an example of them,” she said, crossing her arms, “and there will be fewer disciplinary issues going forward. Pity we don’t have a general mess in which to hold court before the entire crew.”

I’d been on ships where Captain’s Mast was held in the central mess hall, but the Element Class had been designed with numerous small galleys so each department could eat together. This arrangement was supposed to enhance team-

should be at the same rank as the CWO. Timothy was non-committal. “I think to be fair, I don’t have an opinion! Or at least, have never given this thought till now.” The second question raised was over whether captains can transfer the conn to whoever they choose, regardless of rank. Again, I asked Timothy for his opinion, and again, he was unsure, but he was also unsure if it mattered. “I don’t know that I would be a slave to real world practice as this is Traveller and gaming needs should come first.” He then described how back in 1988 he’d spent many a graveyard shift manning the bridge as the ship’s night watchkeeper. This was aboard a 6500-ton, non-military ship with 350 people on board. There was nobody else present but a fireman who’d leave every two hours to make his rounds, making sure there were no fires except for the one he’d use to make some noodles halfway through the night. And Timothy was under strict instructions to immediately call the 2nd officer if he had *any* concerns there might be a collision with another ship while he was on anchor watch, something he actually did on one occasion. The upshot was that no matter who has the conn, it’s the ship’s captain who’s ultimately responsible.

building by making each department into a sort of family, but the consequence was that there was no one room where the entire crew or even a sizable percentage of it could gather. Indeed, the largest conference room on the Jaqueline could only hold about thirty out of a crew of nearly five hundred sophonts. Add to that the pod crews and Marines, and the total compliment came to well over a thousand, so thirty was what... three percent?

Yet as a fighter jock, I'd preferred the distributed arrangement. Departmental galleys did improve team-building, and there was some actual choice about what to eat, even a little bit of friendly competition to see which department could produce the best chow. And there was a seldom-mentioned downside of the unified mess, which was that if it suffered a surprise hull breach, such as by a suckerpunch from some pirate or terrorist, there could be a massive number of casualties, not to mention problems going forward about where to eat.

Sidara entered the room carrying her ubiquitous data slate and came to attention.

"Lt. Sidara, reporting as ordered."

"At ease," Nizlich said after a short pause. Meanwhile, I picked up the slate in front of me and used my thumbprint to log in.

I pulled up the reports of the fire, the crew records, and their service jackets in case I needed to look at anything in particular. I knew that at least some of them had ingested psychotropics, but I was more interested to see if any of them would fess up. Just on the surface, they were all guilty of behavior unbecoming of Navy personnel. Impaired judgment would be a mitigating factor in their sentencing, but there was also the decision to ingest before the more serious crimes took place. I was pretty sure it was all property damage, and I looked for any casualty reports. We in the Navy did hurt and kill, but we preferred it to occur under orders rather than freelancing.

As I located what looked like some medical reports, our elderly Senior Master Chief entered the room. I might have mistaken her for someone's nice, old grandmother if not for the burn-scar covering half her face as well as the mirrored shade over one eye-socket.

"SMC Kaashukapiaki reporting, sirs. The accused are just outside. Do you want to do this all at once or separately?"

"Remind me, Lieutenant. How many are we talking about here?"

"Six," Sidara replied.

"Two groups of three," I told the SMC.

Punishments could include brig time, confinement to quarters, pay penalties, reduction in rank, and cashiering. Technically, corporal punishment was also available, but I was hopeful none of the offenses would rise to that degree. I was leaning towards pay penalties to offset the expenditures towards repairs, as well as suspension of leave privileges. If

I cashiered them, I would remand them to HPSS for local punishment as well, but judging by my own experience, I wasn't about to send any more Navy into that particular hellhole. The accused being vargr also raised the issue of the xenophobic response.

"Are we in need of disciplinary examples?" I murmured to Stefani as the Senior Master Chief turned and left.

"Always."

I wasn't sure if I wanted to rule through fear.

The Senior Master Chief re-entered the room with three of the detainees, all of them vargr. Petty Officer Faeng, who'd sat beside me on the shuttle ride down to Plankwell Naval Base⁵, was among them. I couldn't help but recall how he'd exclaimed how lucky I was to be descended from the great Olav hault-Plankwell, the one sophont responsible for killing more vargr than any other single non-vargr in all of history — granted, that was merely a guess — and now here he was before me again, no doubt hoping for leniency. There was a bit of irony there, I was fairly sure.

"Salute," the SMC said to her enlistees. They saluted, albeit not quite in unison.

"Uncover," she said, and they removed their caps.

"Report."

They took turns stating their name and rank, each ending with "reporting as ordered, sirs." Then Sidara read the charges, which were identical for all. "Violation of Articles 116-112a and 108-53." The first was for drunken rioting, and I was pretty sure the second had something to do with the destruction of civilian property, especially while whoring. "How do you plead?"

"Innocent," said the first. "Mostly innocent," he amended. "Partially innocent," he downgraded it further.

"I swear to Cleon and Olav — hell, sir," said the second, "I'll even swear to Erzikh Dhadh — I did not commit arson."

"None of us did, sir," Faeng said. "We were all intoxicated. That part's true. And there was a fight. It was a fight, not a riot. At least, it started out that way. If you'll bring the other guys in, they can tell you what they know. But none of us started that fire."

"Silence," I said.

I drew open my psychic curtain and looked carefully at each in turn.

Mr. Partially Innocent remembered it all as a series of disjointed segments tossed around in his canine brain like chunks of meat in a blender, such was the power of the skuubi snacks.

"They ain't workin'!" he'd yelled at one point. It was dim and loud, and there was a vargr woman dancing in front of them mostly unclothed, her fur no doubt soaked in synthetic pheromones. Or maybe they were the real thing.

5 See Chapter 19 in A&E #567.

"It'll work." Ghoerrg replied. "Just be cool." The actual word he used was *ghaekkh*⁶, which meant sleek, but in this context, it meant cool; i.e., don't overreact.

Ghoerrg, whoever he was, wasn't among the three who were presently before me. Maybe he was in the next group.

"Who sold you this?" Mr. Innocent had asked with a disgusted sneer. "Whoever it was, you got robbed."

"No, dog, they were a gift."

"A gift? From who?"

"A friend."

"Well, you can tell your friend he's a lightweight."

"She," Ghoerrg corrected.

"She?"

How many seconds had passed? I was pretty sure I'd been staring at him for way too long.

"How did you come to be intoxicated?" I asked, breaking the silence.

Their story was that Ghoerrg went to the restroom and came back with six — count them, six — skuubi snacks. Some lady vargr had been there, a little cutie who he'd presumed was one of the professional dancers, given her minimal attire. She asked him if he wanted to have some fun, and of course, he said yes. Who wouldn't? Next thing he knows, she hands him six skuubis for him and his friends.

"So some mysterious voman slipped you a Mickey," Commander Nizlich summarized, then pursed her lips. "Shocking."

I was pretty sure she wasn't buying it. Either that or she judged them to be as stupid as they looked.

"We had no idea how powerful they were," Mr. Innocent went on, semi-truthfully — they'd been warned, but they hadn't listened. The rest of what came out of his mouth, however, was pure fabrication. In the mind of the one standing next to him, the one who'd just sworn on the names of Cleon, Olav, and some ancient vargr hero, I could picture Ghoerrg telling them, "Yeah, I have friends who happen to be female. So what?"

"Who?" they all wanted to know.

They'd just come down on the shuttle, all of them together, which meant Ghoerrg had been hiding these skuubis in a secret compartment inside his bionic leg for how long?

"How long have you been holding?" Faeng asked him directly, holding a knife in one hand and a fork in the other. They were at some restaurant.

"How many you got there, dog?" Mr. Innocent asked.

"We get one each," Ghoerrg said.

"One each? That's way more than six."

"I don't get one?" Kaar said. He was human, the same guy who'd called himself a Trevera on the shuttle.⁷

"You can have one if you want," Ghoerrg replied, "but I don't know if they even work on humans."

"That's *ghaekkh*," he said, obviously trying to say it was cool/sleek but using the word in the wrong context. "I'll be the designated soberite."

The rest of them chowed down their skuubis, one each. The plan was they'd go into the club and wait for them to take effect, but then...

"C'mon, dog!" Mr. Innocent snarled. It was Faeng's memory this time. "Just admit! These are crap skuubis you got from some she-chimp⁸ you've been tongue-tickling."

"Who said anything about a she-chimp?"

"So wait. You got these from one of us?" *One of us* meant a fellow vargr. There were only so many vargr crew members and even fewer vargr females. "You didn't get these from Manda, did you?"

Bingo!

"I'm not answering that."

"Hahahahaha!" Vargr laughter actually sounded a bit different from that of humans, but that was the gist.

"Manda is what... half my weight? Half! No wonder this drug is lame! Give me another or it's *fuenrag* time!" He was basically threatening to take it.

"She said to give it an hour." Ghoerrg reiterated, but under pressure from the others, he ended up handing over the bag, and they all had a second helping. One of them, Kfoerrgh, even had a third.

"How did you end up fighting?" I asked, once their story about the phony mystery lady was out of the way.

"There were these jarheads that were badmouthing the Jaqueline, sir," Mr. Innocent lied again.

It started because the seventh member of their group, Spacehand Kaar, was catching flak from a group of vargr marines, the reason being that he was taking a front row seat, and the dancer was giving him extra attention seeing as how he was the only human directly in front of the stage.

"What are you doing here, Flatface⁹!" someone barked from directly behind him.

That's when it started, one moment staring at Grade A, prime choice, tongue-wagging succulence and the next catching the toothy glares of a group of angry vargr marines.

"It's cool, you guys." To his credit, Spacehand Kaar tried to diffuse the situation. "I'll go. Okay? You can have my seat."

"Oh, hell no!" Mr. Innocent stood up.

"He's our *shaggi*," Ghoerrg said. A shaggi was an honorary vargr, some alien, usually a human, who'd proven themselves so trustworthy as to be admitted as a member of

6 See Classic Traveller's *Alien Module 3: Vargr*, page 22.

7 See the 3rd page of Chapter 19 in A&E #567.

8 See <https://lists.simplelists.com/tml/msg/29170733/>

9 Thanks to Jeffrey Schwartz (see <https://lists.simplelists.com/tml/msg/29170886/>).

the pack. Often, they were well on their way to becoming a kengrran.¹⁰

“Yeah, piss off, you *trevera*-shitting, hydrant humpers!” Kfoerrgh’s retort came out so slurred it was pretty obvious he was in no condition to fight, and spitting on them for good measure might not have been the most diplomatic of gestures. Needless to say, from there it was claws to muzzles, but to hear them tell it, the fight started not because these marines were angry a human was occupying a prime piece of real estate and therefore getting all the female attention, but because they had supposedly smeared the honor of our ship as well as my own personal honor.

“They called you a *Veukh Nga*!” Mr. Innocent lied. “That’s an insult, sir, and as your crew, there was no way we could let it pass.”

“That’s right,” the second one said. His name was Thork. He’d been the one to come up with this whole story. “They insulted you, sir, and they insulted the ship. They said we couldn’t fight our way out of a paper bag.”¹²

Faeng, too, nodded as well but said nothing. *Please, space gods, let this work.*

“I’ve heard enough!” I snarled in Gvegh, using the packmaster imperative.

All three stared at me wide-eyed like I’d hit the desk with a hammer. Even Nizlich stared, unsure what I’d said but impressed with the effect. Only the SMC looked unfazed.

“Chief,” I said, switching to Anglic, “take these three out and bring in the other group. Let’s see if their story holds.”

“Aye aye, sir.”

She marched them out and brought in the second group, ordering them to salute, uncover and report just as the previous three had done. The first, Spacehand Naerroe, was very nervous. By contrast, Kfoerrgh, the one who’d had three skuubis, barely registered a pulse. Then there was Ghoerrg, who was supposedly the one who’d procured the drugs from some mysterious, scantily clad woman.

They all held up the same story, but I sensed a great deal of unease from Naerroe.

“This could get us all thrown out of the service,” he’d told the others while they were whispering to each other in the brig. “Lying to our Captain’s face is way worse than anything we did in that club.” But he kept to the script, his loyalty to the group outweighing his prudence. As for the arson, however, as far as I could tell he was completely mystified as to how it started.

“I hate fire,” he testified. “It’s every spacer’s worst enemy. Why would any of us start one? It doesn’t make sense.”

Kfoerrgh nodded in agreement but then admitted he had no idea what he’d done, as he couldn’t remember anything once the fight started.

“You don’t remember anything?” Nizlich asked.

“I remember us getting into it with the marines, but after that...” He shook his head. The skuubis had apparently gone into overdrive with the surge in adrenaline, and for some reason he’d decided to tear his shirt off and jump on the stage. Then he spread his arms and jumped into a random group of marines who up until that moment had merely been watching the fight as opposed to participating.¹³

“It was probably those damn zhos¹⁴,” said the last one. This was Ghoerrg, the one who’d procured the skuubis both in reality as well as in this fantasy story they’d concocted about the mystery woman. “We may have been targeted, sir,” he continued. “I admit, it’s entirely my fault for letting this happen. It was my decision to accept the narcotics from what turned out to be a... uh, well... I don’t know what she was... at minimum, a highly disreputable individual.”

A highly non-existent, disreputable individual. No doubt, the Starport Authority and HPSS tried to identify this imaginary person. I hadn’t read their report, but I didn’t really need to when I could just look into the minds of the accused.

“This whole thing is your fault,” Ghoerrg told Mr. Innocent back in the brig. “If we’d waited a full hour like Manda said...”

“The fight would have happened anyway,” Faeng interjected, trying to diffuse their argument.

“Yeah, but it didn’t turn into a full-on brawl until doofus here took a swan dive into those other marines.”

Kfoerrgh only vaguely remembered that part. His memories were like little shards of glass from a shattered window, and even those were mostly hallucinations. For example, he’d thought he’d seen Lt. Jaamzon. She’d floated over and talked to him while he, in his mind, at least, was crowd-surfing. He’d heard she’d just died, but at that moment, for whatever reason, he didn’t find it strange that she was right there next to him.

“The Captain’s a good guy,” she’d said as he was getting pummeled. “Tell him I said Hi.”

His memories from the club were all like that, weird little splinters of impossibility. By the time he came back to

¹⁰ <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Dictionary:Kengrran>

¹¹ See Classic Traveller’s *Alien Module 3: Vargr*, page 23.

¹² For what little it’s worth, I got the idea for this excuse from a video I watched about Terry Allen, one of the lesser known generals of World War II. See <https://youtu.be/GfFuMuVazrE?si=fzPrJpyRfv6UGiCF&t=1690>.

¹³ I got this idea from an actual bar fight some friends of mine once told me about. They described how one guy got up on a table and then jumped into the crowd. I don’t recall how this worked out for him, but I can imagine everyone just stepping to the side and letting him belly-flop against the floor. I suppose it would depend on how crowded it was.

¹⁴ Slang for Zhodani.

reality, he was already in the brig with the others, all of them in the same cell, quietly plotting strategy.

"If we're going to lie about the skuubis," Thork had whispered, "then we might as well lie about how it all started. We can tell the Captain we were defending his honor."

"That's the dumbest thing I ever heard," Naerroen retorted. "Once he talks to Kaar, he'll know exactly what happened."

"Why would he talk to Kaar? Nobody but us even knows Kaar was there."

"Unless he made an incident report or just stuck around to answer questions," Faeng conjectured.

"Even Kaar's not that dumb," Thork replied, although the fact that he'd tricked Kaar into proclaiming himself a *trevera* didn't exactly support this assessment.

"I say we go for it," Kfoerrgh said. "What's the worst that can happen?"

"Court martial," Naerroen replied. "Either that or the worst duty you can imagine."

But Kfoerrgh had it in the back of his mind that I was a good guy and there was really nothing to fear. Everything would play out however it was meant to be, and no matter the outcome, he'd have a great story for his future pups.

Nizlich kicked me under the table, and I too came back to reality. They were all staring at me, even the Senior Master Chief. What was the last thing anyone had said? Something about the Zhodani, I was pretty sure. They wanted me to think they'd been targeted by this non-existent mystery lady.

"Bring the others in," I said in my calm command tone, one that previous subordinates had occasionally mistaken for disinterest. "I'll do sentencing with all present."

Stefani was right insofar as we needed to make an example of them, but there were other considerations as well. I needed to be seen as judicious and fair in my dealings with the crew. If I came down too hard, it would be more difficult to establish command authority. It helped that they were aware they screwed up, so I was pretty certain they wouldn't complain about the punishment for the fighting, and not assuming guilt with respect to the arson would be viewed as taking their side against the planetary authorities, who seemed to have it in for the Navy.

The SMC brought the rest of them in and lined them all up shoulder to shoulder.

"With respect to the intoxication as well as the fight, I find your actions disgraceful," I told them, "and I am dismayed at your credulity, your inability to discern, and your poor decision-making capabilities. You are all confined to the ship for the next two ports. All shore leave credits are forfeited. You will work your normal duty shifts. You will all pick up extra half-shifts working in the medical bays looking after your crewmates when they come back from shore leave or cleaning up after them as the case may be.

You will attend and complete re-education classes in shore leave protocol, identifying harmful substances and learning how to have cordial interservice relations."

I stood up and marshaled my Gvegh.

"You will not steal my honor by fighting for me. You know not where my honor lies. If you wish it, challenge me and see."

I was pretty sure none of them were that hopped-up, but if they wanted to be in my pack, I needed to put them in their place. As expected, none of them said a word. I'd just smacked them on their snouts, and I hadn't even gotten to the arson.

I slowly walked around the table and stood in front of Faeng.

"You, I had hopes in. And this is how you repay my confidence?"

I could feel his sense of shame, but it wasn't over the intoxication or even the fight. What he was most ashamed about was the lie in which he'd just participated, but it was ultimately for a good cause, to save Manda from suffering a possible demotion, and looking him straight in the eyes, I couldn't help but sense how he was inwardly torn. She was, after all, the ship's Chief Technical Officer, and if her part in this were to come to light, she might lose that position, and that would be a terrible thing, as the other vargr on the ship saw how far she'd gone and believed they could go far as well. If she went down in flames, they'd all have less faith in the Navy as well as less faith in themselves.

"As to the arson," I said, turning away from him, "I am not convinced that the planetary authorities have given enough investigative resolve to determine the source, so I am unlikely to charge you for that particular episode. At this time," I added, looking at them sharply. "You are all on parole for a standard year, pending completion of the punishment detail. Screw up again, and my very limited patience will be exhausted. Chief, they are dismissed. You too, Lieutenant," I added to Sidara.

As they headed to the door, I said, "Wait. Kfoerrgh, report to Medical for a full toxicity scan. I am interested in exactly what it is that turned you into idiotic *vapchata*."

"Aye aye, sir," he replied. "And happy birthday, sir." And then they were gone.

"Vapchata?" Stefani asked, genuinely curious.

"A fast-prey chaser," I said.

She looked at me, still confused.

"A *vapchata* is a vargr who pits his speed against a prey animal that has evolved to evade. He acts on twitch instinct instead of pack tactics. In other words, he's arrogant and self-indulgent, but he still has the ability to do better, which is all I really want, that they learn to do better."

I'm sure ve could all learn to do better, Nizlich thought to herself. Apparently, she mispronounced her W's even in her thoughts. But she was also thinking about me.

I'd appeared to zone out during the Captain's Mast, so much so she'd given me a kick under the table or at least bumped my leg. She'd been thinking about the contents of my formerly secret stash, I suddenly realized, and she was concerned those psi-toys might have taken a toll on my mental capacity, what with me being in such close proximity. Indeed, it reminded her of the way Captain Jenkins used to stare at people including herself from time to time, just the way I was staring at her now.

I blinked, snapping myself out of it.

"So you believe them?" she asked.

"I believe they didn't start the fire," I replied. "And they are doing an admirable job of covering for an unnamed conspirator. Well, admirable might be a strong term, but they are at least trying."

"Unnamed conspirator?" *What unnamed conspirator?*

I couldn't help but smile.

"I told you about the radioactive rum, remember?"

She nodded, thinking that Josefeen must have been feeding me intel, stuff I couldn't share, and, in a way, she wasn't wrong.

"Junior officers and crew get up to the craziest things," I said, "but it is the camaraderie and support that carries through. I know you all have the impression of me being a rules stickler, but it is far too early in my tenure to start cracking down. And after all the events of the past few days, I have little in my inventory to justify it. The punishment for what they admitted to is sufficient to remind them that doing stupid things will have consequences. I know who and what to watch for using my... uh, personal channels, and I impressed upon them the futility of trying to appeal to my personal sense of honor to get away with things in the future. Believing them was never the issue."

Stefani, however, was still confused. *Inventory? Personal Channels?* What did it all mean? But it was not her place to probe, and she sensed asking further questions might only irritate me. Still... *unnamed conspirator?*

She'd been thinking that the mysterious female vargr they'd talked about was probably an employee of the nightclub, and the club decided to hide her from the police for a very obvious reason. Either that or Mystery Dog-Lady simply fancied vargr #6. Was he particularly handsome? Being human, Stefani couldn't say. *Probably has more to do with smell anyway.*

The idea they'd made her up to protect Manda wasn't even on Stef's radar, and perhaps it was better that way, but it didn't change the fact that Stefani now felt she was on the outside looking in. She sensed I trusted her, but there were still things I couldn't tell her. There was no *need to know* on her part, or at least that had been somebody's judgment, probably mine.

"I see," she said. "Vell, sir, do you have any instructions? Is there anything you need me to do?"

"Stefani, you have been instrumental in my transition to this command. In a just world, you would have been promoted to command, and I would have been shuffled off to another Fleet staff assignment."

"Oh no, sir... please."

"I can tell you have questions about this, and I will read you in as soon as I can. Preferably in a secured briefing room with several large drinks." I looked around. "Sadly, no large drinks."

I leaned back and tapped on my temple with my finger. "Yes, in a just, intelligent world, it would all make much more sense." I then made the hand sign for undetected hostile. "But now, I have some time before Director Scarlett, and I think I should put in an appearance in the way of a surprise inspection, just so people know I do indeed work on my birthday. Who's in need of a shot of captain-driven panic?"

"I suppose our Marines would enjoy a little panic from time to time." Indeed, due to that hand sign I'd just flashed, she was feeling a little panicked herself.

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 #6:

City Building:

Clark B. Timmins (E&A #6, pg. 6): "I've been working on a large adventure site..."

Some additional background would have been helpful. For example, how old is the city? Who were the first inhabitants? Who are the current inhabitants? You discussed architecture and funeral rites. Why are these important? Personally, I think I would have focused first on the history, demographics, politics (including important NPCs), and current events, and then possibly covered economics, the military, noteworthy laws and festivals, and perhaps various establishments, such as taverns & inns, and random encounters, rumors, etc.

Rivers, Dams, and Mapping:

Myles Corcoran (E&A #6, pg. 11): "Don't introduce a dam above a waterfall. It doesn't make sense and 'a wizard did it' doesn't work well outside of D&D."

What about the International Control Dam above Niagara Falls? And Timothy just mentioned the Inga Dam in the Congo as well as the Seebe Dam in Canada. I'm no expert, but you might want to double-check. I once had a player who criticized one of my maps, because there was a river that split into two. He said this never happens in the real world. Rivers can come together, he said, but they never split. But then I looked at a real map and found instances where rivers do split. Apparently, it's called bifurcation, and although it's somewhat rare, it definitely happens and is most common in deltas and in braided river systems. There are even rare instances of rivers that bifurcate and flow into two separate oceans.

Misjumps in Traveller:

Myles Corcoran (E&A #6, pg. 17): "The Trip Hazard emerges in an uncharted system off the main."

Curious as to how you handled the misjump. As you probably know, there are rules on misjumps, not that I care that much for rules, but if you followed them, they'd require you to have a map of the surrounding area for quite some distance, and, of course, there's the possibility of emerging in deep space, which could end the campaign. And then there's also the question of how much time elapses.

Personally, I find it somewhat ludicrous to think that a ship entering normal space randomly would just so happen to come out near a star. As you know, stars are very far apart, but Traveller doesn't seem to consider this, instead supposing that if there happens to be a star within a couple of light years, the ship will somehow be drawn to it prior to exiting jumpspace.

Okay, I suppose one could make that assumption, but then wouldn't that mean ships never exit jumpspace somewhere deep within a star's Oort cloud? For example, suppose I wanted to go to Sedna? Could I microjump, or would I have to maneuver there on thrusters? What about situations where two star systems are within a light year of each other? Traveller doesn't seem to even consider this possibility. So I think the whole ruleset on this facet of the game could use an expanded treatment.

Making the Reader Guess:

Myles Corcoran (E&A #6, pg. 18): "Sahah christened the gas giant, 'for luck', after an ancient Earth sage."

You're not going to tell us who?

Gas Giant Skimming:

Myles Corcoran (E&A #6, pg. 18): "Ptery's upper atmosphere is swollen with the heat from the nearby M-type dwarf..."

Obviously, they could have skimmed from the side facing away from the sun. I'm wondering about the pros and cons of choosing one side over the other. Also wondering if you've ever run the numbers to see what sort of Gs a ship would be subject to while skimming hydrogen from various gas giants in our own star system. I don't have any idea how to run these calculations or I'd do it myself.

Google's all-knowing AI says the gravity at the cloud tops of Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune is about 2.4g, 1.06g, 0.89g and 1.14g respectively. Assuming that's correct, I'd suppose that as long as the ship's maneuver drive could produce enough thrust in a "downward" direction (in the direction of gravity) so as to control its descent, it could slowly drop straight down rather than having to skim the atmosphere like a pre-gravitics spacecraft with chemical thrusters and woefully limited endurance.¹⁵

Assuming ships can only exert a quarter of their maneuver drive's thrust potential in a direction perpendicular to their normal axis of thrust¹⁶, and excluding the various overdrive options, this would seem to rule out skimming from Jupiter, as you'd need a maneuver drive capable of 10 Gs, assuming you wanted to keep your nose pointed into the wind¹⁷, unless, of course, the ship also has contragrav lifters¹⁸ or a gravity drive¹⁹ that it can employ to take the stress of its primary thruster plate. But for smaller gas giants, this technique certainly seems plausible.

Don't know if you'd be interested in this, but I just now stumbled across some optional/expanded rules regarding fuel-skimming.²⁰ It's a subject that comes up frequently enough that it's nice to see someone covering it in greater depth (no pun intended). Having said that, however, I don't really see why it's considered hazardous (other than to make the game more exciting), at least given the advanced state of propulsion technology in Traveller. Curious as to what you make of all this.

Spaceship Repair:

Lisa Padol (E&A #6, pg. 42): "I do care if spaceship repair is complicated if it's something I'm expected to spend a lot of time playing out or running. Heck, I care if I'm expected to have to spend significant parts of the game worrying about whether the spaceship will need repairs

15 And yes, I know this is the standard procedure in Traveller. Mongoose's *Traveller Companion* (2018) outlines it in some detail in its chapter on gas giant operations (pages 155-157).

16 MegaTraveller's *Starship Operator's Manual*, pages 2 & 3. Or see <https://forum.mongoosepublishing.com/threads/how-is-m-drive-thrust-applied.123965/post-961303>

17 Wind speeds on gas giants can get quite extreme, although the low pressure associated with such high altitudes should reduce the likelihood of suffering damage from turbulence.

18 <https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Z-Drive>

19 https://wiki.travellerrpg.com/Gravity_Drive

20 <https://vectormovement.com/2021/09/29/gas-giant-skimming/>

and whether the characters can afford such repairs. I have enough of worrying about that sort of thing outside of gaming to want it to be anything more than ‘you need to take the job that is tonight’s adventure so you can repair your ship.’”

I have a somewhat different view on this. I think it all stems from a rather detailed blog post I once read on the topic. The author, whose name I can’t remember, proposed this idea where you’d have various systems on the ship (hyperspace drive, maneuver drive, power plant, life support, etc.), and they would each have each have various parts and components that would themselves be composed of a variety of subcomponents, and so when systems would fail, they’d fail in different ways depending on what specifically went wrong. And before failure, you’d have little clues analogous to when you hear your car making a strange noise. And, of course, this was all rather complicated.

Now, whoever posted this didn’t have all the details worked out, but the framework was there, and I wish I downloaded it, because like most things on the web, it eventually disappeared. In any case, the reason I liked this general framework was because it seemed to give the Engineer PC something consequential to do. Indeed, it seemed to suggest that we make starship maintenance into a sort of mini-game where you have to keep the ship well-maintained or bad things will happen deep in space, and there won’t be any tow truck coming to get you.

Also, I liked the idea that an important part of visiting planets and space stations would be scouring the local junk yards for parts. If you couldn’t get the exact part you needed, maybe you could at least get something that’s reasonably compatible. Of course, you’d need to take into account a part’s age when considering its value. Is it OEM or some aftermarket knockoff? For the more expensive parts, does it have pedigree (an ownership transfer record proving it isn’t stolen)? Is it still under warranty? Does it have any defects?

Granted, all this sounds like too much detail, but there are some players (generally known as gearheads) who like this level of detail. Granted, it’s not for everyone. And the GM will likely need a computer to keep track of all this stuff and figure out which component has failed and what the consequences are. It’ll get needlessly complex, and there’s a good case to be made that it won’t add anything to the adventure. But, I’d argue that this sort of system can create its own adventure, and it can arise organically from the rules.

It also creates choices. Should we buy that new part or save some money and buy a used part? The used part is just as good, but there is a slightly higher chance of failure.

And it potentially creates all sorts of interesting problems. “What do you mean we lost gravity in the back of

the ship?” “What do you mean the landing gear is frozen?” “What the hell was that noise?!”

One of the problems with SF-RPGs in general is they don’t think very hard about everything that can go wrong in space. The starship, by and large, is just assumed to work unless the GM decides otherwise. Granted, there are misjumps in Traveller. But for the most part, there are few if any rules behind pretty much everything else, and therefore nothing the players do can have any effect on how things turn out, because it’s all decided by GM-whim.

Even starship security, which is something you’d think would be very well defined in Traveller, just isn’t.²¹ A lot of it, once again, boils down to the GM. I’m not saying it’s wrong to allow the GM some leeway in deciding how things work in his or her campaign. All I’m saying is that it would be really helpful to have a bunch of gearheads sit down, preferably people who are engineers in real life, and go through all of this in detail, creating a supplement sort of like the Starship Operator’s Manual but with an emphasis on maintenance and mishaps.

So much could be written on this topic. Indeed, all you have to do is look at the sorry state of the sensor rules. I’ve looked for information on the sensitivity of sensors in Traveller, and my guess is that the set with the highest correspondence to reality are the rules outlined in the T4 version of Fire, Fusion, and Steel, pgs. 72-73, where it says that for Passive EMS, detection probability can be derived from the signal strength (Table 195 on page 109), which is itself computed using this formula: signal signature + sensor sensitivity (Table 198 on page 110) – range (Table 194 on page 109). But how do you get an accurate value for the signal signature? The reason Traveller doesn’t go into extreme detail on this is probably because there are a lot of factors that affect how conspicuous an object is, everything from its size and shape to how much radiation it happens to be reflecting and/or emitting, which will depend on how far away it is from the primary (star) as well as how much radiation the primary is generating. But can all of this be set forth in a few pages and with a few formulas? Yes, I think it’s doable. I’m not saying it’ll be perfect, but what the designers get wrong, their audience of Traveller-enthusiasts will likely correct with various unofficial errata.

Granted, not everyone wants realism in their science fiction, just like not everyone who plays D&D wants to deal with encumbrance. But I think some people would like it, and it could make things more interesting. I mean, if you’re going to go for realism anywhere in the RPG literature, this is probably the place to do it.

Removing Alignment from (A)D&D:

Roger Bell_West (E&A #6, pg. 71): “So my answer is ‘away with it all’; your helmet can still reverse

21 I talked about this briefly on the 6th page of our zine in A&E #540.

personality, but I don't need a Detect Evil spell to say that a tyrannical and oppressive society is pretty darn bad..."

Okay, fair enough, but then what about the Outer Planes / Planescape / Deities & Demigods? As you know, the whole map of the outer planes is essentially based on the alignment chart. Would you recommend throwing all of this out, or would you prefer to assume there are simply different outer planar societies founded around different principles and codes of behavior, all of which can change over time just like politics in the real world? And are they simply fighting over power itself? If so, then what of devils and demons? Are they any different from gods? And how do mortals fit into their schemes? Are worshipers just a source of primal energy and nothing more? And how does this affect clerics/priests? Furthermore, if you apply game theory to your thesis (or just commonsense), what sort of principles and codes of behavior are likely to prevail over the long term? Is the great game destined to end like *Monopoly*, with one all-powerful deity, a sort of Emperor of the Multiverse?

Sorry if this is too much to consider all at once, but I'm curious as to where this thread will lead. Removing alignment from my campaign is something I've tried, but I vaguely remember bumping up against these sorts of questions, and I don't quite remember if I ever got around to answering them all to my personal satisfaction.

Annoying Players:

Patrick Riley (E&A #6, pg. 72): "Plus, there are just some players I cannot stand to be around. When this happens, I have to give myself a timeout. Not always and not every time, but enough that I'm ashamed."

Very interesting. What sort of players set you off?

Homeroom in Monsterhearts:

Avram Grumer (E&A #6, pg. 89): "The next step after that was setting up the homeroom. This was huge fun! Briar set down a paper with a four-by-four grid of desks (plus one more for the teacher)..."

Seems like awfully small class, but there probably are some schools where this is normal. Enjoying the write-ups.

Page Dimensions:

Avram Grumer (E&A #6, pg. 94): "re using a landscape layout — I've got the same impulse, but the E&A contributor guidelines specify 'page dimensions of 8.5" x 11" (portrait).'"

Since I doubt anyone is actually printing E&A, at least not in its entirety, I personally wouldn't be opposed to

loosening this requirement. Perhaps we should reconsider our rules on a semi-regular basis.

Graphics Tablet:

Pum (E&A #6, pg. 98): "I even bought a graphics tablet to plug into my PC to make it easier for me to sketch stuff out, and it seemed to work quite well."

Curious to learn which one you got as well as its pros and cons from your personal experience.

Forced Impersonations:

Mark Wilson (E&A #6, pg. 99): "So we had an ongoing bet with each other and some other friends, wherein we could demand that any of the others do an impression of Mick Jagger on the spot. Failure to do so would result in them owing dinner to the rest."

So happy we're not friends. Although, on second thought, this would make for an amusing D&D spell. Loved Adam West's reaction as well as your friend's. He's an exceedingly good sport. And that final line ("I hate you. You're my hero.") is classic.

Tales of Rynn (Female Orc Monk-Barbarian):

Mark Wilson (E&A #6, pg. 102): "I left two guards with broken jaws before I left. It felt good. They were not kind individuals, and the pain will give them a chance to reflect on their purpose in life."

Rynn's being a female orc reminded me of Lumekki, a female half-orc fighter, who was featured in a pair of old Usenet articles about *The Blades of Fate*, which was the name of her adventuring party.²² The author, posting anonymously, assumed that she would need to masquerade as male due to gender role restrictions within the campaign setting. This of course, created some tension, and early in the first article, I wondered if she would form secret feelings for one of her fellow party members. I'm not entirely sure why I still remember all this except that it surprised me. It was one of those early examples that showed that campaign write-ups could be about much more than simply the events of the campaign. They could include vignettes, exploring a particular character's unique perspective.

Collaborative Worldbuilding in Wanderhome:

Elf (E&A #6, pg. 110): "We have sorted out some things. We had a worldbuilding session where we just asked questions about the world and decided on the answers."

²² These were posted to *rec.games.frp* in the late 1980s. See <https://www.usenetarchives.com/index.php?s=mjh06557@uxa.cso.uiuc.edu&t=0&p=1>

Curious to read more about this campaign and what additional worldbuilding questions get raised as things progress. Some questions that might occur to me to ask would be whether crossbreeds exist, whether certain species are at odds for some reason or another (for example, predator vs. prey), why the war happened and who was involved, whether or not it went nuclear (if that's even a thing given the tech-level), who won/lost and whether animosities still exist, and (of course) what sort of technology and magic exists/existed in the world. Oh, and politics, of course. Is there someone loudly blaming the squirrels? The aftermath of a world war can be a chaotic period of time. While some might reject violence, the sentiment is usually not universal.

GP→XP & Training for Level Advancement in OSRIC:

Patrick Zoch (E&A #6, pg. 115): "...the DM was growing visibly and audibly frustrated by the delays to proceeding on to the next adventure by the disjointed leveling of characters by the players. I was somewhat surprised by this as the DM was an ardent supporter and enforcer of the very rules that resulted in the situation that frustrated him."

I ran into much the same problem.²³ The thing your GM needs to remember is that this is a roleplaying game. So the question to ask is whether a given rule enhances or hinders roleplaying. If a rule is bogging the game down, then maybe it should be jettisoned.

Getting Drained in the Temple of Love:

Michael Cule (E&A #6, pg. 126): "COP: I have been interviewing some people who have attended those parties. They report feeling drained and unwell afterwards. I strongly advise you not to indulge inside the temple unless you have some protection up.

JARATHIR I don't mean to be crude but feeling drained is quite often...

COP: More so than is customary."

I'm glad that got clarified. And nightly parties in the Temple of Love — I mean *Lurve* — seem like not such a great idea from a public health standpoint. Definitely use protection.

Rob Kuntz on Dave Arneson:

Heath Row (E&A #6, pg. 140): "Rob Kuntz has written a couple of important books that detail Arneson's contribution to D&D and roleplaying games more generally. They are available from Kuntz at <https://threelinestudiostore.com>."

²³ See my comment to Gabriel on *Level Advancement in AD&D* on page 149 of E&A #2.

I picked up a copy of *Dave Arneson's True Genius*. It's nice that one of the old-timers who was actually there is pointing to Arneson as being the true creator of TTRPGs, although Gygax, of course, provided the necessary boost for this whole style of gaming to gather momentum. A merry Christmas to the souls of both.

Random Jottings #22:

Heath Row (E&A #6, pg. 143):

"<https://efanzines.com/RandomJottings/RandomJottings22Omnibus.pdf>"

This should probably be:

<https://efanzines.com/RandomJottings/RandomJottings22-Compleat.pdf>. There appear to be at least three different versions/issues of Random Jottings #22 (Dobson sort of explains why on page 5). Yes, I know it's confusing, but these are confusing times.

Refusing to See "Reality" in Call of Cthulhu:

Brian Misiasek (E&A #6, pg. 158 & 160): "The bowel coils around Llerena's arm. Another loop of small intestine lashes upward toward his throat. Llerena screams as a slick rope of bowel encircles his neck, tightening with a wet suction sound." & "Perversely, Dr. Llerena's reaction at being saved by foreigners is one of furious humiliation. He blames everyone except himself and immediately starts claiming the PCs 'interfered' and 'contaminated the sterile field.'"

First of all, great job with the description and with creating a truly hair-raising scene. Top notch!

However, it's stuff like this that breaks my suspension of disbelief. Here's a doctor being effectively attacked by a dead patient's intestines, and yet he somehow manages to convince himself that... I don't even know how to describe what he's thinking. What he's thinking makes no sense.

I totally get that this is entirely compatible with the Lovecraftian horror genre, but at a certain point, I'm just like... this is too much. The inability for characters to accept that reality is very different from what they thought appears as almost a form of insanity, whereas anyone who accepts what they saw as being real are themselves deemed insane. It's *bass-ackwards*, but I like it. It reminds me of the well-documented madness of crowds but, of course, is taken to such an extreme that it almost appears as a form of parody. I can't help but wonder if it's some strange nugget of social commentary that surfaced organically as an element of the genre.

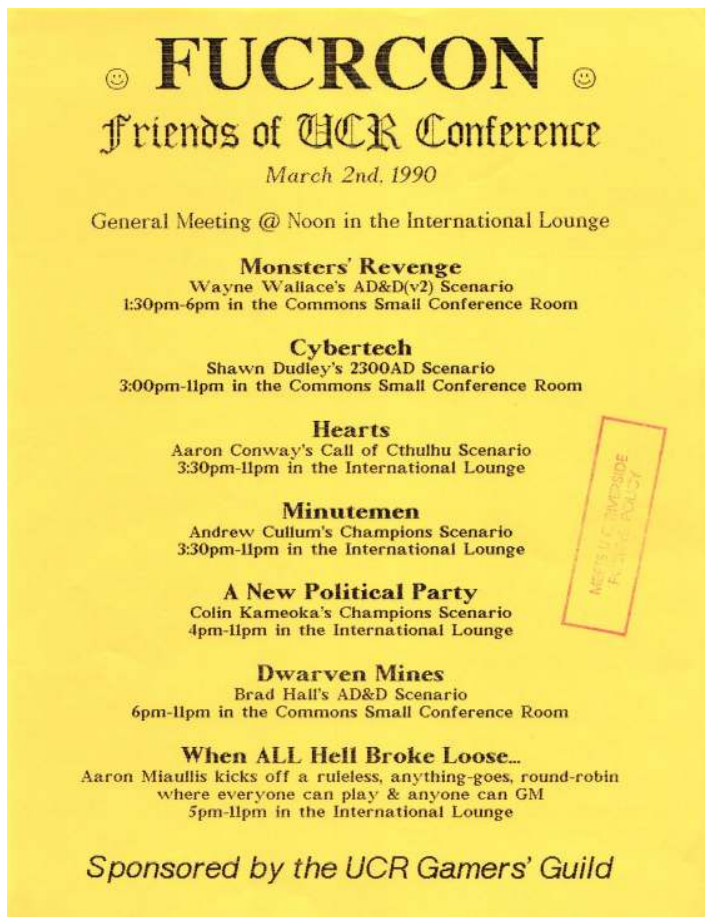
Tiny Conventions:

Joshua Kronengold (E&A #6, pg. 163): "And as for tiny conventions, well, that's where things can get weird. Fun, but weird."

This reminds me of a tiny RPG convention I helped organize back in my college days at the U.C. Riverside (UCR). Somebody came up with the idea of calling it FUCRCON (the *F* stood for *Friends*), and given what *fucr* sounds like when you just say it like it's a word, we thought ourselves quite hilarious, and so I went ahead and made fliers.

Needless to say, the more mature members of our gaming club were somewhat annoyed and insisted we change the name to something more appropriate, which we agreed to do, but... well, we couldn't think of anything more appropriate (and still funny), so... what can I say? I'm still waiting for the point where my maturity level progresses to the threshold that I'm embarrassed to talk about this in public. Not quite there yet, obviously.

As for the convention itself, that's where Round-Robin Roleplaying got invented.²⁴ This was actually my favorite part of the convention. I also recall an event where we'd invited a speaker from on campus to give a talk, and literally nobody showed up. I can't help but laugh about it now, but at the time it wasn't quite so funny.



²⁴ Simply put, the office of gamemaster would rotate around the table, moving to a new person once every half hour. It made for a rather bizarre game, but it also gave people who might never have tried GMing a brief taste of what it's like.

Timothy's Comments on E&A #6:

Myles Corcoran – Twisting the Rope

Love the coffee stain map! I had a friend at school who did similar although not as pleasing, as far as I can recall, as your circle of islands.

RYCT Mark W: Great that *Taskmaster* brings the family together.

RYCT to Avram G and an APA of *Alzabos & Excruciations* – if there isn't, there ought to be!

RYCTM: I was drawn to Traveller by the world creation system before anything else (including actually adventuring). I ought to revisit 2300's system. You may well be right on the Kzinti – another set of books I really ought to read. I'll take your warning on *Cage of Souls*. I want, for the most part, something uplifting. And yes, TravCon is a lot of fun!

John Redden – Reddened Stars

My brother comes round to visit on Tuesday nights so we can watch *Foundation* (on his dime). When I heard it was happening, I was very excited having loved the books since boyhood. I've learned to accept that the tv series isn't really Asimov except in name and have enjoyed the general excellence of it. (Except the swearing – which seemed to get worse in the second series. Enough that I'd have given it up if it didn't provide time with my brother. It's not that I don't accept some (if I must) but in a fair bit of season 2 it just seemed so unnecessary. We've 500,000 words in the English language and to keep reusing the same old 7 or so, just seems... well, it seems such poor writing.) We've just finished Season 2 and will start 3 in the new year. We'll see how that goes. But it has made me take another look at the books, not that they're far away as I picked up a copy of *Nadace* in Brno (Czechia) so I can now read it in Czech (though only with my English copy close to hand).

RYCT Joshua K: I followed your link to find *Document on Network Encounters* – but am I doing something wrong as I can't find a link to the document on the page?

RYCTM: Hah! As it happens *Children of Time* is on my desk at work as a colleague has just given me her husband's copy. (With permission, I think!) Like Myles, I'll take your warning on bleak.

Gabriel Roark – Bugbears & Ballyhoo

Reading a PDF on a phone? Well, I prefer reading *E&A* on my tablet, but if need be, to get on with it in the corners of life when I don't have tablet to hand, I do just that. Although it's much easier to read *E&A* 'zines with two columns if I'm on my phone. I have to save one column 'zines for a bigger screen.

Lisa Padol – An Unlooked for Zine

RYCT Brian W: Interesting thought on ‘bad books’ letting you see the bones. I shall try and pay more attention. In RPGs, it was attending TravCon for the first time and playing a few games that made me realize “I can do this...” And did. (Not that they were bad. ‘Good-enough’ would be fair. But I could see the ability was within reach.)

Roger BW – Firedrake’s Hoard

RYCT Myles C: Thank you for noting the *Bayern* changes, before I got lost in them!

RYCT Lisa P: Yes, I like Traveller’s time roll mechanism for tasks (when it’s needed).

RYCT Joshua K: I’ve had debates in the past about how much of a PC’s skills/characteristics are ‘visible’ to them in Traveller. Some seem obvious like, say, their Pilot rating which would be tested/certified. Others, Streetwise, not so much. I’m fairly blasé about characters having their stat block almost as though it were an ID card though.

Patrick Riley – Quasipseudoludognostication

RYCTM: Unfortunately, I don’t know RPG goblins or kender to know what ‘place’ they have or what characteristics. But the Chirpers we play are nothing like goblins from *The Hobbit*. Much more cheery and friendly and probably not as bright. But yes, it would be hard to play Chirpers seriously after Andy’s games!

Paul Holman – De Ludis Elficis Fictis

Do say ‘Hi’ to Alex and Kez! It’s a small galaxy as you say. (Yes, it was Kez playing Zilan Wine. I think she had a blast. I hope so.) Safe travelling and I’ll look forward to hearing about GridCon.

Mark Wilson – Bumbling Through Dungeons

RYCT the Plankwell collective: many thanks for your ‘catchup thread’. Really interesting to read about the tale from another perspective. Good thought on Amika!

Patrick Zoch – The Dragon’s Beard

You see! That’s exactly why I’m not fond of my name being shortened! Too many dogs (and robots) called Tim or Timmy! :-)

In your *Conflict of Gold and Experience* section, I liked the line about “if you’re going to embrace and enforce the pain of a system, then it should be borne with some sort of grace as well”. Traveller doesn’t do ‘levels’ like DnD and it’s notoriously hard to raise a skill level. Which is why we didn’t just ‘change it on the character sheet’ when a PC in my *Traveller Adventure* campaign went from Steward 0 to

Steward 1 but we actually roleplayed the PC’s practical exams/testing across two days of game time. It was a really memorable session which Jane, the player, still speaks of fondly. (Of course, I had to write up a syllabus for Fred to study, but that was fun too.)

Michael Cule – The Phoenix Nest

On blowing your own trumpet. I often tell my students (in the context of referencing their academic work most frequently) that if you don’t blow your own trumpet, no one else is very likely to! Which is really just a different way of saying what our last Vice Chancellor said in his retirement speech – “we’re all in promotions now”.

I might have to disagree with your comment in the IgTheme about “all British conventions”. I’ve only been to two (TravCon and North Star) and they both have their games all preplanned beforehand. North Star also has you sign up beforehand. Neither are “American imports”.

Heath Row – Engines and Emulators

Many thanks for your trip report to Lake Geneva. Interesting to read and great photos. I’m glad it’s not just me that takes pictures of books/bookshelves.

Jim Eckman – Ronin Engineer

Thanks for your world write ups. Fun! (I get torn between a short paragraph and then wanting to write pages and pages more as soon as I’ve thought about it for three seconds...)

RYC on “once Heinlein could no longer be edited, his books become a red-hot mess”. I not only agree with this but have said so for a long time. I’ve managed to learn to love some of his later books, but they could have still used a decent editor with a refillable red pen. (One of my secret shames is not thinking too badly of *The Number of the Beast* but I’ve always lusted after a nice RV!)

Jim V – Plankwell Campaign

When I first proof-read your ‘zine and your comments, I’m pretty sure I had a comment to you that I said I should keep for now. Of course, now I can’t for the life of me remember what it was. I’ll try and keep better track next time. Sorry.

LAST WORD

TC, remember what you just said about Heinlein? Everyone needs editing and *some people* especially.