



EVER
&
Anon

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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 #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

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

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 #8 (ver. 1) – February 2026

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This issue’s IgTheme:

GMing tricks you’ve either “borrowed” from other GMs or figured out yourself.

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

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

Q: And everyone is doing all this for free?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Q: Who is Lee Gold?

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

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

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

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

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

I Want YOU!

to join our flippant fellowship



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



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ISSUE #7 (E&A #8)

Missed last month, but I'm making up for it with a large entry this month (back to my regular 2-3 pages after this!). To start, the remainder of my session reports, from the campaign I posted session #1 for a couple E&A issues ago.

Following that, responses to the last two issues and some IgTheme & miscellany. Enjoy!

Myriad: City of Tiers Campaign Report (Tales of Rynn)

Characters

Talullah Rynn Bahk (Rynn) (Me) - Orc Monk/Barbarian
Palamandrix (Pal) - Gnomish Fighter/Ranger
Louise - Tiefling Druid
Lady Jackie Sintara - Halfling Bard
Greer - Goliath Rogue

Character Description: See E&A #6

Character Backstory: See E&A #6

Previously (in Session #1)

My name is Talullah Rynn Bahk, of Clan Bahk. I have been assigned as an emissary of Baldur's Gate to the city of Myriad, a magical city lost to time that has recently reappeared. We are to create trade relations with them, and my role is also to protect the group from threats that it may encounter in the city.

Previously, we reached the city of Myriad and were greeted by one of its prominent merchants. After a meeting, we are permitted to walk the city to learn of its customs.

Session #2

We are anomalies in the city, one that has not seen foreigners for centuries. Additionally, I and Greer tower over anyone in the city, which is bereft of races as large as ours. I do not mind this. Greer seems self-conscious. He should not be. To be singled out for uniqueness is a high honor.

Our arrival precedes us and some know who we are and where we are from. Others simply seem scared. I am used to others feeling intimidated around me. They should not be afraid; I only harm those who deserve it.

A cry alerts us to a nearby boy, who is running from some adults. We query him. The adults are sorcerers, and they are all branded on their foreheads. The boy, they say, is to be one of them. He does not seem amenable to this plan, and so we interpose ourselves between the sorcerers and the boy.

The situation does not come to blows. We determine to take the boy to his mother, who will be involved in the decision making. The sorcerers treat it as matter-of-fact that the boy will be among their order, but we do not wish for him to be conscripted in this manner. The sorcerers seem put off, but we would not permit them this abduction without first consulting his mother.

The journey to his home is without incident, and we enter a tavern once we have dropped him off. The tavern features performers of every variety, but few seem to be paying much attention to them. The bartender informs us that because there's so much downtime in the city, most are musicians or artists of some sort, and so these performances - however skilled - are commonplace.

We are interrupted by an explosion of water, and an elemental bursts from the restroom in the tavern. A fight ensues, with us subduing the angry elemental. The bartender thanks us, and we are told such incidents are becoming more common in the city. I resolve to perform at the tavern at a later date. They agree to hold a place for me as I am able, to perform a ceremonial Haka of my tribe.

Working our way through the districts again, an emissary of Arlon, lord of the city, greets us, and invites us to the central palace of the city. We happily accept. Clearly we have already made a small name for ourselves, and indeed word has already spread about our quelling of the tavern elemental.

A flying taxi takes us to the palace, and Arlon himself comes to greet us. He is extremely kind and praises us. However, he begins to repeat himself and forget parts of

the conversation from minutes earlier. We realize he is senile.

A wizard, whose name escapes me, comes out and shuffles off Arlon, mentioning something about magical wards. It immediately becomes obvious that Arlon is a figurehead only. We exchange some words with the wizard, who did not summon us here and is thus less inclined to converse with us.

We take our leave, somewhat concerned at the state of the city's leadership.

Our wanderings take us to the bardic district and we are approached again. This time, it is a man claiming to be in charge of a local "fight club" arena. He represents the bards and they humbly invite us to prove ourselves in the arena.

When asked why, the answer is simply that it is a pastime of their group, and that the city lacks for excitements. Our arrival is exciting, and so it's hoped that we can make an introduction to their group through these fights.

The fight club rarely features fights to the death. Moreover, no magic is allowed in the fights. This piques my interest and I agree for at least myself, perhaps too hastily. A show of martial skill could gain us allies in the city, and I am eager to let loose after several truncated fights in which my skills were barely needed.

All but Lady Jackie also agree to fight. Jackie will watch us from the crowd. I suspect she hopes to mingle with the fight club's organizers and leaders, but she also seems less enamored of fighting without magic. I have no such hesitation.

Player Notes

Bit of an exposition-dump session, but a useful one as we explore the city and get our bearings. We managed to anger two different - and opposed! - groups in the city, the wizards and sorcerers. So we're not off to the greatest diplomatic start. However, several other factions provide some promise, and it's likely that some of these factions aren't going to be the best of allies anyway.

Rynn imposes herself on situations where perhaps she doesn't have authority, but it's in her nature to want to dictate what she feels is the moral solution to problems. This works fine in a setting where we need to butt heads with various people in order to create some interesting drama. Trying to be everyone's friend would be boring. The rest of the group has been on board with this approach as well; the denizens of the city have to win us over. Perhaps it's a bit of undue, assumptive status as emissaries

from Baldur's Gate, not realizing that most of us were not sent for our skill in diplomacy.

Session #3

After a brief rules explanation for the fight club - we cannot use magic in our contest and can forfeit by lying down at any time - we are ushered into the arena, to the cheers and jeers of the crowd that surrounds us.

Four combatants parade out to face us. The crowd cheers them. I look forward to our combat.

One of them, named Celine, rushes up to me and attacks three times. They all miss. Her skills are adequate, but I am unconcerned about being able to show my superiority in the fight. After I deflect one of her blows and twirl her spear around in my hand before handing it back to her, she speaks to me. "Oh, you're good. But what they really want to see is a show. Bleed a little, yeah?"

I take her words to heart. We are here as diplomatic envoys. Normally I would be against showboating in an arena designed to test the sombre discipline of martial prowess, but I must endear myself to the crowd.

I begin letting Celine hit me in order to produce blood. Wounds open, but it is only pain.

The arena affords me the opportunity to run along walls, flip onto pillars and "show off," so to speak. I do not particularly care for the cheers, and normally I would not be so inefficient in my movements in such an encounter, but the fight itself is lots of fun. Celine is a competent warrior, but no true test for me. I knock her out once I believe we have put on enough of a show.

There are no deaths in the fight; we subdue them non-lethally. One surrenders after taking a beating. It is a smart decision.

While the others wrap up the fight - Louise turned into a bear, which apparently is permissible despite the "no magic" rule - I voluntarily disqualify myself, running up the arena's side wall and leaping into the crowd after standing and receiving their adulation. I believe they are overly sensationalizing a solemn discipline, but I also recognize the need to win their favor. I bow, and sit next to Lady Jackie, who abstained from the fight.

In the crowd, during the fight, Lady Jackie has been talking with someone who looks important. I learn that it is the leader of the Bards and their representative on the city's council. Her name is Fendra.

She is intrigued with us, willing to exchange information and favors, and we learn at a meeting with Fendra following the fight (we all receive gold, which I once again give to Greer) that the city is in some peril. The wizards of the city have dwindled in number, yet they're the only ones capable of controlling the numerous elementals that power the city. Deep within the city is a portal that is the source of this elemental power, and the elementals themselves are beginning to behave erratically. Eventually this could threaten the entire city.

Fendra has lost members of her Bard college to outbursts from the elementals, and asks us to investigate a particular area.

Her connections within the city, her information and goods, suggests she would be a good ally for us and for Baldur's Gate. We agree, hoping to strengthen ties with her organization. This is particularly true since I do not believe we made a good impression on either the Sorcerers or the Wizards. Beyond the merchants, we will need to create stronger diplomatic ties to the city if we hope to succeed in our mission.

On a personal level, I am concerned for the safety of the city. If the arena is any indication, their warriors may not be up to the challenges that face them. I feel compelled to protect these weak beings from the elemental forces that may threaten them.

She offers us rewards for our assistance. I am intrigued with one she mentions, a ring that permits free action to the user. I accept it, but then immediately wonder if my thirst for additional power has compromised my equilibrium.

What is the good of material goods if it sacrifices my inner peace? Or will this item aid me in my journey in ways that will justify my taking it? I plan to meditate on this.

The fight was very fun. I wish to fight again, though I would request stronger foes to face us. Perhaps I could face multiple foes. That would be a better test of my skills and discipline. For now, though, we must investigate the source of the elemental disturbance, and we have a meeting with another city merchant tomorrow.

Player Thoughts

This arena fight was tailor-made for a Monk, particularly one with a Barbarian level dip. No magic, which meant that I could halve all damage, deflect much of it with my reactions, and was not impeded at all in dealing out damage, whereas any caster class would be nerfed into oblivion.

Rynn was basically in a playground, literally and figuratively running circles around her opponents, and holding back to put on a better show. When I finally got serious and connected with about four straight attacks (I was deliberately only attacking 1-2 times in other rounds), a fellow player exclaimed "holy crap, you've been holding back."

It was fun. I will never be as effective in combat in this campaign as I was in this fight. But it was a nice chance to flex my character's muscles, so to speak.

Session #4

Fendra, leader of the Bards in the city, puts us up for the night. She has shared information with us that is of interest, and in exchange for goods and information we have agreed to investigate an anomaly for her.

She scries on much of the city to maintain her information network. One area of the subterranean area of the city is a "dead spot" in the scrying, and she wants to know why.

Concurrent with this, there have been elemental disturbances throughout the city. The wizards maintain control over the elementals, but their numbers are dwindling and the city itself may be in danger if the elementals - which form the foundation of the entire city's magical operations - are not kept in better order.

The lack of discipline is striking. I would have expected better from those who claim knowledge of the arcane arts. But the factions of the city seem too at odds with one another to truly work together toward harmony. This saddens me.

We are provided two dwarven guides, Polan and Moril, and from them learn more of the elitism of the wizards. The dwarves lead us through the city's underground sewers and tunnels. The smell is pungent, but I use it as an excuse to focus my thoughts in order to ignore it.

We come upon a trapped water elemental whose binding keeps him locked in a collapsed tunnel. We release it, and it seems pleased with us.

Further along, in a large cistern, a Carrion Crawler lurks, and Louise speaks with a swarm of centipedes - which disturbingly crawls all over her - and we agree to rid the area of the much larger crawler. Louise does not seem to mind the crawling. I squirm a bit despite my training. This is a mental block I will need to focus on.

The crawler is dispatched quickly, but an Otyugh, hearing our fight, surfaces from a dark pool and attacks us. We

dispatch it as well. Greer, hidden in the water, smells horribly until he is cleaned off with a Prestidigitation spell. The centipede swarm leaves us, thankfully, though Louise does not see the need to similarly cleanse herself as Greer did.

Deeper in the tunnels, we find a hidden temple to Ilmater and nearby some graffiti that implies the presence of death cultists (of the tyrannical god Bane). However, the tunnels are extremely old, parts even predating the city of Myriad itself. So it is uncertain if these are new markings or old ones.

As we near the area we were sent to investigate, Polan points out a painted hand symbol on the wall and goes to touch it. Crying out, Moril stabs him! Lady Jackie magically holds him and I grab him by his neck against a wall, while Louise heals Polan.

Magically compelling him to share what he knows via one of Lady Jackie's spells, he reveals the presence of a cult of Bane beneath the city, a god the city of Baldur's Gate has a history with as well. Working with the cult are other factions who have taken to keeping slaves.

Pressing the painted hand reveals a secret entryway to what we presume is a hideout of the Bane cultists. Some three hours from the start of our journey, we decide to investigate it. We send Polan to a nearby enclave to hide for the time being (he happily agrees), and after knocking him out, I carry the unconscious Moril over my shoulder with me into the cultist area...

Player Notes

I was pleased that there were a handful of skill checks where Greer (Rogue) and Jackie (Bard) were able to shine. The so-called "skill monkey" classes stand out in a good way next to, say, my monk, where I have to worry about low rolls even for skills I'm proficient in. This creates meaningful juxtaposition between classes and when they can be expected to shine.

I have more-or-less found my role in the group. Our Ranger/Fighter is dex-based and sometimes prefers to fight at range, meaning that I am more qualified than any others to command the attention of our foes in taking damage.

While I built my character for roleplaying purposes - a monk who struggles with anger management - the Monk 7 / Barbarian 2 build, particularly as I have statted it out (and with Gauntlets of Ogre Strength for high strength) is a shockingly synergistic character build. The interplay of abilities is considerable, with the caveat that if I wasn't a strength-based Monk, a couple Barbarian abilities would

no longer be useful. It's all combat-based, though, meaning that I can be bodyguard and/or accidental comic relief in the social scenes (which is to my liking) and fade into the scenery while the others in the party take the spotlight.

Session #5

With the unconscious dwarven cultist tossed over my shoulder, we head in, sussing out some secret entrances to reach the hideout proper.

The dwarf proves a hindrance to my movement, and so I quietly ditch him in an empty cell in the hideout, tying his limbs and gagging him in case he wakes.

We investigate the immediate area and hear voices coming from several different directions, as well as various cells that line the walls. Most of these do not seem to be in use.

Breaking into one of them, from which screams were emitting from what we learned was an interrogation, we come face to face with one of the cult's leaders and a couple of his henchfolk.

We make quick work of them. One tries to escape, but Greer and I prove the swifter, following him into a secret cavernous tunnel and killing him. I despise their ideologies and do not feel remorse at their deaths.

Inspecting a bit further down the tunnel, I discover a large cavern of people sleeping. I report back, and the captured creature - a dwarf - who was being interrogated surmises that the sleeping people are perhaps the kidnapped citizens of Myriad.

We accept this provisionally and wish to create an escape route for them. To do so, we must clear the area of cultists, to remove the danger to any commoners who are not as strong as we are.

Two other battles ensue, one in a break room and another in a temple, the latter involving an awakened statue and priests of Bane. None provide significant challenge to us, but we are also becoming aware that some of our spells and resources are dwindling. Even the focus that I channel to perform beyond my normal abilities waned in ways that limited my actions at times.

No matter. I have a purpose here: to rid the area of evil for the sake of the citizens of Myriad. My purpose as an emissary of Baldur's Gate is secondary at this point. I must destroy the evil that resides here, to restore the city to equilibrium, or at least give it a better chance of achieving lasting peace.

Player Notes

Hard to say if we're simply beasting through the encounters in this campaign, or if these are meant to soften us up for additional encounters in this portion of the underground. As a monk, I'm less susceptible than many classes to losing utility as I burn through resources. The spellcasters have it worse. But even I had to engage in a bit of "resource management," so to speak, assuming that there's more to come.

I am amusingly bad at skill checks, even when I should be good at them (I have yet to make a good stealth roll, despite being +8 at it currently).

Light session for RP, specifically for me as I continue to embrace my role of enforcing the plans that the group decides upon, but not taking the lead in any of the social scenes.

Session #6

We sneak into the cavern with sleeping people. I grab one, muffle their mouth and dash back to the main compound so we can interrogate them. Mara is her name, and she is skeptical of us.

She has also been blinded by the cultists, and promised riches and land, and we soon piece together that she has been scammed like the others into doing labor for the cult on the promise of land and wealth. The plight of non-magical citizens in the city and the possible oppression of the wizards led them to this even worse fate.

The blindness seems temporary and magical, though we are not able to fully cure it. And by we, I mean the others. You cannot punch blindness. We leave Greer with Mara [player note: Greer's player was absent; this was a narrative device to remove his character] and investigate further, trying to unearth what is being done down here.

We successfully sneak to a locked and barred stone doorway that we cannot open ourselves, despite some magical efforts to do so. Instead, the magic users make strange noises with their spells and we attract attention from the other side of the door. It is opened, and we rush out.

It is an enormous cavern in which crops are being grown. A river runs through it, winding slowly back and forth. At the far end, we see two distant doors like the one we just exited, presumably to other warrens of this complex.

We are met by both bearded and spined devils. Their individual strikes do not bother me, and we quickly thin their numbers, but in the aggregate I begin to bleed

somewhat. I do not mind. It is only pain, and I am better able to weather harm than my companions.

One calls for their boss loudly. Moments later, from an adjacent entrance - perhaps 60 feet on - a large devil steps out with others at their side. In the distance, other groups of devils begin to take notice. We suspect we are in for an arduous fight, even as we finally dispatch the initial group.

However, before we can close the distance, a large rumble shakes the entire cavern. A couple hundred feet away, a large hole opens in the ceiling of the cavern and magma elementals pour out. As they fall, the crops and entire area begins to catch on fire, smoking horribly.

The devils race toward the elementals to destroy them, and they are immune to fire damage and so it is certain they will defeat the magma beings. But the damage is considerable, and the fire grows. We are left without an immediate foe.

Noting the doors on the other end of the cavern, we surmise that there are other people there. Louise and I race to the doors, her in the form of a bird. She creates some magical water to protect the doors and fight the fire, but it is not nearly enough to make a difference. Louise flies off, and I find myself nearly surrounded by fire, unable to return to my companions.

Racing back to one of the barred doors that Louise had tried to protect with water, I destroy the lock in a single, furious strike and open the door. I find several hundred more people, also blinded, and fear for their safety.

I imagine what Lady Jackie would say, and engage in diplomacy to convince these people that they need to exit with us. The river leads down a winding cavern tunnel, nearby to this exit, that would allow us to move away from the smoke. Louise returns as a bird and we navigate this conversation together. It is difficult, but I impose upon them the dire necessity of this, then race through the cavern of people to spread this message. Louise leads them toward the river slowly. I will admit to losing my equilibrium during my run through the cavern. I hope the people who heard my voice were able to remain more calm than I was.

I know not what happened with Palamandrix and Lady Jackie, though they would have had a more clear escape route, back the way we came originally.

Though the going is slow, we have the prisoners join hands and carefully lead them along the riverside in this underground area. We do not know where we are or where we are headed, but we trust it is to a better fate than they

would have had with the devil cultists.

Player Notes

I created this character for a couple purposes, but one was to try to use her interest in breathing and meditation as a way to do the same as a player during sessions, to better focus on the sessions, be more present in them, and enjoy myself fully. So how's it going?

It's actually been a neat way to remind myself to breathe deeply when I am idle, and use that as a focus tool for paying attention to scenes. I think we all underestimate how much our attention spans have been compromised by modern media, and so this can only be a good thing. During a couple sessions, I engaged in some extended breathwork to see how long I could hold my breath for. Perhaps not the best way to utilize my exercises, but an amusing extension of them, and it also didn't disrupt the session.

The meditative aspects of Rynn's character have at times fallen away, in favor of her more martial tendencies. This is fine; it's D&D, after all. But a portion of my original intent isn't fully manifesting during play. Some is, though.

I still write off-topic notes in my notebook as we play, but I only check my phone when I am deliberately looking something up for the game.

So I'd called it a qualified success, albeit not a full success. That may be enough.

Session #7

The people are endlessly nagging, and they try my patience and equilibrium. They do not understand that we are doing this for their own good, to free them from the cult who was enslaving them.

After some failed attempts at persuasion, I resort to threatening them. They do not know that the threats are not legitimate. If I must be hated to protect them and see them safely from these caves, so be it.

Those that refuse to cooperate, I try tying together with a rope and pulling, but Louise suggests that this is too forceful. We slowly navigate forward and come to a waterfall, past which there is no walkable cave, only the river which leads into darkness.

Louise takes on an animal form and jumps into the water to investigate. I fear she may be dead, and she is gone for a long time. I fear we have failed these people, and I begin to despair.

Then, a water elemental springs up and heads directly for me. I attack it!

It does not attack back and offers me a rock. I sense that this is not an aggressor. The rock has some writing on it. It is difficult to make out, but I intuit that it is from Louise or the others. It seems to be signed by Lady Jackie.

I convince several people to enter the water and hold their breath. Others need to be thrown unwillingly, but there is no other way that I see.

Moments later, we are spat out by the river just outside the city walls and land in a pool of water. The others - who successfully navigated back to the surface much more quickly than we did, are waiting with some dwarves and priests to tend to those we rescued.

They seem to want to get away from me. This is expected. I do not need their thanks.

We find the Bards leader again, Fendra, though she seems sullen. We tell her of our findings with the cult. We believe their efforts are greatly hindered with the loss of slaves and the cave-in and fire in their fields, though the cult itself may not be stamped out entirely.

She informs us of other dire matters. The crystal palace adjacent to the main political building, from which the wizards control elementals that help to power the city, has been breached and attacked some time ago. None have seen Dolan, the head wizard.

We are too tired and injured to investigate immediately. Rest may cost us precious hours, but there seems little other option.

Once rested, Fendra provides us with a flying carpet to investigate the crystal palace. Apparently her network of informants lacks those with the power we possess. It is a wonder this city survived for centuries before us, though I understand that much of the recent tumult with elementals was not previously the case.

The palace is breached and there are dead bodies in it. Eventually we find Dolan's corpse among them. In the floor, a hole likely created by magma elementals, the same type that we saw in the Baneites cavern that caused the fire. The hole leads down further than we can see.

Ascending the tower, we're hit with an emotional wave of desire and sadness. We reach the zenith and find an enormous crystal to be the source. It is flanked by hybrid elementals of various types. Sand, storm, and others.

It seems to want to consume elementals, and we gather that the summoned elementals of the wizards are what gave it sustenance. We also learned from open tomes in lower levels that the crystal is what hid the city for centuries, and apparently stores vast magical power, but only when powered by elemental energy.

It seems to have turned on the wizards, though, and the deaths are consistent with wounds from various elementals that seem to surround it.

We do not see a purpose to the crystal at this point, and it becomes increasingly demanding that it wants to consume elementals. Rather than risk further destruction to the city, we attack it with the intent of subduing it or destroying it.

Palamandrix runs up to the crystal and manages to wound it consistently via psychic attacks. I cannot attack the mind, but summon my own elemental powers and channel the power of thunder. This seems effective against both the crystal and its guardians.

However, the guardians hit harder than expected. Pal is knocked unconscious swiftly, and my initial plan of gathering their attention to me to absorb damage seems ill-advised before long. Though I may be the hardiest of the group, I cannot sustain the damage for long either.

We agree to focus on the central crystal to see if we can neutralize it before being forced to flee. Lady Jackie keeps Pal alive while the others harass and engage as they're able.

The crystal cracks and shatters eventually, not being able to stand up to our combined attacks. Thankfully, this neutralizes its guardians as well, which seem to have spawned from the crystal.

Exhausted and battered, we take stock of the scene and plan our next steps.

Player Notes

Hey, a tough fight! I had gotten a bit too comfortable, and quickly regretted it in this fight, which was excellent. I actually wish the elementals had remained alive after the crystal was defeated. It would have made for a more harrowing fight, though one I think we were ultimately equipped for.

Though that undoubtedly wouldn't have been true if we had decided not to rest first!

Palamandrix shined in this fight, which was fun to see. I think he did over half the group's damage, though it was

also at the expense of his safety in the fight. No one - not even my surprisingly tank-ish Monk - could just wade into this fight and expect to stay up for long.

This implication following the fight is that we're at or near the "wrapping up" part of the campaign. The city will have a power vacuum and will be in some chaos, but the immediate threats to it are neutralized.

The crystal, it turns out, was the source of the magma elementals, sent to investigate the Baneite cult since that area was cut off from magical scrying. It seemed semi-sentient, but also vitriolic enough that destroying it was likely the correct decision, particularly with the wizard handlers killed by it.

And earlier, the bit with the captives in the tunnel was high comedy, since we have characters in the party who are great at skill checks and diplomacy, but Louise and Rynn are NOT them. It may have legitimately been the toughest thing I had to navigate in this session. The roleplay during it was dreadfully amusing.

I'll have more to say about the campaign as a whole once it officially ends, but it was a satisfying session.

Session #8

Bloodied and exhausted, we take stock of the scene for additional context but then head out. On Dolan's (the head wizard) corpse, we find a note that alludes to a plot by two of the city's factions, the Sorcerers and a group called the Shroud, whom we have heard of but not interacted with, in an apparent coup attempt. It is possible that Dolan was assassinated via these groups.

We are met by Fendra, of the Bard faction, and we tell her what has happened.

The following days are a blur. With the head wizard killed by the crystal or the coup attempt, unrest is high in the city. As outsiders who were somehow involved in much of it, we are shunned or feared by many. The merchants suggest we leave the city, refusing to do business with us or those we represent.

Deciding to take matters into our own hands, we use our Bard connections to hide out and spend some time hunting down Venece Caltreen, the slaver who had been running the Bane cult. We do not give him a merciful end. We then pin the crystal destruction on him by planting crystal shards around him and his hideout, since its destruction was not universally regarded as positive for the city, despite its recent homicidal tendencies and unruly nature.

With a clear villain to blame for the unrest - rather than the general state of the city and its factions, which seem the truer problem - we determine our long-term plans. Lady Jackie decides to stay in the city to help Fendra navigate the city's unrest, with the goal of positioning Fendra in a position of authority. We have not found many others in the city worthy of our trust, so this seems sound.

Greer enjoys being Jackie's assistant, and stays with her. Seeing opportunity in the city, Pal stays to pursue his fortune. Louise stays to promote animal life in the city. She takes to the sewers and we hear little of her afterward.

I feel differently. My purpose here seems done. In some ways, it was a success, since we rooted out a slavery ring and evil cult, and helped to regulate the political situation in the city, volatile as it was. I do not regret my actions.

But to stay seems limiting. I have more to explore in my quest for enlightenment, and there are likely others I can help on their path outside of Myriad.

After concluding the business with Caltreen, I take my leave of the group. It was an honor traveling with them, and I shall remember them fondly.

We are still feared and hated. As I depart the city, there is an attempt on my life, though it is unsuccessful. I pity those who allow their fears to dominate their actions. I trust that my friends - friends? Yes, I think they are such - will help the city's inhabitants navigate the coming years in a better manner.

I take to the road without a specific end. To return to Baldur's Gate in failure seems purposeless, so I set off in the opposite direction. I have much to reflect on.

Campaign Wrap-Up

Most of this session was handled narratively, since it happens outside the confines of the published adventure. Which is fine, and allowed us to work through our character's long-term plans a bit for a small campaign epilogue of sorts.

I enjoyed my character enormously. Rynn was a lot of fun to roleplay, and her personality lent itself well to both the group and D&D campaigns as a whole. I felt like shenanigans and mayhem would occur as a result of her personality, but without having to "force" such things and also while still ultimately being a force for good.

Mechanically, probably my least favorite character I've ever played was a Monk multi-class build from a previous

campaign. So I was nervous about Rynn in a mechanical sense. I need not have been. She was fun to play, and I felt useful and powerful in combat. I think the new (2024) D&D edition has done a nice job sprucing up the Monk class. Many of my former gripes about Monks in 5e were not an issue in this campaign.

I also had pronounced gaps in my usefulness, which is also good. The Bard and Rogue were lots better at skill checks, our Fighter likely had higher total damage output potential, and Druids never lack for versatile options that a more martial class will lack. And despite the damage tanking I alluded to on several occasions, magical damage was sort of my kryptonite. And so I was situationally powerful while still having meaningful drawbacks. This feels like the sweet spot for class design.

I cannot comment on the module as a whole from a Game Mastering (GMing) perspective, which is a DM's Guild purchase. The feedback from our GM is that it was not terribly intuitive to run as-is, requiring a lot of work to flesh out absent information and encounters. I've seen some glowing reviews for it online, but frankly, seeing a lot of praise for something that I personally find to be clunky as a GM is nothing new.

Some amount of work to adapt a campaign to your table is necessary in most adventures from any publishing source, so it's not necessarily a huge knock on a module if there are other interesting elements in it. But the fact that our GM specifically called out this aspect is a bit telling to me; she has run a lot of D&D and knows there's no such thing as a perfect campaign module, so she wouldn't have mentioned it if there were only "normal" levels of missing info.

We were informed that this would be a more diplomatic campaign, and that the encounters wouldn't be uniformly difficult. Amusingly, we ended up taking a fight-first approach to some of the campaign's challenges despite this. We were warned, however, and now so is anyone reading this. I assume there are plenty of other ways it could have played out, particularly since we angered or ignored several of the city's other factions.

The rest...underground evil cult, warring factions where we have to choose a side, and so on. Nothing revolutionary, but also solidly executed. The fact that the creator(s) of the adventure created Myriad as sort of a demi-plane is another smart move, since it allows for easier absorption into a variety of campaign settings. The best thing I can say is that I wish I got to hang out with this group a bit more and explore Rynn's character further. I'm a little sad the adventure is ending, and would love to revisit Rynn down the road in a different campaign or one-shot.



Issue #7 Cont.

Comments & Responses to E&A #6-7

+ IgTheme & 2025 Roundup

Responses to E&A #6

Lisa Padol

Re: unprofessionalism of companies in the job hunt, it's become increasingly common simply to ghost applicants. I'm used to receiving nothing from most but, for example, being ghosted after three rounds of interviews with one company felt like a slap in the face.

Scams to get personal information also exist. I was the target of a couple during the process. Lowball offers after promising higher figures as a salary range are also somewhat common. They use the higher range to get more and better applicants, then hope that some of them are desperate enough to take less pay.

Also companies listing jobs as though it's to work for them, but when you apply they contact you and inform you that you need to sign up for their platform to apply to the actual job (which is with another company). These are software-as-a-service companies who are using this trick to get more people to sign up for their platform, to then use those numbers to entice advertisers or investors.

And the perpetually annoying "what are your salary expectations?" questions instead of listing a salary. I learned through a couple recruiters that this is often at organizations that don't have standardized pay scales because of previous lowball offers and can't list salaries online for fear of existing employees finding out and demanding higher pay. Just miserable.

Additionally, there are growing practices of companies listing jobs that they don't even intend on hiring for. This is for two reasons:

1. To have a talent pool of applicants whom they can reach out to when the position becomes available (this is usually at companies with high turnover anyway), or
2. At startups that need to create the appearance of exponential growth in order to attract investor money. There are many such companies in my field (digital marketing). There's no actual intent on hiring for all those they've listed.

While it makes sense for the company (I guess? It's still unethical imo), it's frustrating to only be able to guess at

how many of the hundreds of applications I filled out where there wasn't actually an open position or possibility of being hired anytime soon.

That doesn't even get into the new world of having to optimize your resume/CV for artificial intelligence bots scanning through it before a person ever sees it. The technical hoops I had to jump through to make resumes both readable by bots and reasonable for humans was considerable, and ideally you're customizing your resume for each individual job posting (I didn't quite do this but had about half a dozen I cycled through that matched certain job types within my field).

So in all, it's a mess. I'm glad I'm back with a stable company and hope not to be back on the job market anytime soon. I don't envy job seekers in the coming years.

In lighter responses, *Caves of Androzani* does seem like it would make for a good RPG premise!

Re: not changing details of NPCs from their source unless "necessary," it's probably important to note that when I post to my website, my imagined audience is a much more casual audience and/or newer players compared to many I converse with online who have been doing this stuff for decades and have developed their own best practices that work for them. A piece of advice like "don't change NPC details from their inspiration unless you have to" is intended to reduce cognitive load on the person running the NPC, who might not have a ton of experience adapting NPCs from other sources. So if they're just doing a loosely adapted "Chandler from *FRIENDS*" or whatever, they can just picture the character instead of having to remember whatever additional personality quirks they assigned to the NPC initially.

However, in that particular example, "necessary" would likely include renaming the NPC, as you mention in your *Sorcerer* example, because otherwise it could risk taking the players out of the experience, so to speak, with a reference that's too on-the-nose to its inspiration.

Patrick Riley

RYCT Josh and 5.5e weapon abilities, I agree that it's probably the clunkiest add-on to the 5e system and the one I like the least. You correctly pointed out even a couple

inconsistencies that hadn't originally rankled me, but do seem less than ideal.

That said, I think 5.5e (or 5e 2024, whatever it's being called) has pleased me more than annoyed me. A good progression on the whole, I'd say, though I dare say it's not a system that will ever be perfect or without noticeable flaws.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek

Re: Fiddle vs. Violin, oh yes, no technical difference in the instrument itself, but a world of difference in the music and implied training/skills of the player.

There are even separate bow grips and techniques that would be considered gauche in much of classical music that are standard in fiddle fare, and some related skills that aren't always overlapping. For instance, improvisation is much more in demand in fiddle settings, whereas for example I'm classically trained enough that I tend to need music in front of me (or memorized) to perform with a group. Similarly, I can read jazz charts (chord progressions, etc.) but can't adapt that knowledge into heuristics for play quickly enough to perform in jazz settings since it's a lot of improvisation within that loose structure.

Joshua Kronengold

Re: 5e Rangers, you make a good point about them in Tasha's. I have ranging and varied thoughts on Rangers and how Wizards of the Coast doesn't really know what to do with the class. Suffice it to say, I love playing Rangers, but sometimes I think that's in *spite* of how they're presented in D&D.

Nice to hear about your musical and dancing efforts as well!

Good luck with the job search. If you want to give yourself some anxiety at what it's like out there at the moment, check out my comments to Lisa just above.

Neat to hear about the tiny Cons you attended, including the one with James Ernest and Andrew Looney. I think both don't quite get the attention they deserve as designers and tinkerers in design-thinking. Ernest's failed company Cheapass Games had a laudable ethos, and a lot of the microgames that came out of that experiment are extremely worthwhile and better than their often print-and-play production would suggest.

Elf (Erica L Frank)

Re: *Thousand Year Old Vampire* and Jim V's comments to you in issue #6, I do indeed have a review and a couple session reports that may interest you. Jim mentioned back-

issues of *Alarums & Excursions*, but it will be much easier to find them on my website (links below). Either way, I hope you get to try it sometime!

Review: <https://bumblingthroughdungeons.com/thousand-year-old-vampire/>

Session Report: <https://bumblingthroughdungeons.com/thousand-year-old-vampire-session-report-1/>

Session Report: <https://bumblingthroughdungeons.com/thousand-year-old-vampire-session-report-2/>

Responses to E&A #7

Michael Cule and

Brian Christopher Misiaszek

Clearly I missed a Mick Jagger joke with the Barrowman pics. Either way, I was amused that two of you stumbled upon the same connection.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek

My condolences on the passing of Sadie.

Joshua Kronengold

Best of luck in the job search. As you know, I have some experience with it, and don't envy anyone the grind of finding a new, and worthwhile, position.

Re: *The Batman*, happy to be disagreed with. That one tends to polarize more than most. I may need to rewatch it in light of your criticisms, but can't say they bothered me upon a first viewing. I found *The Eternals* sort of charming. I think amidst some of the more egregious Marvel slop (I use that term deliberately; the bad stuff like *Secret Invasion* or *Inhumans* is almost unwatchable to me), it holds up perfectly well, and is only being swept under the rug, so to speak, because it bombed at the box office. Not that the Netflix Marvels shows were perfect (*Iron Fist* was rightly called a low point), but I genuinely miss the tone and storytelling acumen those had compared to the Disney stuff, even the better-regarded series like *Loki*.

Re: *Brindlewood*, I appreciate the mechanical breakdown and analysis. I had fun in the session despite the misgivings in question in our discussion, and we've discussed returning to the characters, which would be nice.

Re: Rynn and my recent D&D campaign, this particular DM runs by the book quite closely, so I don't think there was a chance for me to be Charmed/Dominated into turning into a foe. I agree it would've been fun. I gave her an epilogue that leaves the door open for future adventures, since I wouldn't mind revisiting her exploits.

Jim Vassilakos

“So happy we’re not friends.”

I got a hearty chuckle out of this line, but took it in an easy spirit. For what it’s worth, each of us who were in the bet (four at its peak), opted in. We had plenty of friends who wanted no part of it.

Patrick Riley

Procedural elements tend to bore me as well in some systems. *Ryuutama* is not one that excited me, for instance, because it dwells on aspects of play that hold little appeal to me (such as inventory management). You’re far from alone in this preference, at least.

Patrick Zoch

Enjoyed the story about your son re: Leeroy Jenkins-ing across the bridge. The whole thing seemed nicely handled. A lesson learned on his end, and a springboard to additional adventure.

Paul Holman (Pum)

Re: The Great God Brian, fun stuff, and it reminds me...there was a “Lonny, the Fart God” in a campaign I ran a few years ago that was supposed to be a throwaway random encounter gag, but turned into a recurring character and plot driver for one of the characters. We had quite a bit of fun with it.

Avram Grumer

Re: length of system names, it’s true in lots of media, including games and books, and as I understand it the reasons (at least in books) are twofold.

One, longer names do better in internet searches due to specificity, so there’s an SEO component to it. Search for “Hero” or “Fate” and the RPG won’t pop up; you’ll need to dig deeper, which hurts its searchability.

It also relates to publishers’ increasing reliance on title and cover art to convey enough information about something to sell it. It’s why so many books have subtitles now. No more *Catcher in the Rye*. It would be *Catcher In the Rye: the Tribulations of Youth in an Uncertain World*, or something similar, because the general thrust of the book needs to be obvious even if all you read in the cover.

Belated IgTheme: Dumbest/ Silliest/Crazy Things Players Did

I once drank from the River Styx, instantly wiping my intelligence and memory (well, I had a saving roll, but with an insane difficulty).

What I want to talk about most though is the bathtub full of butter and how a lich PC brought our long-dead father back to life in the middle of the campaign’s final act.

Curse of Strahd, 5e. The players had conquered the penultimate dungeon, but at a cost. Having given in to the dark powers that resided there, one player made a series of bargains to trade for power and knowledge. He had been turned into an undead lich and also given a True Resurrection spell use. He retained enough of his original personality that his goals still loosely aligned with the party’s, but the relationship had become far more tense.

The party was a group of all-aaracockran (bird-people) siblings.

Meanwhile, in Mordenkainen’s Magnificent Mansion, we prepared the Reincarnate spell since a major NPC had died and her reincarnation would give us new leverage over the titular villain. Due to GM generosity, we were interpreting “unguents and oils” liberally, which are needed to complete the spell, and the olive oil and butter that the mansion’s servants were bringing us counted as the oils needed for the spell. But we needed a lot, and so we filled the mansion’s bathtub with melted butter and oil, and placed the corpse of the NPC in it.

There was an argument about using the True Resurrection spell as this was happening, and the lich-PC was getting increasingly agitated, insisting that he be the one to wield his power in the way he saw fit. In an act of defiance, he grabbed an urn - one containing the ashes of our dead father (rolled randomly in character creation, which had acted as little more than a prop to this point) - and cast the resurrection spell.

Our long-dead father sprang to life, surrounded by his now-adult children, one of them a lich (!), and flanked by a ritual casting over a bathtub with the corpse of a human soaking in butter and olive oil.

The pandemonium of the rest of the session can barely be described. What we thought might contain the final boss encounter was instead a nearly session-long social scene with a bewildered father and sibling bickering, punctuated by the NPC returning, soaked in butter, surrounded by birds (one of them undead) and as a new race (dark elf). We still chuckle about it to this day.

Mark's 2025 Roundup

A good year overall, and not without hiccups. Rather than a full year overview, below are my favorite finds from games and other media:

RPGs:

Fiasco was a delight. The **Convention-run “murder mystery” one-shot session at Origins** (detailed in E&A #2) was an unexpected highlight as well. **D&D** remains a joy and the recent pseudo-edition has not marred the gameplay in any significant way.

Film:

Flow contains no dialogue, and I'd call it meditative if it weren't so nerve-wracking at several points. A quietly profound film, in any case.

The Fabulous Baron Munchausen (1962) is another, more deep cut hit that is charming almost because of its obvious limitations and faults. It's available on *The Criterion Channel*, and possibly elsewhere.

Books:

A re-reading of *The Book of Disquiet* (Fernando Pessoa) was as profound as my first read-through over a decade ago. It's impossible to like or agree with it in its entirety, but it's also one of the most fascinating books I've ever read.

Also *The Beauty of Games* by Frank Lantz, which might not be the single best book on games and gaming I've read, but it's undoubtedly the best I read this year. Lantz weaves in and out of a surprising number of insightful topics, covering how he believes Poker may have saved the world, how we can think of games as systems with players being part of the active creation of each game, how the purpose of play (separate from the goal of a game) can be staggeringly multifaceted, and how systems-thinking via games could help us move forward as a society.

On a personal note, *Into the Breach: The Life and Times of the 740th Tank Battalion in World War II* by Paul Pearson was great to read. My great-uncle served (and died) in the battalion in WWII, and their story is all sorts of insane and heroic. Pearson cobbled the book together with a mix of his own recollections, those of other survivors, official after-action reports and declassified documents about their orders and actions, and historical documents about the war in a holistic sense to provide context for the battalion's actions. I doubt I'd have enjoyed it as much without the familial connection, but it was riveting overall.

Design:

Rather than repost what I've written elsewhere, I'll link to my yearly roundup over on my BGG blog. It's been a busy year, with more to come.

<https://boardgamegeek.com/blog/11746/blogpost/179745/2025-designer-diary-the-long-walk-toward-the-long>

Board Games:

I played around 80 new-to-me board games this year. Here are the best, trending toward my absolute favorites from the year at the bottom.

1. **1212 Las Navas de Tolosa** (2022) - excellent, sub-hour-long wargame about an obscure but interesting battle.
2. **Panda Panda** (2024) - micro-game of set collection, but sharp gameplay makes it a quick delight.
3. **Twilight Struggle** (2005) - a thesis statement of sorts for card-driven wargames, and damn fine game besides, with numerous overlapping tensions and considerations.
4. **Banque Fatale** (1997) - Stefan Dorra strikes again. Auctions and stock manipulation in this typically quirky, brutal, streamlined and player-driven game from one of my favorite designers.
5. **Marabunta** (2023) - a fun, interactive mechanic - I Split, You Choose - in the hands of a master designer (Reiner Knizia). The result was destined to be good.
6. **Last Penguin** (2023) - Finger gymnastics and bluffing? Lol. This is some dumb fun.
7. **Dou Dizhu** (??) - 2-v-1 shedder intended for casual settings and tied to light gambling culture in Japan. Play is speedy and the 2v1 dynamics elevate it both tactically and dramatically above several others I've played.
8. **Sequence** (1982) - possessing of that old-time card game quality that's perfect for casual or family gatherings, and with just enough to the decision space that it doesn't feel rote or without tactical options. Best played in partnerships, meaning it may only be a 4p or 6p game, but that's fine.
9. **Pass the Pigs** (1977) - loads of silly, simple fun, and sneakily makes a few sneakily savvy design decisions to incentivize dramatic play and keep everyone involved throughout.
10. **Ironclad (aka Philosophers & Robots)** (2004) - utterly fascinating game with two concurrent abstracts taking place, and when you take a turn in one, your opponent takes a turn for you in the other, with the two halves informing each other in subtle ways. I posted rules in the forums of the game's BoardGameGeek page, since it's quite obscure.
11. **Hare & Tortoise** (1973) - old but decorated racing

game that has a sense of whimsy about it, mixed with interactive, tactical play.

12. **Ichor** (2025) - Knizia's 2nd game on this list, this one an abstract with asymmetric one-time use special powers that allow for some surprise and creativity amidst the more calculative play.
13. **21 Hand Games** (2024) - playful and stupidly simple games, which aren't all winners, but enough of them are. Standouts for me are "Mirror Shield" (a wizard battle) and "Wrist War" (eyes closed, chaotic fun at 2p).
14. **Hnefatafl** (400) - ancient asymmetric abstract that absorbs quickly and produces a lot of fascinating gameplay. My girlfriend and I have quite enjoyed exploring it.
15. **Skull Queen** (2024) - punitive, player-driven trick-taker that allows you to fly as close to the sun as you'd like in each round, but always with the risk of melting those wax wings. Also Stefan Dorra's 2nd appearance on this list.
16. **Battlelore: Second Edition** (2013) - wargame without the historical elements, and it uses this lack of historicity as an excuse to inject some fun chaos in the form of Lore cards and eclectic scenarios. Hidden troop deployment is always fun for me, since it can play into some mind games with one's opponent.
17. **Toy Battle** (2025) - fierce 2p tug of war that doesn't take itself too seriously and contains a lot of interesting variance in its
18. **Pairs** (2014) - a "deck system" of related card games, the best of them being Continuous Pairs, Port, and a few others. Great pub game, or in casual settings.
19. **Heroscape** (2004) - utterly gleeful, combative mashup that feels like the brainchild of a sugar-high 12-year-old with war paint on their face, but then streamlined into something eminently modular and playable.

There are no surprises on this list. Silly party games, traditional style card games, "light" wargames, old-school interactive Eurogames, like those from the German boom in the 90s and 2000s (or modern designs with those older sensibilities about them), an abstract or two, likely with some light luck that removes it from being entirely combinatorial...each of those reinforces what I already know of my preferences. My tastes have collapsed into known quantities. This is a good thing.

Useful or Interesting Resources:

Here's a link to a list I made on Board Game Geek about the importance of playfulness, and the various things playful games have taught me over the years:
<https://boardgamegeek.com/geeklist/364516/10-games-that-can-teach-us-something-of-playfulness>

I shall also use this space to champion [Areopagus, my favorite e-newsletter](#). Written by a man named Sheehan, who has come to be known as The Cultural Tutor, these are sporadic but thoroughly detailed and long emails that appear in your inbox, with seven educational passages (they're really closer to articles) on a variety of historical and cultural topics.

It's lovingly written, and Sheehan has amassed a sizable following of subscribers and related followers on social media who are eager to absorb interesting tidbits from culture and history, from someone who clearly delights in researching and sharing it.

Back issues do not go stale either, and if possible are extremely worth tracking down for some lesser-known gems from history, be they political movements, music or literature, battles, historical figures, artistic trends, or innovations.

Miscellany

December saw the start of my new job, which immediately sent me on a nearly week-long trip with the rest of the staff to run a large event for the organization's membership. Exhausting, but a nice chance to bond with my new coworkers.

That, plus holidays, contributed mightily to me missing the last E&A deadline.

In unrelated news, the girlfriend and I discovered a new favorite cheese: Westminster Rustic Red, a wonderfully flavorful cheddar, at our local supermarket.

Back in gaming, we both also went through the "best new-to-me" gaming exercise, which is a nice chance to see how we aligned (or didn't!), and how we can curate our gaming in the new year in reaction to the results. *Flamme Rouge*, a light strategy racing game about the final mile of a competitive race, was her new-to-her favorite. I enjoy it as well.

And with that, I end what is undoubtedly my lengthiest submission to E&A or A&E before it. I hope to return to more manageable submissions hereafter, fun as this issue was to put together. Have a great 2026, all!
-Mark

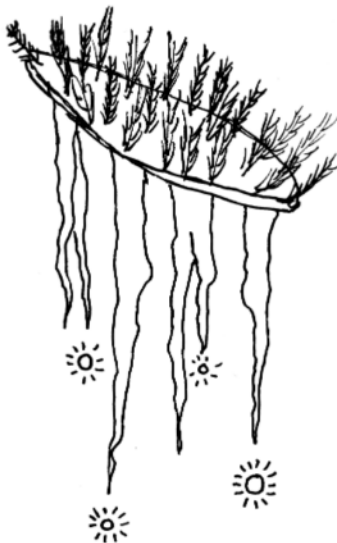
Scribbles and Horrors

Presented by Scribble M. Horror (Pseud.)
*February, 2026*¹

In college I ran a very fun OD&D campaign with some friends. I was well on my way developing what I then called my *megadungeon*² and a wilderness hex map covering the better part of a continent. It seemed that, finally, I was on the right creative track, making a lasting D&D world which would endure.

College ended, however, and when moving to Wisconsin all my maps, notes, and drawings disappeared courtesy of the USPS.³ My whole campaign was lost in an instant! I was left with nothing but memories, a few by-chance saved scribbles, and some blurry photographs.

My current D&D campaign, REDUX, emerged after this. Redux is a monument to and echo of its predecessor. Ringbod Tower is now Redux Tower. Not a reproduction of the original, but a kind of memorial to a creative past.



A priority in Redux has been taking careful notes and distributing them. I make frequent scans of dungeon maps. I keep detailed Expedition Logs patterned after the campaign notes for Rythlondar⁴. These campaign logs I further compile into *Seasonal Reports*, a high-level view of three-months campaigning.

Tabletop games are an ephemeral activity. Like theatre, they are conditional upon being present in a moment: the choice to make one move or another. To really understand what the play of any game is you must *be there*.

Because of this, a great deal of energy in wargames is dedicated to producing notation text: maps, notes, logs, house rules. My friend once joked that the main function of OD&D rules themselves is to produce interesting character obituaries.

The games we are playing can be considered text-producing procedures.⁵

¹ Illustration is of a Glubitrubabubtrub, by me.

² The term *megadungeon* is one I no longer use for this kind of project, now preferring *underworld*.

³ It is not fair to put much blame on the USPS here: my poorly packed box probably tore itself apart through ordinary handling. The USPS is a national treasure, and recent efforts to erode it into oblivion are a travesty.

⁴ Rythlondar link: <https://smolderingwizard.com/2014/03/02/the-rythlondar-chronicles-original-dd-at-its-finest/>

⁵ E&A's AI policy is intriguing. I applaud it's prohibition on AI text and am puzzled (read: horrified) by the allowance of AI images. I do think the policy is an example of *text* being considered an essential component of games-as-art moreso than imagery.

My contribution to this February E&A, then, is the recently completed *Fall 1025 Seasonal Report* for my Redux OD&D campaign, edited for publication.

The report is at an abstract level – vivid adventure has been boiled down into statistics rather than stories. These statistics are factual, but not neutral. They are a wilful interpretation of this game I am playing, a further creative product of the activity *Dungeons and Dragons*.

Some statistics are simple and useful: **Number of Sessions**, and **Characters Participating This Season** are largely just documentation of the activity I've spent so much time on.

Some statistics are intentionally rhetorical. The precise quantity of **Treasure Extracted** from each dungeon, broken down by type, is a number which means little in real terms, yet this kind of bean-level accounting is exactly the sort of document real world exploitative for-profit ventures produce. Looting a dungeon solely for financial and political gain is by any measure morally dubious, and I want to highlight this. I think (or, hope) that reproducing this pattern of records keeping will allow for investigation and critique.

Some statistics are included to encourage campaign participants to try new things. **Artistic Works Produced** and **Construction Projects Initiated**

both not-so-subtly imply that those are things I'd like players to do in Redux.

Leads shows the results of my goal-tracking system. Players create their own leads and choose to pursue one each expedition. Characters are then rewarded with XP for completing leads. It's been a pretty good system so far. Preparation is a lot easier when there's only a handful of options to choose from.

Records Requests I have edited down for publication, but include written documents requested by characters from in-world institutions.

In the non-E&A version of the report I include a list of characters and their statistics. It reminds me of baseball.

Some other statistics I don't include, but which could be good in future reports: *Conversations Engaged In*, *Letters Written*, *Differences Settled Peacefully*.

If E&A endures beyond me and my notes, perhaps this will end up one of the only surviving written records of Redux. Obscured, but hopefully interesting.

Happy to answer any questions, field complaints, etc.

- Scribble M. Horror (Pseud.),
1/9/26.

Redux Seasonal Report

Fall 1025 (October-November-December)

During Fall 1025, expeditions R14 through R19 were conducted. Expeditions were generally successful, with a high rate of treasure extraction and low casualties. The parties operated mainly on the first level of Redux in search of the *Treasure of the Snail Knight*, along with *Alfonso Ultima* and his god.

Campaign Statistics

Total Number of Redux Participants	10
Number of Sessions	6
Average Non-referee players per session	2.2

Expedition Statistics

Total Number of Expeditions	6
Underworld Expeditions	6
Wilderness Expeditions	0
Average Rooms Traversed Per Expedition	9.3
Average Hexes Traversed Per Expedition	18

Number of Characters who participated in at least one Fall 1025 expedition	14
Characters Created this Season	11
Characters "Returning After a Long Absence"	1
Hireling Battlefield Commissions	2
Average Characters per Expedition	2.8
Number of Characters Killed	2
...by Giant Sentient Radioactive Bananas	1
...by Goblins	1
Percentage of Expeditioning Characters Surviving Season	85.71%

Number of Hirelings Employed	13
Average Hirelings per Expedition	2.66
Number of Hirelings Killed	4
Percentage of Expeditioning Hirelings Surviving Season	69.23%
Average of Percents of Hirelings Surviving Each Expedition	72.80%

Number of Traps Sprung	2
------------------------	---

Number of Foes Encountered	73
Number of Foes Killed	20
Percentage of Encountered Foes Killed	27.40%

Total Treasure Extracted from Redux in Gold Pieces		2491.7
	Copper Pieces (GP value)	0.7
	Silver Pieces (GP value)	165
	Gold Pieces	523
	Gems	650
	Jewelry and Art	1018
	Other	135
Total Treasure Extracted from The Palace of Nork (Praise Nork!) in Gold Pieces		992.9
	Copper Pieces (GP value)	0
	Silver Pieces (GP value)	33.9
	Gold Pieces	159
	Gems	250
	Jewelry and Art	550
	Other	0
Total Treasure Extracted from All Dungeons		3484.6

Average Treasure Extracted per Expedition	580.77
Average Treasure Extracted per Expeditioning Character	248.9

Domains and Paperwork

Contracts Signed	17
Contracts for Service of Arms	9
Contracts for Carrying of Lights and Equipment	3
Contracts for Hauling Treasure	3
Loans	2
Charters Ratified	0
Lawsuits Filed	0
Domains Established	0
Construction Projects Initiated	0
Artistic Works Produced	0
Records Requests Filed	3

Leads

No.	Title	Expeditions	Completed?
001	Meet the Botanist	0	No
002	Locate the Treasure of the Snail Knight	4	Yes
003	Palace of Nork (Praise Nork!)	1	Yes
004	Meet Alfonso Ultima, PhD.	1	Yes
005	Banana Vengeance	0	No
006	Find God	1	No
007	X Marks What Exactly???	0	No
008	Survey Gill Lake	0	No



SMR Issue #4 for E&A #8, Feb 2026

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

Tarot Decks for Gaming

If you collect solo TTRPGs, you'll probably run across some that use a tarot deck instead of dice or playing cards; they're not rare, especially in the fantasy and introspective/psychological genres. If you don't have any experience with tarot, you can just find a deck with images and an art style you like. (You may be able to use an online generator, but some games require splitting the deck by suits or in other groups, and the online generators can't do that.) If you do read tarot, and you don't want to use your divination decks for gaming, you'll need to find a separate deck that works for games.

I have acquired several tarot decks specifically for solo ttrpgs, mostly by going to Amazon, searching for tarot, and filtering to \$15 or less. I looked for whatever seemed appealing to me but didn't strike me something I'd use for divination. Most in that price range were mini decks - the smaller-than-playing-card size that's become trendy. These have included the [Star Seeker Tarot](#) (which I wound up giving to my younger daughter), [Witches' Tarot](#), and several decks that no longer have Amazon pages, so I'm assuming they were bootleg publications that were later removed. None of them had clicked as really working for me.

I am picky about tarot decks. I try to check the Fool, the Lovers, the Moon, the Hanged Man, and/or Death to see if I like the deck's symbolism and approach for those, as well as checking the minor arcana. I prefer scenes on the cards, like the Rider-Waite, not pips like the Marseille deck or "ornamental pips" (not sure what else to call them) like the Thoth deck. However, I don't like the Rider-Waite art style.

For a gaming deck, it doesn't need "correct" symbolism (and it's probably better if it's off). It just needs to be pretty, with images and symbolism I can

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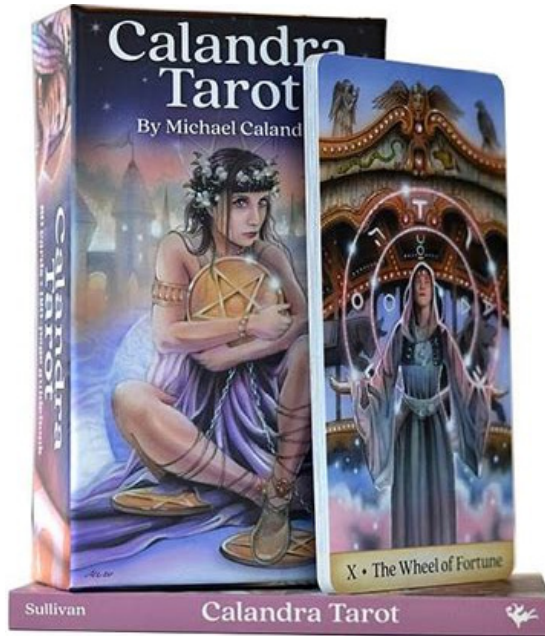
grok as tarot-inspired. It needs to be close enough to standard tarot that I don't look at a card and think, "well, *that's* not the five of pentacles." But it's okay if I think, "the five of pentacles is supposed to be in a city and this is a desert." (In a traditional deck, the five of pents has two destitute people walking through the snow in front of a church's stained glass window with five pentacles on it. It means hardship, adversity, isolation.) (I have seen no decks that put it in a desert, but it'd be possible.)



Rider-Waite Five of Pentacles

I liked the art in the Witches' Tarot just fine, but the cards were holographic and that made them hard to read. They kept catching the light in annoying ways.

My most recent gaming tarot deck, hopefully my last (it was not at a bargain price), is the [Calandra Tarot](#). The artwork is gorgeous. The back-of-deck art is gorgeous. I would not use it as a divination deck for several reasons.



One: It comes across as pretentious. Each card practically shouts 'LOOK AT ME' which is lovely for art but terrible for divination work. I wouldn't be able to find answers in this deck because the artwork is yelling so loud. (If I had art analysis skills, I could maybe explain that better.)

Two: For the cards I check as important touchstones, several strike me as wrong, or at least, incompatible with my understanding of the card. The Fool is fine, other than not being a young person. This changes the meaning from "naïveté caused by youth" to "naïve even after substantial life experience." The Hanged Man is a skeleton, instead of someone who is caught by his own will and biding his time waiting or deciding when to get free. I like the Death card – a skull and death's-head moths, obviously meaning "transformation" more than actual death. The Moon is missing the road entirely; there are two wolves instead of a wolf and a dog; there's a woman, presumably the moon-goddess... no idea what she's doing there. I like the belladonna, but I don't otherwise like the card. (...as a tarot card. The art is terrific; I'd be happy to have it as a poster.) Among the cards I don't normally check: The Sun is... goofy. I don't like it. It has a grinning/smirking sun and a kid in a cowboy costume; it clashes with the tone of the other cards.



Three: The deck has two additional cards, "As Above" and "So Below," with the artwork continuing from one to the other. (I mentioned "pretentious," right? Any [additions to/changes in a tarot deck](#) are a red flag – a statement of "the scholars and occultists of the last several hundred years missed something/ got something wrong, and I have figured out what it is." I've seen decks where I didn't mind it, but in those cases, they were building around a specific theme, reconsidering all the cards in light of their changes. In this case – the As Above/So Below cards don't even have the same structure as the other majors (they don't have the yellow bar at the bottom with the name); they are very much "these cards are EXTRA SPECIAL" rather than just additions to the deck. (Deck images are [at r/TarotDex](#), for the curious.)

Four: The book is in the wrong order. Tarot order normally goes Majors-Wands-Cups-Swords-Pents; this one is Majors-Pents-Swords-Wands-Cups. (This is minor, and anyone who doesn't collect a lot of decks is never going to notice. I notice, and it bugs me.)

It doesn't strike me as a bad deck; I wouldn't wrinkle my nose to see someone using it for divination. (And I'm not going to mention which ones I would have that reaction to, because I'd try to suppress it anyway – it's not my business what works for someone else.) It doesn't suit my style for tarot readings, yet it has beautiful artwork mostly in the Rider-Waite format (e.g. six of swords has three people in a boat; three of cups has three women dancing together; seven of wands has a man with a staff fighting off six staves coming at him from offscreen, etc.) – which makes it perfect for gaming.

...I could go into great detail about what makes a good divination deck (...anything *can* be someone's perfect divination deck, but that doesn't mean The Baseball Tarot is actually a good deck for most people.) But that starts getting way off-topic.

The key point I'm making is: What makes a good divination deck is not the same as what makes a good gaming deck. I've had gaming decks before for specific games (I have a [Fradella deck](#) for occultist characters in superhero games); my interest in solo ttrpgs drove me to find decks that would work across multiple genres.

For those who would never use a Tarot deck for gaming – I made [Dice to Cards Conversion](#) in part to cover “you have dice and/or regular cards but you have a game that requires Tarot cards.” I should probably update it to include “you have both dice AND playing cards, and you want to generate tarot cards without using a tarot deck.”

Solo Play: Cage of Sand

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

Cage of Sand is a time loop horror game for one or more players. It requires a deck of tarot cards, some paper and something to write with.

This is a GMless group game with a solo option; I'm trying it solo. The PDF is only 5 pages long, and it has hourglass images on each page; it's less than 2000 words total. I got it in the original [Racial Justice Bundle](#) which had a whole lot of games that have never been included in other bundles. As far as I can sort out, the print book that this was supposed to be included in was never produced. It nicely comes with an Excel file that includes tarot images (Rider-Waite) and allows easy tracking of the game details.

I spent over an hour reformatting the rules into a single-page booklet layout for easy print & reference use. It does not fit into four half-sized pages, which is what I needed, without chopping out parts or making the text very small. I chopped out the parts on safety tools, which were focused on group play.

I'm familiar with safety tools, and it's sometimes useful to have them mentioned in solo games – that if you freak yourself out by getting too dark, you can take a break or change things. But I don't need that warning in print every time I look at the fairly short game rules.

Game setup

Protagonist: Select or draw a card to represent your Avatar.

I'm going to go with random draw. Normally, I'd expect this to be a court card, or limited to court + majors. I'm going to just draw a random card.

Ace of Cups. Wow that's pretty. Golden chalice, dove, lotus blossoms. Keywords from the booklet: *Serenity, Opportunity, Acceptance.*

Name: (from [Fantasy Name Generators \(FNG\) - Finnish names](#)) (No particular reason for Finnish.)

Anni Joutsen, she/her. Mid-20s, unmarried, orphaned; her parents died of illness a few winters back.

Personality (Based on the Ace of Cups): Hopeful, calm, and mellow. Anni is cheerful in the face of adversity and helpful to strangers.

Setting. This isn't part of the game system, but I need a world concept. (I suppose the default is modern day.) I'm going to put her in a high fantasy setting – Anni is a seamstress in a moderate-sized town, the largest that's close to a large forest near mountains. She lives and works near a busy tavern and inn that gets a number of adventuring visitors, both mercenaries hired to escort traders through the mountains and young would-be heroes seeking to prove themselves against the fabled monsters in the forest. A good portion of her income is from those adventurers, who are always needing new or repaired clothing. She often spends her evenings in the tavern, quietly embroidering in the corner and looking for new business.

Next, three cards determine the starting setup:

Place: Queen of Cups. Beach, oceanside – The town (needs a name, doesn't it. Off to [FNG](#) I go.) *Baysheer*, is near the water. It has a bit of shipping trade, but not much; the placement of the mountains make it a poor location for a large port, but it has modest docks and plenty of local fishing.

Time of year: Four of Wands. From the picture, grapes are ripe and near harvest, so... August. Late summer, warm, sometimes very hot.

Circumstances that bring the characters together:
Ace of Wands.

This is harder to just make up/figure out because I don't have other players or any of the other characters yet. However, the Calandara version has a prominent castle in the artwork. (Technically, the Rider/Waite has one, but wow is it distant and hard to notice.) Keywords: *Inspiration, Creativity, Imagination.* What brings us together is... I'll go with “a Royal Decree”: A search for artisans to create fine items for the upcoming prince's wedding. Anyone may enter the contest, although of course most will not get past the regional judges. For the next several months, there will be crafts fairs and talent festivals in every major city and many smaller towns; Baysheer is not exempt, and is setting up for a long-running festival near the beach, in an area that's fine for short-term buildings and sales booths during the summer but not useful for housing during the winter storm season.

Cast of Characters

Draw 10 more cards. These are the entire cast of named characters in the story; the rules specifically allow replacing cards you don't want. (I did not replace any cards.) I used FNG for most of the names.

1. **Three of Wands:** A successful merchant, one of the few shipping traders in Baysheer, who is expecting a shipment of goods that will greatly enhance his wealth.

Anton Kumala, He/Him

2. **Knight of Pentacles: Sir Godfrey of the Ocean** normally patrols the coastline. He nominally watches for enemy ships, but also enforces shipping laws (taxes etc); he's been assigned here specifically because of concerns that the contest will push smugglers to try their skills at less active ports. Sir Godfrey of the Ocean, he/him

3. **King of Wands:** Not the king. Not *a* king. One of the event judges (the only one anywhere near here), a passionate man devoted to the arts. With the mountain dwarves nearby, the king sent a dwarf to judge the local artisans; "Bari" will encourage students and those whose skills have not yet developed, and slam hard anyone who is lazy or believes they have already reached the peak of their art. His language is coarse and he often seems angry, but is endlessly patient and gentle with apprentices and servants who honestly try their best. He is especially harsh with corrupt business owners or fake artists.

Barigrotir Bristlegrog, dwarf, he/him

...At this point, I want to mention that this takes FOREVER. I forgot that was a thing with many solo games: the prep/setup is part of the game itself, and can be very time-consuming.

There's the option of drawing all 10 cards (well, the remaining 7) at once, and then assigning characters to them; I'm enjoying doing them one at a time. A drawback: Tarot card images are mostly men; if I want women characters, I may have to not directly draw from the main images on the cards. I'm making a decision now that if I don't get any women in the first 6 cards, I'll lean towards female interpretation for the rest.

4. **Five of Swords.** A disgraced retired mercenary elf, one who used to win battles by corrupt means until he got caught and exiled. He settled in Baysheer long ago – maybe a few of the elders remember when he arrived, but it's been more than 50 years (and of course he hasn't aged). He keeps a low profile, perhaps from shame, perhaps to keep his people from

finding him. He occasionally tutors young swordsmen but charges them a lot – it's clear he doesn't like that as a profession. He is a talented woodcarver; he often underprices his art as part of the laying low, but several people are trying to convince him to enter the contest.

Vamirelion, he/him

5. **Wheel of Fortune:** Lady who runs a games booth (or cluster of them) at the faire. She is an acolyte priestess of Shweyu, the god of luck, and every spin of the wheel is a prayer in his temple. (The Rider/Waite deck image for Wheel of Fortune is just the wheel, surrounded by 4 elemental creatures. The Calandra deck features a woman under a carnival carousel.) She is very devoted, but that mostly comes across as encouraging people to gamble. She is sharply aware of attempts to cheat, and has magic to block some of the most common methods.

Elenwen Crow, she/her

6. **Seven of Swords:** A hobbit thief who skulks around the edges of the fair looking for easy marks. He's genial and friendly and humans rarely suspect him of anything. He has some knotworking skills and he uses those as a front, claiming he will enter the contest when he makes a few pieces good enough to submit. But mostly it's a scam: he just wants easy access to wealthy patrons.

Remi Longfoot

7. **Six of Wands:** Lady Linyive is a half-elf who has outlived three human husbands. (Two of them died in battle.) She and 2 of her husbands (1st and 3rd) were rangers who patrolled the forest; she has recently returned, sans husband, with a large pack of bandits in chains; the main trade route should be safe for quite a while. Her victory march was part of the opening festivities of the faire.

(This is one where I flipped the gender on the card because I'd like more women characters. The pic for the Calandra deck is definitely, overtly male, and I am just ignoring the beard. Maybe that's her memory of her 3rd husband.)

Lady Linyive the Widow, she/her

8. **The Empress:** The duchess, who is entering the contest with her famed weaving skills – her tapestries are renowned. (Having Bari Bristlegrog as a judge helps avoid any hint of favoritism; she has no political jurisdiction over him.) She is in her late 30s; her husband is in his 50. She has four children and the oldest, a son, is 15. Her youngest is her only daughter; her sons and husband are not attending the festival.

Her Grace, Maritha of Heliot

9. **Six of Cups:** Maritha's daughter. (I changed the previous description from my initial notes – I had none of her children attending the festival, but seeing the card draw here, I decided that the young girl on the card would work well if connected to her.) She is six; this is her first major outing away from home, and she is thrilled with all the art and festivities.

Lady Phoebe of Heliot

10. **Four of Swords:** A wizard with depleted powers, attending the faire to look for potential apprentices while he recuperates from something that badly drained him. He is very knowledgeable and talented – but currently his power reserves are so low he can barely cast a firefly light spell. He is bombastic and eccentric, but kind-hearted.



You might think, “that card looks nothing like a mage,” and you would be correct. I was looking for an option to make a mage of some sort, and didn’t want to say “oh, the 6-year-old has strong magic powers.” (She might. I don’t want that to be part of the background.) So I’m drawing from the meaning of the card – recuperation, recovery – and decided that a mage-in-recovery might visit an arts festival and potentially look for an apprentice that would presumably help him keep from getting to extreme burnout levels in the future. (I am picturing him as Dr. Bombay from Bewitched, in D&D mage robes.)

Stregori Zrin

Bleh. There we go, and that only took... *checks clock*... about five hours. Now I’m ready to actually start playing. (Wow. 5 hours of gameplay out of 300 words of rules/instructions. I’m impressed.)

Recap of the cast of characters so I have an easy simple list to check (human unless stated otherwise):

Protagonist: **Anni Joutsen**, a seamstress & embroidery artist

1. **Anton Kumala**, a wealthy merchant, literally waiting for his ship to come in
2. **Sir Godfrey of the Ocean**, a knight looking for smugglers and tax evasion
3. Barigrotir “**Bari**” **Bristlegrog**, a dwarf judging the contest art & selecting artisans
4. **Vamirelion**, elven former mercenary, exiled in disgrace; skilled woodworker
5. **Elenwen Crow**, priestess of the god of luck, who runs games of chance at the faire
6. **Remi Longfoot**, a hobbit thief & fake contestant with knotwork
7. **Lady Linyive the Widow**, half-elf, a ranger who won accolades for arresting bandits
8. **Her Grace, Maritha of Heliot**, duchess entering the contest with her tapestries
9. **Lady Phoebe**, her daughter, age 6
10. **Stregori Zrin**, a tapped-out mage looking for an apprentice while he recovers

First Loop

Act 1: Awakening

You awaken from a nightmare you can’t remember. Draw 3 cards; each of them is either a minor detail of the surroundings or an insignificant task that’s part of the morning routine. These will not be reshuffled into the deck.

1. **The Devil:** A goat is braying outside her window. (*Do you have any idea how hard it is to turn “The Devil” into “some minor/insignificant detail of your morning routine?”*)
2. **8 of Pentacles:** A work task. She sews the cuffs onto the sleeves of a shirt she’s working on.
3. **Death:** She has a vase of flowers that are dead enough that she throws them out and puts new ones in the vase.

Morning routine: Anni is startled out of a nightmare she can’t remember by the loud braying of a goat outside her window. She shakes off the shudders, and goes to work on the project she’d left unfinished last night: sewing the cuffs on a fine silk shirt, which she wanted daylight to complete.

When that’s done, she has breakfast, and notices that the roses in the vase on the kitchen table are dead. She throws them out, and replaces them with a handful of brilliant goldenrods growing on the path near her front door.

Act 2: Interactions

...At this point, I took a break for the evening. The setup is complete and I'm ready to actually start The Game Events, but I want a break before doing detailed roleplay/storytelling.

Before this section, I spent a bit of time (about an hour) making AI-generated images for each of the characters. I discovered that, while Google is perfectly good at making elves and dwarves and rangers and mages, it is utterly confused by the idea of non-white people in D&D/medieval setting roles, and they wind up looking like they're wearing tacky Halloween costumes. (Also discovered that using "D&D" in a prompt is more likely to lead to d20s in the picture than elves/goblins/trolls in the background crowds. Dammit.)

- 3 minor interactions (draw character card, then prompt card from the deck, indicating either the topic of conversation or nature of the interaction)
- 2 major interactions (character card + prompt card, using the key in the rules to interpret it.)

Minor 1: 7 of Swords, Remi Longfoot the hobbit thief

Prompt card: The Moon – Traditional meaning: Mystery, Illusion, Dangers of the unknown

Anni sets up her table for the day. She has her normal array of embroidery for sale – a few collars and sleeve cuffs done in blackwork, easy to swap for plain ones on a shirt; long narrow triangles of artwork meant to cover the lacing of a bodice; pairs of long wool strips a hand's width wide, embroidered with vines and flowers, meant for the front of a skirt or the sides of breeches. She has a few fancier pieces: a fine cotton kerchief, softer than course linen or wool, with tiny butterflies along all the edges; a dark green velvet scholar's hat with golden flames in silk thread along the band. But most of her fancier work is on unfinished cloth, suitable for adding to a doublet or bodice. Her largest piece is a night landscape – the moon rising over mountains, a wavering road between them, and beasts on both sides. It's picked out in silvery white thread on black silk, and tiny gathers in the fabric make it look like it ripples in the sunlight.

She's laying out the cloth and her racks of showpieces not intended for sale when she sees a hobbit walking through the faire, looking carefully at each booth. Hobbits aren't unknown in Baysheer, but they are rare, and she's never seen one this close before.

"Hello there," she calls out to him. "Are you looking for something?"

He startles at her voice, and then looks up at her and smiles widely. "No, just... admiring the beautiful works the faire has to show," he says, as he comes over to her table. "Do you make all these?" He glances at the items laid out on the table but his eyes are caught on the black-and-silver piece in its showcase frame.

"Yes; I do both the sewing and the embroidery. I'm Anni Joutsen," she says, and curtsies briefly. "I normally work in my shop, over by Three Snails tavern. But I wouldn't meet as many new people there," she smiles at him.

"Oh! I'm, um, I'm Remi. Remi Longfoot," and he gives a sweeping bow. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Anni."

"You seem to have a discerning eye," she says. "You're not just looking at the most colorful pieces."

"I, well, I dabble, a bit," he says shyly, gesturing vaguely at his tunic, which is decorated with complex knotwork designs. "But nothing as elegant as that," he waves at the black silk.

"Don't mark yourself so poorly!" she replies. "That is excellent cord-work. Are you considering entering the contest for artists?"

"I... have considered it. But my work is so humble..."

"Nonsense. There's no fee to enter, and they will need many artists of different kinds for the prince's wedding. At the worst, you don't get asked to the second round, but at least you might find some customers. That's my plan; I hardly expect my simple threadwork to compete with some of the master smiths and painters."

"That's... a thought," he says, and looks off to the distance as he seems to absorb her words. He turns back to her, and nods. "I'll do it!" he decides.

She smiles at him. "Good! We thread-workers need to stick up for each other!"

He ducks his head, almost blushing. "I thank you for your encouragement. And now... I must be off to find the registrar of artists, so I can put my name on the list of hopefuls!" With another bow, he turns and leaves her at her booth.

Minor 2: The Empress – Her Grace, Maritha of Heliot

Prompt card: Knight of Swords – Traditional Meaning: Determination, action, haste

Partway through the day, Anni shuts down her table, brings out her best pieces, and goes to the central pavilion where works of art for the contest are being displayed. The assistants are putting similar wares together: Weapons and smithcraft, pottery and carvings, paintings and calligraphy – and textile arts have their own section.

She selects a small table near other embroidery workers and starts to set out her midnight piece and other works, when she is bumped into and almost drops her work.

“Oh this will not do,” an authoritative woman’s voice says.

“Your Grace?” one of her assistants says.

“I need MUCH more space than one of these small tables. How can I display my tapestries on this?” she waves dismissively at one of the larger table-booth spaces.

“But... the registrar said each person gets one space...”

“That’s ridiculous. My tapestries are hardly similar to...” she glances around, sees Anni holding her silk-and-silver piece “—that kind of simple work. I need SPACE,” she says.

Her assistant looks ready to argue, and she tells him, “Go get one of the people doing setup; have them move some tables. And you—” she calls out to the man behind him, “—bring that over here!”

He’s carrying several large cloth items — tapestries, Anni realises. They look beautiful. She looks down at her own small artwork and sighs, and backs off.

“You, girl” — she almost didn’t hear the duchess addressing her, but she looks up, and then curtsseys deeply.

“Y-yes, Your Grace?” she says.

The duchess frowns, but doesn’t look angry at her. “I’m sure your... whatever that is... is lovely. And it should have a space. Just not here, because I need this whole section for my tapestries.”

She waves at her assistants, who sigh. One who’s carrying a set of wooden frameworks starts assembling them, and soon, she has hung three beautiful tapestries... in approximately four times the space allotted to any one contestant, by pushing Anni and another person out of the way and squeezing so close to a third that her knitting is entirely overshadowed by the hangings.

Minor 3: Wheel of Fortune — Elenwen Crow

Prompt Card: Nine of Swords — traditional meaning: nightmare, worry, anxiety

Anni goes walking to clear her head and wanders into the games section of the Faire. Elenwen invites her to try one of the games for free — “We’re still getting set up, and it helps to have some activity” — and she tries one called Nine Daggers.

It has a 3x3 grid with nine wooden knives in the shape of swords, each with paste gems and decorations on the handles. Players can pay for 1 or 2 blades (one per hand), and select their lucky swords,

each of which has a different color of paint at the tip. Then they stab (nudge) their choice of dozens of small cloth monsters of the same color as the tip of the blade — each of which is attached to a string. The strings are attached to prizes, most of which are worth less than the cost of playing. Elenwen gives Anni a free try — “Even if you win a big prize — you just have to tell people to come play!” Anni wins a Lucky Token charm, a little disc with a white flower painted on one side and a sword on the other, with a hole at the top and a cord run through it. It’s obviously intended to be a child’s prize, something they can use to flip a coin. Anni thanks her and goes back to her table, somewhat cheered.

Major 1: King of Wands — Bari Bristlegrog

Prompt card: 8 of Swords — Swords = they make an unreasonable request for help

Bari asks her to hold her space against the Duchess. Asks for her support in insisting on everyone getting the same amount of space to display their goods.

Anni: I can’t! She’s... she’s the duchess! I would be ruined if... (Anni is very dismayed at the idea of deliberately clashing with the woman who kind of owns the town she lives in.)

Bari: I won’t let that happen. And here — she is not a duchess. She’s is an artist, just like you, just like everyone else here. Having large goods just means she’ll have to be careful in displaying them.

Anni: I can’t tell a duchess what to do!

Bari: I’m not asking you to tell her what to do. I’ll do that. I’m asking you to claim your space, to not let her bully you into moving aside or leaving.

Anni: It’s not bullying! She’s allowed to order me to leave! She could have me imprisoned for failing to follow her orders!

Bari: I... don’t think she will? I am here to make contest fair. Which means I can make even duchesses follow the rules. But I can’t make that happen if nobody else will stand up to her. Will you stand with me — stand with the king who has appointed me to judge this region — and tell her that no, she can’t have your table space?

Anni slowly agrees, although she is very worried and has some serious doubts about how this is going to work. She follows him back to the pavilion and braces herself to earn the enmity of her duchess.

Major 2: Six of Cups: Lady Phoebe, age 6

Prompt card: Knight of cups — Cups = Learn something about another relationship this character has

When she returns to her place in the pavilion, the duchess is finishing her setup: three large tapestries and four smaller ones; the largest shows an elven

knight bowing to a dragon. On the edge of her space is her daughter (which Anni knows, because the child keeps saying “Mama...” and the duchess keeps saying “not now, dear” while she fusses with the arrangement.)

Bari approaches the duchess and says, “This will not do. You cannot push other people aside to show your artwork; they also have a place here.

She glances at him, wrinkles her nose, and says “there’s plenty of space; put them somewhere else.”

They begin to discuss (or argue), and Anni, uncertain of what she should be doing, looks to the child. “Hey sweetie; would you like to play a game?”

Phoebe nods and comes over to her. “What kind of game?”

“A string game!” Anni says, and pulls out a length of cord tied in a circle, and shows her how to make shapes with it. Phoebe claps her hands and laughs when Anni makes a broom, then a bowl and plate, then a spider-ladder.

She pulls out another length of cord and starts showing Phoebe how to do some of the shapes, when her mother notices her.

“Phoebe! What are you doing?”

“I’m playin a string game!”

“Who is that?”

“This is the string lady!”

Anni bows low. “Anni Joutsen, your Grace,” she murmurs.”

“This is Anni the String Lady,” Phoebe repeats, and the duchess laughs.

“Anni the string lady, hmm?” Phoebe just nods and shows her string, which is on its way to being a tangled mess.

“She’s teaching me to make a magic broom! Out of string!” The string gets caught on her thumb and she says “Ow!”

Anni starts to reach to unhook it, and then looks up at the duchess, worried that she’s overstepping, but the duchess just nods at her. Apparently having her daughter’s goodwill is a mark in her favor, and Anni disentangles the string and helps Phoebe start again from the beginning.

Bari is looking at her, arms crossed, tapping his foot.

The duchess sighs, and says “I suppose I can... shift this one over, and fold these two so only the centers are showing...”

She squishes her display down to... only twice the amount of space she’s supposed to take, and Anni squeezes into a space about half what she should have, but that’s all right with her – she really doesn’t have many pieces, and she doesn’t expect them to get much attention next to, sigh, whole tapestries.

Inciting Event

For the first loop: Draw a card to determine the event that kicks off Act 3. It’s the same in every loop.

The Magician – Major arcana = a festival, ceremony, or party.

The opening ceremony of the arts pavilion the next morning – once most of the artists have their wares displayed, Bari makes a short speech at the front entrance, and people from the faire start to come in and look at everything.

The wares being displayed here are not being sold; these will be judged, but there will be a few days display first, and the artists can make contacts and business arrangements with the viewers.

Bari goes around all sections of the pavilion, talking with each of the creators.

Anni notices that he’s encouraging to a lot of apprentices with mediocre but promising work, and disdainful of some of the master artisans whose work looks like it has stagnated.

He offers praise to the Duchess; her skill and passion are both evident in her work and the way she talks about it. He praises Anni’s work, and notes that the silver thread must’ve been expensive for her to acquire, and that she’d be able to make great works with more quality threads and fabrics.

...Next is **Act 3, The Turn**, in which Anni discovers corpses of 6 of the 10 characters. (Don’t worry; the others aren’t left out: All 10 characters plus the protagonist die in each loop. This is a horror game, remember?)

To be continued next issue.

Comments on E&A #6

This month, I had time in the post-holiday quiet to read most of the issue.

Cowman Baloney Face #3 – Matt Stevens

Thanks for the Top Secret game plan diagram – very interesting, as that’s a genre I don’t normally play. (I’d seen Top Secret but it’s one of the boxed games I never even looked at, much less played.) (No dragons? No space ships? No mutants? Not interested. Plz ignore the Boot Hill sessions in junior high school; the group went back to D&D and Star Frontiers pretty soon after that.)

I suppose I need to get around to reading *The Elusive Shift* someday. It’s on the ereader. It’s just. There’s so much else on the ereader.

RYCT Myles Corcoran: I think most of the OSR movement is less about admittedly archaic mechanics

and more about *not* wanting mechanics to get in the way of the “convince the GM that you have a Clever Plan” approach to problem-solving.

RYCT Lisa Padol, heist games: Real-world bank heists often didn’t work, not because the heist went wrong, but because it’s very difficult to vanish with the cash, set up a new life far enough away, and NOT spend the money in a way that results in needing to do it again in six months or a year.

A single well-planned heist (err, before the modern era of cameras-everywhere, ID-needed-to-buy-train-tickets, etc.) could set up a small team for a long time. Could be the one big rush of money they need to fix their problems, skip town, and start a new life. The problem is, ability to plan & pull off a heist does not necessarily include the skills to live off cash while hiding where you got that cash, nor does it include ability to invest that cash so the money won’t run out. And a gang that pulls off two or more heists has much higher chance of getting caught.

You can, of course, check out the [world’s greatest heist game](#), but I suspect it lacks the complexity you’re hoping for. There’s also the [Leverage TTRPG](#) but I have never clicked with Cortex. Also, it’s currently out of print, although I expect PDFs are available in the usual places. (I’d like to enjoy Cortex; I miss all the fun dice.)

Quasipseudoludognostication #7 – Patrick Riley

Re: Games that require roleplaying, or systems that encourage it –

Prokopetz at Tumblr had a terrific post a while back about [four approaches to TTRPG roleplaying](#):

In a nutshell, there are four basic “stances” a tabletop RPG’s rules can assume that players are going to have toward their characters:

- a. My character is me in a funny costume, and I’m going to do whatever I myself would do in that situation, if I somehow happened to be an elf wizard.*
- b. My character is a role that I’m playing, and I’m going to do whatever I think that notional person would do in that situation.*
- c. My character is a fictional protagonist whose life I’m narrating, and I’m going to do whatever I think would make for the most compelling story.*
- d. My character is a playing-piece in a game that I’m playing, and I’m going to do whatever scores the most points.*

*In practice, most tabletop RPGs contain elements of all four, and there’s obviously a fair bit of overlap at the edges (including wrapping around from top to bottom – **d** can look a lot like **a** in certain contexts!), but every game is typically going to assume that you’re primarily aiming for one of them, or else switching between a couple in a well-defined way (e.g., playing-piece mode in combat versus actor mode in downtime, to cite a common one).*

That latter example is very common for D&D, and the rules are unconsciously written with that in mind. Players and the GM will generally be very, very unhappy if you continue to use actor/fictional protagonist approaches while you are in combat.

“I can’t stab him in the back! That’s dishonorable!” will get frowns from some but a thumbs-up for others for good RP. However, “I can’t hit skeletons with a weapon – that’s disrespectful of the dead! I look around for a blanket or curtains to wrap them up in until we can get them to a priest to put them to rest” will NOT be lauded as excellent roleplaying. Especially if you didn’t warn the other players in advance that there are some “monsters” you won’t be willing to attack.

I have also found it a bit troublesome to figure out where the roleplaying goes in things like *Blades in the Dark*. You have rolled for the encounter, for whether or how well you succeeded... now I’m supposed to RP? Or, I’m supposed to do the RP to set up the plan – sweet-talk the guards, bribe the butler, make friends with the teenager wandering around alone – and then there’s a single roll to see if you successfully infiltrated the castle?

It feels like there’s a rhythm to the game I haven’t figured out. I can’t tell if that’s “I’m missing something” or “this takes a very different approach” or just “I don’t actually like this game structure.”

Firedrake’s Hoard #5 – Roger Bell_West

RYCT Myles Corcoran re Creative Commons & AI: My understanding, as an amateur copyright law aficionado, was always that *feeding* data into LLMs/AI image generators is entirely legal, based on the same principles that allow Google search to work (which has been litigated in detail at least twice) and similar situations.

Creating a copy for analytics purposes is legal.

Acquisition of the content is still subject to legal review, hence the Anthropic lawsuit settlement.

And what’s actually done with the use of the content after it’s fed into the analysis machine, whatever that is, is also potentially subject to review.

It's my amateur, not-a-lawyer opinion that Creative Commons licenses, other than CCO attempting to release something into the public domain (...it's complicated), are not relevant for AI purposes.

1. Feeding the content into the AI blender: No problem, regardless of license.
2. Releasing public content based on stuff fed into the blender: All CC licenses require "BY" attribution, and none of the AI bots will tell you a damn thing about where they got their data. If the AI uses CC content and builds output based on it, that's no different from building output based on a movie or book or game currently in production with its copyrights strictly protected.

Is that allowed at all? Is AI-gen content a fair use of the source material?¹ We'll have to watch the next few years of court shenanigans to find out. But CC licenses don't change the base principles here, because they're all requiring something that the AI machines are not equipped to provide.

Twisting the Rope #7 – Myles Corcoran

I have not tried many non-journaling solo games, by which I mean, games where you roll² for success/failure, or yes/no answers. I have some, and intentions to try them; I'm still getting the hang of "draw a card and narrate the results based on this interpretation..."

I don't have a good setup for this. I have limited table space, and I keep wanting solo ttrpgs to be offline, set the computer away and sit down at the table with character sheets, rulebooks, dice, etc – and then realize that actually I don't enjoy taking notes by hand anymore. I want a keyboard to keep track of what happens, and if I've got that, why not a PDF character sheet where I can type in changes as they happen, and ooh hey I could have a map program, or at least a map to look at and put down dots on for where I've been...

Maybe someday after I get my room cleaned up and organized (hah) I will have a dedicated TTRPG table, with a laptop focused on gaming and half the table open for cards/maps/character etc sheets.

Reddened Stars #5 – John Redden

RYCTM: MDZS is Mo Dao Zu Shi, the Chinese book (...or series, it's complicated) translated to Grand-Master of Demonic Cultivation, which inspired the

live-action show *The Untamed* (abbreviation CQL from the Chinese version, which I can never remember the words for). A lot of Chinese media are known to fans by abbreviations of the Chinese words; many of the characters are known by 2- or 3-letter abbreviations based on the characters that form their names. LWJ is Lan Wangji; WWX is Wei Wuxian; Xie Lian is XL (from a different story), etc.

Ronin Engineer – Jim Eckman

I am not sure it's reasonable to call a game published in 1979 the "third generation" of anything. Bushido may have the kind of system that 3rd gen OSR uses, but I don't think it was a 3rd gen thing on its own.

An Unlooked For Zine #6 – Lisa Padol

I was also impressed with *Wake Up, Dead Man*. I'd been worried that it was going to do one of those "we solved everything... except this One Tiny Detail which is a Mystery we're leaving open as potential Divine Intervention." Nope, everything worked out in proper murder-mystery style – but it couldn't have been solved without Father Jud's faith and devotion. Blanc would never have been able to earn the trust needed to get the details. He might've been able to sort out most of who did what, but he would never have known why.

The Estate of False Griffin Point – Limli the Librarian

I enjoyed the adventure module, which I believe I could adapt for GURPS or Fate. (Fate has the issue of "no resource tracking" – have to decide what to do about anything that costs money. It probably becomes an Overcome roll based on Resources in Fate Core/Condensed, or maybe a Careful approach in Accelerated.) I've had some practice converting D&D spells to Fate; most of them are "inflict an Aspect" or "create an obstacle that needs to be Overcome," potentially with some measure of bonuses.

Going to be Ad-Libbed #5 – Avram Grumer

Re: Superheroes fighting because they can't screw: Whoever theorized that has not read any superhero fanfic. Over in our corner of the creative world, we believe superheroes screw *all the time*, with anyone momentarily consenting, because they are all living the "we could die any time" lifestyle. High adrenaline, high risk; high mobility; take your pleasures where

¹ Or fair dealing. Or other exemption. Hey, where are the AI servers located, and what copyright law is in effect for them?

² Roll dice, draw a card, remove a block from the tower, spin a wheel, whatever. Use a randomizer to get results.

you can because you or they may not be here tomorrow. (Superman's type has been stated as "sentient and not currently engaged in a major crime.") The one exception is usually Batman, which makes him neurotic as hell. (Of course, the plot of the fanfic is often someone breaking through those neuroses and getting Batman laid.)

Re: Tactical games: There's a large crowd that insists no PbtA game can be "tactical" because there's no hex map or grid involved in the combat mechanics.

RYCT Roger Bell_West — yep, there it is: The claim that "tactical" in TTRPG means "battlemat required."

RYCT me: I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.

No, as far as I know, there is no Subgenius BoB game... yet. There just aren't [that many of them](#).

Now I have a new project. I am gonna have to find my copies of Book of the Subgenius and Revelation X and The Stark Fist of Removal and whatever slackanalia I can track down on bootleg PDF sites and put something together.

I hate you.

In other topics: Part of why our Wanderhome prep took forever was because we were short on people, so we could take a couple of extra sessions to just poke through the rulebook together and get a sense of how this works. We also agreed that it's likely to have some awkward and slow moments but it looks like there could be real magic here and we want to find it.

The huge number of natures hasn't been a problem because, so far, we're not assigning them to people. It's been useful to have a large number to draw on to describe locations – to say this town/mini-region/site has these 3 natures; you can interact with any of them. And for our location writeups in Roll20, we're listing all the details for each nature: The basic description, the "this place can always..." the two aesthetic elements we (I) chose, and the folklore for each place – randomly chosen so far, with "something of your own choosing" either being something I'm bringing in from Glitch, or left to the other players when we get to that place.

Denizens of the Library #6 – Brian Rogers

RYCT Lisa Padol: While I would very much like JKR's media empire to collapse and for her to hit the same instant obscurity and outcast status that Neil Gaiman is facing, there's also a part of me looking forward to the new HBO remake of the Harry Potter series. Because there will be a swarm of new fans who grew up vaguely aware of HP but were too young to read the books or even see the movies when they came

out, who will avidly watch the new series, start making fanfic and fanart, and go looking for the communities about that...

And discover that the biggest pairing in HP fandom is Harry/Draco ("But they hate each other! That's an abusive relationship!"), with a strong showing by Harry/Snape, which is not far from being overtaken by Harry/Voldemort.

(JKR's continued celebrity status is horrible, so I am going to enjoy the hell out of the shocked dismay of her new fans who believe fanfic needs to follow the character assumptions from the canon setting. And that it needs to depict plausible, ethical, morally decent relationships that you would be happy to have as neighbors.)

I have also been enjoying the *League of Regrettable Superheroes* writeups and have been tempted to go crawling through public domain comics to write up a pack of superheroes in my game of choice.

Probably Champions; GURPS is not good for Supers. There are a few Fate supers adaptations; I like Wearing the Cape but that one requires a specific origin type – no aliens, no deities, no beings-from-other-planes, and no true gadgets.

Age of Menace #244 – Brian Christopher Misiaszek

RYCTM: My two Black Loti (one is signed) are in very much not-mint condition. We played without card covers (card covers did not exist when we started, or rather, nobody was using them for MTG; they were for sports trading cards). He mentioned when he signed it that most Lotuses he saw were in one of two conditions: Pristine mint, or "much loved." Mine are in the "much loved" category. They are from the Revised edition, not Alpha or Beta, and I have no specific provenance to verify Rush's signature. I also have a small handful of moxen and dual lands, not a complete set of either. My single purchase of an Arabian Nights booster got me Ali from Cairo. Suffice to say that I have a very nice slush fund in collectible cards, should I sell them someday, but they are not "buy a house" levels of value.

Accidental Recall #6 – Joshua Kronengold

Sorry to hear you lost your job; job hunting sucks, and I am hoping to stay at mine (I've been here 3 years) for the next several decades. (Our union group may be tiny and weak, but it is a union, and as such we're immune to the erratic "oh sales are down; you're all fired" events that I've faced in the past.) AFIAK we don't hire coders or I'd look for openings; but we mostly hire actuaries & analysts for health &

retirement benefit plans. Plus admin assistants like me, but I believe those jobs are all frozen for now.

RYCT Myles Corcoran & Brindlewood Bay – I hadn't thought of having a mystery game where the players 100% know the murderer in advance, and are trying to figure out how they did it and how to verify enough details to bring them to justice. But that's a "maybe later" issue; I am considering running Brindlewood Bay, and I will note that it's important to tell the players "you need to be building a theory of what happened as you go, and adjust it every time you get a new clue" – that they can't just collect clues, and then sit together and try to put together the story. (They technically can; there's no penalty for that, but it'll be a lot harder to incorporate all the clues at that point.)

I suppose I need to try running it to see if the built-in retirement of characters bugs me. On initial view, I am annoyed that there is no way to run a Holmes/Marple/Bones/Scooby Doo etc. longstanding campaign – that the Crowns are one-time uses and when they're gone, your character is done. Although I suppose you could have a longstanding Murder Mavens club, with some people retiring, or dying, or leaving Brindlewood as new members join them.

I am planning on putting together an Untamed/MDZS modern-AU Brindlewood Bay module. A cultivator from a local Buddhist temple ("Cloud Recesses" if I'm running it for fans; "Deep Cloud Haven" if I need to file off the serial numbers) is getting married to a man soon, and in searching their archives for support of same-sex marriages, he's found some disturbing info, and he believes his mother may have been murdered 20+ years ago. He's come to the Murder Mavens because he doesn't want a messy, disruptive police investigation for something that may not even be a murder. But he'd really not like to include his mother's murderer in his wedding ceremony, so please, can they find out what happened?

I have a list of 9 suspects, although Lan Xichen is very much a stretch and would likely fall under "accident" rather than murder. Two options are not technically suspects. (Maybe it's not a murder at all, just illness or something like that. And maybe she just escaped.)

RYCT Lisa Padol and sanity rolls: No player would (effectively) argue that "make a find-traps roll to detect the hidden needle" means "well, I only have to roll the dice; it doesn't mean I have to roll under my skill level." "Make a sanity roll" doesn't mean "roll the dice and compare the result to your sanity stat"; it means "succeed at a sanity roll." "Make a saving throw against poison for half damage" does not mean

"roll the dice, and whatever number turns up doesn't matter – you take half damage."

RYCT Brian Misiaszek – Violin vs Fiddle: There are a lot of short videos about "what's the difference?" that involve a musician first playing an excerpt from a classical piece, then removing their shirt, opening a beer and playing a bluegrass piece. There are very few that play the same piece in the two different styles, but I found two:

- [Difference between Violin and Fiddle in One Note](#)
- [If Vivaldi Played the Fiddle](#)

Everyone else

RAEBNC.

Not-E&A Comments: RPG Dating Services; Dungeons as Colonialism

From [Domille on Bluesky](#):



There are a few places where you can search for groups – or more accurately, search for a GM/game to join. There is nothing focused on "find other players with similar interests so you might chat, pick a GM, and play together."

There are a few ancient player/group finding websites where the main detail is "where are you physically located," followed by "which games do you play?" (I found my long-running GURPS group through one of those.)

None of them address style of play. Most of them have a checklist of games, so they include a few dozen of the most popular, and maybe an "other" option.

Startplaying.games is "paid GMs offer their services." It had a big boom during Covid lockdown and is now scrambling to make money, because once its GMs find themselves a reliable group, they stop scheduling through SPG and just connect with their players in Discord or whatever. (Their cut went [from 10% to 15%](#) last year, and GMs and players both twitched about that. Also, they apparently take their percentage out of tips as well, which is illegal.)

Reviews on SPG are subject to GM challenge – you can leave a negative review, but it might be removed if the GM can argue to the site owners that it's not valid.

Players are not reviewed. There's no way for GMs to spot a troublemaker in advance, nor to say "this person is great at roleplaying but weak on tactics" or vice-versa.

...Someday I'll probably write ~~a rant~~ an article about paid GMing. Short version: I am not in favor, although I've heard some valid points about GMing as an educational skill; I can see "teaching people to play RPGs" as a reasonable approach: "Pay me for this 6-week RPG workshop" or something like it.

Roll20.net has a "find a game" function, where the GMs put as much (or as little) description as they want, and each game has a mini-discussion forum. This is mostly used for things like "I can't make Thursday; how solid is the date" or "here's my character idea" and the GM saying either "sounds good; I'll send you an invite" or "um, I do not think your owlfolk nun warlock is going to work in this Brindlewood Bay game." (I cannot tell you how much I wish I were making that up.)

The main R20 forums are very limited in topics; there is no "social/find players" zone, and posts on that topic will be removed. Even if you find players or GMs you like by connecting through a game – it's hard to keep track of them later; you have to remember to share contact info so you can chat outside of R20.

Sick of These Fucking Dungeons by Radmad

[radmad.substack.com/p/sick-of-these-fucking-dungeons](https://www.geeknative.com/p/sick-of-these-fucking-dungeons) – Dec 26, 2025

This article discusses "dungeons" as they exist in fantasy rpgs, and how they exist to allow depersonalized violence.

What do you think of when you picture a dungeon? A tomb? A temple? A collection of rooms? A grid?

The dungeon is categorized as a place to be traversed. It has locations that house things to kill and/or things to steal. It has distances that tax your supplies. It has traps and hazards to impede your traversal. Much ink has been spilled trying to make dungeons make sense. Ecologies, economies, housing, etc. But they do not undungeon the space. Ecologies exist to be disrupted. Economies exist to be exploited. Housing exists to hold things to kill. If

these things described the dungeon as a place, like a city, well then it wouldn't be a dungeon.

He points out that a "tomb" dungeon involves grave-robbing; that a "temple" is (or was) a place of worship, "demonified to make it acceptable for conquer."

He nicely articulates what I've felt for years but hadn't figured out how to say – that there is something innately disturbing about the whole dungeon-crawl focus of most fantasy games, that it does not survive consideration as an ethical lifestyle. That to make it ethical to loot tombs, raid wizard towers, and kill the residents of every temple that welcomes goblin worshippers, you need a whole lot of very complex worldbuilding in the background. Otherwise, the characters are just murderhobos,³ wanderers who kill "things" (...often people) that inconvenience them, or that they can get paid for killing.

Re: Murderhobos – there are any number of articles online about how to spot them & avoid them in games, how GMs can craft their games to discourage murderhoboing, etc. Very few note that the entire "dungeon" approach of many D&D games results in all the characters being murderhobos: They have no permanent homes; they wander around in small groups, looking for things to murder or steal. Only, as Radmad's article mentions – it's not called "murdering and stealing" when it's a *dungeon*.

"Nobody" owns that treasure; please ignore the sentients who live in this "abandoned" tomb (which is to say, no longer managed by the people who created it, not that nobody lives there). It's not "murder" if it's "kill the non-humans that are preventing you from grabbing the holy items in this temple dedicated to an evil deity." And so on.

The more distant I get from D&D, the less sense the classic adventure modules make to me. At best, they work as exercises in warfare: "The Evil Empire is at our borders; we need to take out their new keep" I can understand. Whether or not the empire is "truly evil," I can accept "gotta kill them before they kill us."

But many of the modules or GM-created adventures I see are, "deep in the hills is an ancient tomb full of treasure, guarded by wraiths and filled with spider monsters, with a lich-king at its center. Dare you brave its dangers to win its prizes?" as if it were a kind of circus game or sports arena.

...Whose tomb? Who's the rightful heir to that treasure? I suspect it's not Gorkaar the Bold and Fleswip the Sneaky.

³ <https://www.geeknative.com/64349/>

Cowman Baloney Face

THE NEVERENDING SAGA #4

SCREWING UP THE PLANET FOR A QUARTER MILLENIA

BY MATT STEVENS

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(ARTWORK BY ME AND WILLIAM O'BRIEN)



I'm working on this instead of following the news. Good god!
Switching from Garramond to Calibri this issue. The federal government
banned Calibri for being "woke" -- it's too easy to read -- so I see no
reason not to try it.

THE DUNGEON MASTER AS DICK (IGTHEME)

This is from another D&D 3E campaign in the 2000s. **Ping** was the DM; **Wyeth** played Lemec, a gnome wizard; **Ben** was Toriyama, a Chaos-scarred half-cat ranger (portrait is top left); and I played Kerith, human cleric.

Ping may have been the best Dungeon Master I ever had. One reason he was so good is that he was a bit of a dick to his players. Not *too much* of a dick -- he wasn't a munchkin DM, killing off dozens of characters for stupid reasons -- but a minor one. Munchkin games were like the *Saw* franchise; Ping's were like Coen brother movies.

For example ... I joined his 3E Erathia campaign when the PCs were in their mid-teens, level-wise. The PCs had killed a beholder in a cave complex; the treasure had been left at the bottom of a giant pit. Lemec went to check in.

DM (Ping): "Oh, the cave is filled with Orcs now."

Lemec (Wyeth): "What about the treasure?"

DM: "I'm afraid it's gone."

Lemec: "How?! The pit was 100' deep!! What did they spend it on!?"

DM: "Eh, furniture, art, knick knacks, that sort of thing." (We imagined black velvet paintings of sad Orc clowns.)

Lemec gave up, disgustedly cast *Cloudkill* on the orcs and we moved on.

Later, my cleric Kerith got a prestige class that gave him a free daily *Heroes' Feast*; at that level, the effects would last all day. In one session I said we should all have the spell's benefits.

DM (Ping): "No you don't! You didn't say you cast *Heroes' Feast*."

Kerith (me): "Why wouldn't I? I get to cast it for free!"

DM: "Nope, you have to tell me each time."

Thereafter, whenever Ping would say “the next day...” I would respond: “Oh, is it morning again, Ping? That means I cast ...” (cupping my mouth) “**HEROES’ FEAST**!!!!!!” It drove him crazy, but that was kind of the point.

At one point Kerith learned the *Harm* spell, the insanely powerful 3.0 version. The PCs were pissed off at an ancient white dragon, so we teleported to his cave. The fight went like this:

Kerith (me): “I cast *Harm*.”

Toriyama (Ben): “I poke him with my longsword.”

DM (Ping): *sighs* “All right, he’s dead.”

We were congratulating ourselves while Ping rolled up treasure. He looked up, smiling.

DM (Ping): “So... That’s 100,000 copper, 8,000 silver, 900 gold, and a +1 flail.”

Lemec (Wyeth): “Are the coins separated, at least?”

DM: “No, they’re mixed together, in a big pile.”

So we won the equivalent of 100,000 pennies. We had no interest in shipping 1,089 pounds of coins for a 2,700 GP reward, so we found some nearby dwarves and told them to help themselves. Hey, nothing wagered, nothing gained.

CORRECTIONS/CONTEXT FOR LAST ISSUE

Big Scary Dave said that the Whale Whore encounter was at a dockside warehouse, not a castle, which made the manager’s conclusion a little more reasonable. Point taken!

He added more details about why we were there and what we were supposed to be doing, but who cares? All I remember is, we barreled in as whores and killed some dudes. THAT’S ENTERTAINMENT!

MY D&D REPLACEMENT

Brian Rodgers has been telling us about his revisions of basic D&D, so I thought I’d talk about my own D&D-style game.

I’ve been working on it because my campaigns fit awkwardly with D&D. I’ve always been more interested in mythology and folklore than Tolkienesque fantasy (even though mythology and folklore were Tolkien’s inspiration), and my last few campaigns have been inspired by sources like the Mahabharata and the companions of Mohammed. D&D didn’t work well with me as DM or the settings.

So I’ve working, slowly, on my own system. Rather than go through mechanical details, I thought I’d talk about some of the ideas behind them.

The Standard Six

From the very beginning, every single new RPG has had a different list of ability scores, from *Tunnels and Trolls* to today. I once made a list of ability score names from all the different RPGs in my collection, and got to over 200 before I abandoned the project.

I want to break with this 50 year tradition. My game has six abilities, and they are Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom and Charisma.

Their meanings and uses will be a little different, though.

- Strength determines both damage and resistance to damage
- Dexterity is the combat-god stat, as combat is resolved with competitive Dex rolls like in *Two Fisted Tales*
- Constitution indicates endurance, which is spent to dodge and parry attacks; to resist spells; and to cast spells and use special abilities
- Intelligence is used as in GURPS: It's the base for most non-combat skills.
- Wisdom indicates knowledge, particularly of esoterica.
- Charisma represents favor with the gods.

So in this game, Intelligence would be the key score for rogues; wisdom for wizards; and charisma for divine agents.

Stats are allocated: You start with scores of 8 in each, and have 24 points to allocate between them, with maximum scores of 16. Each level after 1st you get 3 points to add to ability scores, and no score can be more than double another.

Favor and Fate

There's a long standing debate whether or not DMs should kill PCs. For this game I take a middle position: PCs can die *after their Divine Favor runs out*. Initial Divine Favor points are based on Charisma -- starting at CHA-8 for most PCs -- and the DM keeps track of them. He spends them whenever the PC gets valuable magic items or other favors from the gods.

Some characters have preordained fates. They can *only* die through that preordained fashion, but they build up "anti-Favor" when they escape death by other means, and it's applied against them when their fated end approaches.

Characters can also *curse* each other, which means they convert their Favor into anti-Favor for someone else. Obviously their curses only work if they have Divine Favor to spare.

Spells and Skills

I don't want a system where everyone casts spells, like old *RuneQuest*. But I also don't want magic limited to narrow classes of "spell casters." Legends are filled with epic crafters and their miraculous creations, and the mind-blowing feats of legendary warriors, and I want them to be part of my game.

So in my system, magic comes from skill mastery. The best musicians can enchant listeners with their music; the greatest blacksmiths make magic weapons; the arrows of master archers can fly around corners and strike multiple enemies. Any sufficiently advanced skill is indistinguishable from magic.

Characters start with 8 skill Proficiencies, based on their backgrounds. Each point of Wisdom over 8 gets them an extra skill point, and if their Wisdom is over 10, they can buy skill Masteries with those points. Spell descriptions look like this:

Part the Land

Level 9 [Archery / Sling Fighting / Spear-Throwing]

Ready your weapon, point it in the direction you want to travel, and demand that the elements clear out of your way. A safe, walkable path, as long as your weapon's maximum range, will open before you.

So this spell requires a total of 9 masteries in the listed skills. This requires a Wisdom of 27 or higher.

Monsters and Mystery

Most monsters are unique and very hard to kill. It takes caution, ingenuity and a bit of luck, as well as courage and ability, to find their specific vulnerabilities and defeat them.

These vulnerabilities vary, from soft spots in their armor, to tactical weaknesses, to vulnerabilities against certain weapons or opponents. This could lead to a new combat role, a "watcher" who studies the monster to discover its weak points.

Quick Battles, Real Blood

D&D combat is fast and heroic, but the hit point system is highly abstract. You don't know if "damage" indicates a bloody gash or a desperate dodge. I want to distinguish between the two while keeping things moving.

In my system, you spend a point of Endurance (based on CON) to dodge or parry attacks. Only when you run out of Endurance do you take real, physical damage, and that *hurts*. It will probably take you out of the fight, and may require long term care, if it doesn't kill you outright.

COMMENTS E & A # 7

Patrick Riley

"Every success should prompt an in-character reaction..." For a morning health check?!? "Gee, I feel great not having dysentery today!" It sounds exhausting. I understand they want rules that "promote roleplaying," but it feels like the forced "fun" of an office party.

"What did Steve [the cat] do?" Well it's obvious. He was the mastermind behind the whole thing.

Michael Cule

"Last week you killed Satan": The CRPG *Diablo 3* is just like this. While I'm NOT a good video gamer, I easily defeated Evil and then Death on Hard difficulty. Supposedly that was just the warmup to endgame content but I felt I'd had enough.

Starting a planet description with its culture rather than moons or atmosphere: I'd think of it like visiting a country on Earth; what are the first things a tourist would want to know? OTOH there are few countries where you have to wear vacc suits or exoskeletons so the analogy isn't perfect.



Avram Grumer

There was another (unauthorized) Middle Earth game, *The Ringbearer* (1975). Like many of those old games its RPG status may be contested, but it requires a GM and polyhedrals so I'd say it counts.

It's too bad there are few licensed humor comic RPGs (*Rocky & Bullwinkle* and TMNT are the only ones I know of). Otherwise we could combine Marvel and Disney (and Archie), and DC and Looney Tunes for truly epic IP counts.

Lisa Padol

"The whole Dyas Pitar business makes sense to me." That's good! No one doubts Dyas Pitar is cognate with Jupiter. (You could say historical linguistics is founded on it!) The part about Indra killing his father, Dyas Pitar? That's more speculative.

Joshua Knongold

So sorry about the job loss. Best of luck to both of you.

Yeah, *Two-Fisted Tales* kept the cards, with small adjustments in the second edition. You could say they're a storygame element, and don't belong in the (largely simulationist) 2FT, but I don't see any need for such rigid segregation.

It's true, I was happy to experiment with mundane characters and plots. (I still am!) I don't think we played more than one of those sessions in *Two-Fisted Tales*. IIRC there weren't any issues with mechanics; I don't think we made a single die roll. Any problems were with the plot, or lack thereof. GURPS or *Over the Edge* would've been fine, too.

Which is why I've concluded that these storygame mechanics are, well, unnecessary. I've found them intrusive and unhelpful, while simple "simulationist" mechanics could do the job just as well. I understand they're kind of necessary for GM-less play, but I'm not sure why we went GM-less in the first place. I feel as if everyone went down a weird road while I was gone and I have no idea what they're doing there.

Jim Vassilikos

Lisa and starship repair: It's worth noting that *Traveller* ships suffer damage from combat, while in the real world vehicles suffer from ordinary wear and tear. It would be silly for *Traveller* not to require repairs! Random ship breakdowns can be a source of adventure, too: There was a *Firefly* episode in which Serenity blows out in deep space and they need to scramble to survive.

Brian Misiaszek

So sorry about Sadie! I hope you and Caroline find another, equally loveable pooch.

NEXT ISSUE

I hope the world hasn't gotten demonstrably worse by the time I see you all again... Keep safe!

John Redden



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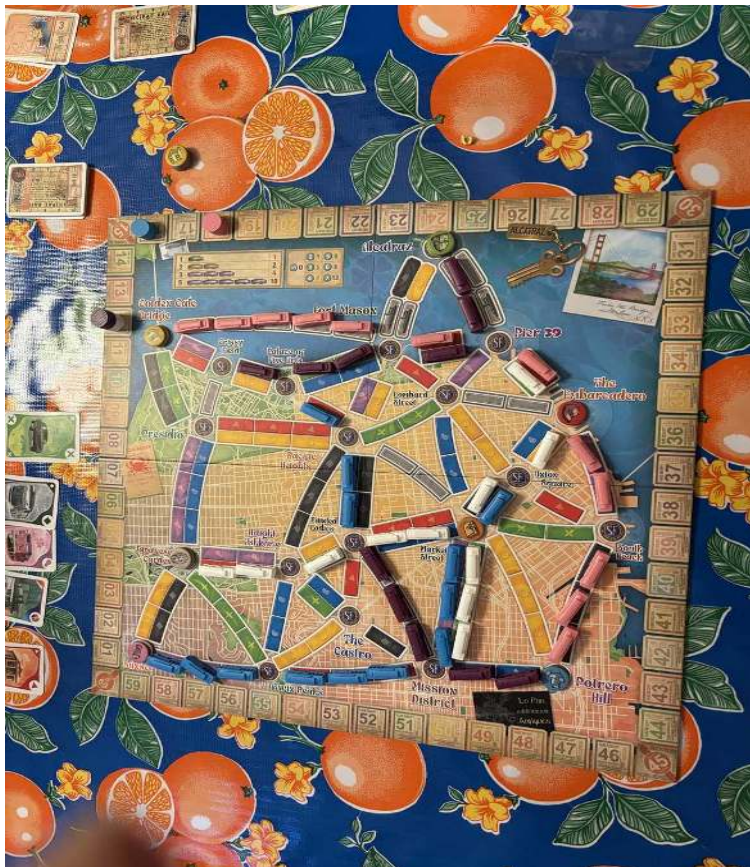
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Mix Natter And Anti-Natter



Gaming in Santa Rosa did not go as planned. It rained nearly the entire ten days we were visiting. This meant that live action Mouse Guard in the park, did not take place. My son was supposed to run D&D but one key player, my daughter-in-law had to work everyday at the bakery.

So gaming continued with Ticket to Ride and Settlers of Catan. We played three games of Ticket to Ride and two games of Settlers. The first game of Ticket to Ride took place in San Francisco. See the image above. The second game of Ticket took place in Northeast North America. It included ships and railroads. Railroads are more numerous than ships. The third game of Ticket took place on the entire planet. Ships are more numerous than railroads. The third game is much more difficult. I did much better with Settlers than with Ticket.

Players doing dumb things. Years ago a group of dwarves let their cleric be killed because he was out of cures.

Regardance

We finished the first segment of Stranger Things and started the second. Excellent.

I finished Children of Time by Tsaikovsky. This book is one of three. I am now reading Children of Ruin, the second book. I thoroughly enjoy his writing.

Sum Comments

Matt Stevens, an interesting diagram. I enjoyed whale whores. Chivalry and Sorcery. Years ago I looked at it, but by then I was burnt out on medieval games. So it was a *no*.

Clark Timmins, I like the way you delineate the ages.

Patrick Riley, nice zine :) Years ago I had to do trade shows. You have my sympathy.

Roger West, I have been reading articles in the journal of the IEEE on quantum computing. They also predict the growth of quantum computing. AI and quantum computing are not mutually exclusive.// Lee Gold used to celebrate Newton's birthday by hanging apples from the ceiling.// Our Traveller GM in northern California uses Mongoose Traveller with GURPS rules. It seems to work.// Using computers at the table, I agree.

Myles Corcoran, ooh. Diverticulosis?// I've never played a War Hammer game.//Solo Star wars? If I ever get the time and energy.// Single and double

columns? You Pick.

Patrick Zoch, Band of Brothers. That's a switch. I like it.//Soviet tanks did stop Hitler. People forget that.

Attronarch, another nicely crafted and detailed zine. I like the Grave Digger character. Ah PCs, just stay out of those old buildings and find another way to make money.

Pedro and Camila, everyone asleep? Why not.

Michael Cule, injections? Yikes. Needles? Yikes. I should be one to talk. Next Thursday I have carpal tunnel surgery on my left hand.// GURPS in space? Nice.// No Mouse Guard LARP. It rained almost the entire time we were in Santa Rosa. :(

Jim Eckman, if the empire of our current Emperor (sic, President), declines, will be feudalism? //When I was a kid I loved model trains.

Dylan Capel, I view sanity as a scale of perception.// Fifty two games systems. WOW, I don't even qualify for one.

Lisa Padol, all I can say is my granddaughter loves Anime.// Thank you for definition of the acronyms. My old man's brain can't keep up with 21st century jargon.

Gabriel Roark, rapid healing of the elbow. Excellent.// The six dusts in the Koan. You're guess is as good as mine. I love to read and imagine what the Koans teach. I do not consider myself a Zen Buddhist. I love to read the passages.// What an organized campaign. Kudos.

Limli, The Estate of False Griffin Point is complete and meticulously laid out.

Paul Holman, I've never played any form of GURPS with mages. Good luck.//Yes, as I said before I was in Bored of the Rings fandom. But I loved the Hobbit.

Avram Grumer, That is an interesting set of Star Trek titles.// Three Raccoons in a Fast Food Dumpster. Really?// Like my comment to Lisa, my old man's brain can't keep up with 21st century jargon. Thank you. Teel Deer?//Yes, to hell with the kings foot. Go metric.

Brian Rogers, a character named Lua? One of the first set of Hawai`ian words I teach visitors is Luau and Lua. A Luau is a party or family gathering where an emu is dug and various food stuffs, usually a whole pig, are roasted. A Lua is an out-house.

Brian Misiaszek, losing a loved pet always hurts. In Hawai`i we've lost two loved cats.//For Habana Horror, you have outdone yourself. If I had a regular game group, I would consider running it as a campaign. My son keeps talking about tools where you can set up a virtual table top.

Erica Frank, Wanderhome seems to be an unusual setting. Bureaucrocs ?
snicker.

Joshua Kronengold, taking it easy for a while may be the best job hunting activity.// I don't think I've ever played a game that was intentionally political. For the band members I play music with during a break, it's one rant after another.// OSRIC ?// HOA ?

Plankwell Campaign, As usual I read the entire writeup and enjoyed it.// Maybe you meant Document on Network Economics.
<http://johnntredden.com/docs/GlobalInternetValueAndWorkCandidate.pdf>

Jargon Zen

By honors and titles
no true one is elated.
To realize that which we are,
for this we were created.

Humor

My dad told me this one when I was a kid...

You know how to catch a polar bear?
First you dig a big hole.
Then you fill the hole with ashes.
Then carefully you place green peas all around the hole.
So when the polar bears takes a pea, you kick him in the ash hole.

-and-

Siri, open the pod bay doors!
I'm sorry Dave, I can't do that.

An Unlooked For Zine #7

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NATTER

We have a tentative cast for the larp Ghost Fu, which we'll run at Intercon X. We need to review and tweak the character sheets, but it's easier to do that now that we have an idea of who's playing whom.

We've finished *Pillars of Sand*, a campaign we were playtesting for *Swords of the Serpentine*, and decided to finish even after the playtest period ended. This was a lot of fun. I can't do write ups for it as it will be a while before it's finalized and published.

I've done a Secret Santa Character Sheet, if a bit late. This is a thing a group of friends started in 2021, and I've made all of the sheets I've done for an imaginary Star Wars larp set during the Clone Wars, using Fate Accelerated. After the first year or so, Josh joined in the fun, and we're reaching a number of sheets where we should decide what the premise of the larp is (beyond "random PCs doing shenanigans during the Clone Wars") and start curating things more carefully.

Double vs Single Column

I think the reason I prefer double is that I can make double columns bigger and easier to read on my screen of choice, but it's hard to make a single column smaller without making it harder to read or to make it larger without having it run off the screen, which may also be the case if one keeps it at its default size.

Recent Reading

The Count of Monte Cristo continues to be delightful. I've read through chapter 42, and while some folks in the read along thread think the disguises are "Shakespearean" and hilarious, I think they make sense thus far. You see a guy dressed as a priest who says the sort of things priests say. You're not likely to ask yourself, "Is this really a priest?"

The thing I'm finding hilarious is NO ONE can keep from reacting. Hide a reaction, sure, but not have it? Nope.

Josh: Not even the count?

Me: ESPECIALLY not the count!

I mentioned this to Bryant Durrell (who graced the pages of *Alarums & Excursions* for a time) who said that this is a lesson for gaming as well and that he gets "so much mileage as a player at the table from reacting to what other players do".

Recent Watching

Only Murders in the Building, Season 5: This show is made for folks like me and Josh. This season even more so, as it builds on the previous four and if they don't have another season, it's a lovely bow or delicious icing or whatever metaphor you like. They've certainly set up for a 6th season, and I am intrigued both by the set up and to see where the show as a whole goes from here.

Your Forma: Anime based on a light novel. The anime covers volumes 2-4 of the light novel, making this feel like we've come in during the second season, even though it is the first and thus far only season. I'm not sure why they skipped the first light novel.

COMMENTS ON EVER AND ANON ISSUE #7

MATT STEVENS: re Whale Whores: Flubbed rolls can lead to a lot of fun (for the players, if not the PCs). Also, one thing that may encapsulate current indie gaming, for better and worse, is that if you told that story in a room of indie gamers, odds are that at least one would decide that their next game had to be about Whale Whores. This, in turn, might inspire a Whale Whores game design jam on itch.io.

re diagram: I love this kind of thing. Even for non-heist games, I love it when scenario authors include flow charts for the scenario. Heck, the diagrams in *Fiasco* and *Streets of Jade*, for game flow and challenges respectively, are also useful. re "better as a story" vs "what the player wants": Again, there's a wide variety of story games, ranging from "everyone works out what they want" to "use a randomizer because even story games are allowed to do that" to "pay for narrative privileges" plus some options I'm failing to think of.

re Heist games: I'm not sure how much realism I want in any given game, but for what you're describing, I think the *Leverage* rpg might do the trick. It is, of course, tricky to buy, iirc, because it was licensed, and

Margaret Weis decided not to renew the license. But I can show you my copy at some point. *Blade in the Dark* and other Forged in the Dark games likely also fit that groove. *Fiasco*, IMO, does not, despite it being listed here: <https://startplaying.games/blog/posts/8-best-heist-rpgs-oceans-11-hacking-dark-one-shot>

re starship repair rules: Again, there's only so much realism I want. Fr'ex, if I'm playing a game about street racers, I want car repair/maintenance/modification to feel like *The Fast and the Furious* franchise, not like a day or even a few hours of actual car repair. I don't play a *Star Trek* game to pay more attention to starship repair than "Okay, your engine coil blew, so you need dilithium, and the nearest source is on the planet below, and the Klingons are currently trying to convince its government to ally with them." I.e., the PCs need to get the thing they need, and then the engineer plugs it in and it works. Okay, maybe the engineer needs X rounds, and the PCs need to buy that time as the Klingon ship fires on them. Beyond that, I don't want to have to deal with starship repair. If it's more *Cowboy Bebop* or *Firefly*, I want "You need X moneys to get the thing to fix the ship, and if you take this job, you'll get it."

re Avram Grumer re teen years: I think that, while the movies lied, there's also a continuum. When I ran the Strange School PBEM, Chris Murray informed me that a teenaged boy will say anything, tell any lie, do just about anything for even a chance of getting laid. This came as a surprise to both Joshua Kronengold and Myles Corcoran, despite all three players having been teenaged boys at some point. re Sneezy: Yes, he survived.

re Joshua Kronengold: *giggle* at your assessment of 1st ed *7th Sea*. re dice vs roleplay for negotiation scenes: Ah, the eternal dialogue! Roleplay because it's talk and can be more diagetic or dice because not everyone is as smooth talking as their PC might be?

CLARK TIMMINS: re creating a prehistory: While, obviously, this is what GMs often do, it's also akin to a solo game of *Microscope* or any of a number of related games that focus on creating a history or timeline that can then be used with a different system completely.

PATRICK RILEY: re Anan: If I were gming and hadn't also forgotten Anan could fly, I'd remind the player. Hm, that reminds me of the time my PC did something similar, though with less dire consequences. You'd actually use the *NightLife* system? Or just the setting? Either way, as someone who used bits of the system and some of the setting, I am intrigued.

re Procedure in RPGs: In the one game of *Diplomacy* I ever played (it was by email), I was far more interested in roleplaying than in the boardgame. This meant I did

rather badly in the game. But the question of when one "cuts in" to a procedural part of an rpg to do roleplaying is one I've bumped into. I remember this coming up in the early days of indie rpgs. And it's definitely something I've bumped into with some Forged in the Dark games.

That said, I've definitely had some rpg combat where roleplaying happened, including some *D&D*. In Stephen Tihor's Strixhaven game, this might be something small, like Ivo (my PC) moving to protect Mac (a PC who is 9 years old, although also recalls several past lives, something I don't think Ivo realizes) or the student body in general. In one *Blue Rose* game, it meant fighting as defensively as possible and trying to break the opponent out of some kind of ensorcellment. In some ways, it was harder to do roleplay in that game, which used AGE and was far more combat oriented than I'd expected of the genre it was trying to emulate. Similarly, I found *Ryutama* more interested in simulationist details of travel than in actual roleplay, though again, I'm basing this on a single (online) convention game.

re Adventurers Guild: Continued sympathy for the scheduling issues. re cranking up the pressure by calling for a roll earlier than you technically should have: It may get the players to remember to have their PCs pack enough food and water for such trips in the future, though I agree with you that handwaving is the way to go. What attacked them at the "oasis"?

re me: I'd figured out how many of my pages would turn into 16 pages. It's a smaller number for *E&A* because I'm using a more different font rather than one Lee chose. But also, *A&E* was capped at 150 pages, and *E&A* has now broken 200. re the *Trail of Cthulhu* anecdote: Oh yes, that is golden. When a process-oriented game that pushes roleplay works for me, it's probably because:

- The designer knows precisely what to push and why
- The group I'm with knows how to roleplay and how to ignore the parts of the process that feel artificial
- Both—e.g., *Good Society* has Resolve tokens that, IMO, work well, but are also easily ignored when folks don't need them

Of course, the fact that I've been playing such games probably makes it easier for me to find a sweet spot. That said, if it weren't already working for me, I wouldn't have kept playing these games.

ROGER BW: Lee and Barry celebrate Sir Isaac Newton's Birthday, iirc, with fig newtons. re Day After Ragnarok: I'm sorry your character didn't get to wrestle a sea monster. re *Mission Impossible*: That could absolutely work. *giggle* at the line about the journalist getting his face slammed into doors and

Mzcslavcz doubting others can, in fact, call him by his name. re me re worst layout decision: Oof! My sympathy to the author!

I'm glad you're finding my advice useful. re the Resistance Table: Yes, I also internalized it as a formula. re Yog-Sothoth.com: Alas, Paul Maclean is shutting it down after 28 years. It's a decision that makes sense, but also marks the end of an era. re psychic hedgehogs: I love that image.

re pushing talking bits to mechanics: On the one hand, yes, I want to do actual talking and roleplay. On the other, we're all familiar with the issue of a player with a character better at certain types of smooth talking than they are, and such cases are precisely why the mechanics exist. Robin Laws, of course, is trying to solve a different problem: He wants to model the reality he sees (likely accurately) of people granting petitions roughly half the time when gamers tend to consider doing this. Losing and avoid it as much as possible. Having overheard a conversation where the GM and player in a *7th Sea* game kept trying to get the last word (GM playing the father of the player's PC at the time), I think Robin is trying to address a genuine problem here.

In practice, however, I'm not aware of anyone currently playing *DramaSystem*, and would have trouble getting a game of it together, in part because the recommended number of players is 5-8, and in part because *DramaSystem's* particular solution doesn't seem to click. The One-2-One version, *Page Turners*, may work better. Josh and I had a blast playtesting the sf setting for it. *DramaSystem* may have been a bit ahead of its time, and I'd not be surprised to learn it was an inspiration for *Good Society*.

re Brian Rogers: Looking at it as "there shouldn't only be a single narrative to the world" rather than "the PCs shouldn't be the most important people in the world" works better, yes. I do have the caveat that not all game worlds are especially fleshed out, and that's sometimes all right.

re Avram Grumer re not wanting to play *Monsterhearts* with strangers: This is very reasonable. I'm not sure why I don't mind doing that. Perhaps it's because I do it at conventions, which means it's a one shot. But I've also had good luck with such games, and I think most of the time, I'm playing with people I've played with before, so even though it's not my home group, they're usually not strangers. re Joshua Kronengold: I'm not sure Deep Ones are About the same thing in *Delta Green*, but it's at least an adjacent thing.

MYLES CORCORAN: re barium drink: I've found it varies. The first time I had this, it was okay, and got slowly progressively harder to drink. The second time, it

was delicious, the best thing I'd had all day. In both cases, I had a kidney stone, which may or may not be related to the taste. I think it depends on how/whether it's flavored with something.

re *Kriegsmesser*: Why did Simon back down when Udo intervened? Was this mechanics (like, a roll for it) or pure narrative considerations (like Udo seems priestly)? I quite understand the necessity of returning the horses. I love the idea of "death star plans" carved into a printing block. re *Traveller* solo game: Did everyone get blown up?

re columns: I find it easier to read double columns because of how things magnify when I tell them to. I definitely agree that longer isn't necessarily better and that I don't want the page limit going over 16 per zine. re Michael Cule: Oh yes, Valente's *Refrigerator Monologues* are great. re Brian Misiasek re why Chaosium is "so restrictive": This is something Peter Hildreth might be able to opine informedly on.

re me: Nod. Comments over write ups. re your panic attack: Reminds me of the time I had a breast biopsy. It went well, despite my going from calm to freaking out (mostly by saying, repeatedly, "I don't like this!"). The folks doing it a) assured me I was doing fine and there was no need to apologize, b) would have stopped if I'd told them to, but I knew that would not be optimal, and c) explained afterwards that it was a vasovagal response, even though I never lost consciousness. I also remember a time when Josh put the cloth we were using as a canopy back in place after we'd washed it. I went from fine to flat out panic when he first put it on to suddenly being calm again when it shifted into the position we'd previously had it in.

re *Everway*: I need to read the new edition all the way through as well. re the lion as Another Bloody Allegory: No doubt. But hey, in Camelot, that's how things are. re Jim Vassilakos re Jennell Jaquays: If I understand correctly, she did have a change of heart and hoped to revise and rerelease the Central Casting books.

PATRICK ZOCH: Your son doesn't seem as reckless as Leeroy Jenkins, just bold, and not always lucky. Kudos for his main concern being about continuing to play. re Saltmarsh's oddly high population: Maybe they produce garum? re Jim Vassilakos re bosses pestering you for work earlier than the deadline to ensure it would meet the deadline: I wonder if their own bosses were pressuring them.

JOHN REDDEN: re me: No. Commenting in every other zine guarantees I'll fall further and further behind, and the end result will either be I do exclusively zines that have no comments, or, more likely, drop out of the apa. re emotional play examples: You're welcome. re Lee's most recent chocolate adventure game: It wasn't

my favorite either. re Mouse Guard larp: I do hope no actual lions come to play. re Avram Grumer: "deets" = "details".

re Erica Frank: "MDZS" is an acronym for "Mo Dao Zu Shi", a Chinese novel originally published online. The usual translation of the title is *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*. The author is known as Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, whose name is often also turned into an acronym, "MXTX". re Jim Eckman: RAH = Robert A. Heinlein. AN = Andre Norton. If "ITL" is actually "IRL", it means "In real life".

PEDRO PANHOCA DA SILVA AND CAMILLA LOURENCO PANHOCA: *Sleeping Beauties and Some Awake* sounds delightful! Disney diverges from the traditional set up by having the three fairies raise the princess far from the castle (and until Josh and I saw the movie *Maleficent*, we wondered how the heck the princess survived to prick her finger, given how incompetent the fairies were at raising a child). re 33 pigs: Ah! Thanks for the clarification.

MICHAEL CULE: I'm intrigued by the background teaser information. re stabby meds and Stabcon: Your doctor's advice seems reasonable. I hope the convention was good and the stabby meds are working well for you. re Glamour: It's true that the GM sees things from a different angle. I'm not sure praying would have occurred to me, but in a Glorantha setting, it might.

re players who assume things aren't going to work: One of the GMs in the rotating *D&D* online games we play in noted that players sometimes assumed that a low roll always meant a miss, and he'd rather hear "I got X" than "Obviously, what I got isn't enough", as he then has to find out what they did get, because sometimes, it actually is enough.

re igtheme: Those are both great examples of cool stuff. re Clark Timmons re quillipoth: Oh -- you're using a variant spelling for "Qlippoth", aren't you? That makes so much sense! re Myles Corcoran: I'm used to "Human Resources", though I totally see why one would hate the term. I agree that "People & Culture" isn't better in this context, but I don't care for "Personnel" either. It's vague for my taste. Perhaps I am wrong -- Brian Rogers might have more informed thoughts on this than I do.

re Columbo-type rpg: Nathan Paoletta came up with this, for two players. It's called *One More Thing*. I have it, but haven't yet tried it. Cf <https://www.ndpdesign.com/>. re Attronarch: I put you on to oTranscribe? This is possible, though I'd have been passing on someone else's recommendation, as I've not had opportunity to use it myself. re Gabriel Roark: I find your zines extremely readable and easy on

my eyes. re me re theoretical Well of Souls rpg: Good points.

re perception vs different skills for different senses: I think that the reason BRPS does it the second way is because that's how BRPS started out doing it, and this may have been because it was a simulationist system, and someone decided that was how best to simulate things. That's not really a full answer to "why?" but it may be good enough. Certainly, there's a large amount of "X game has always done it Y way" and "RPGs at that time did it that way, so other rpgs at that time followed suit." re Roger BW re alignment languages and why *D&D* hasn't given up on the idea: See the rest of this paragraph.

re Joshua Kronengold re *Everway*: It does give GMs more to work with than *Amber*, possibly because it came after, possibly because Jonathan Tweet's design goals were different than Erick Wujcik's in ways not limited to, but including, the fact that *Everway* is not based on someone else's IP.

JIM ECKMAN: I don't know *Bushido* and won't say you're wrong, but it's odd to call something OSR when it predates OSR by decades. Initiative doesn't change between rounds or combats, I gather? re me re "Kipled": It's me being silly by extending an old joke:

Do you like Kipling?
I don't know -- I've never Kipled!

Hence, the Kipling reference you made meant you had Kipled. re old TSR traditions: Apparently, these pass to their non-TSR heirs.

DYLAN CAPEL: *Tower Dungeon* sounds intriguing, though I'm not sure I'd have the patience to read it all. re 52 in 25: I think 42 is a pretty good try. What do you think of your "repeat offenders"? Presumably, you liked them enough to play them more than once.

re *Vaeser*: I've still not read any of the Vaesen material, though skimming some of the adventures, it seems like the pattern is to set up a situation, discuss options for resolving it, and provide any necessary stats or mechanics -- and stop there, rather than mandating a set order of tackling things, mandating precisely how NPCs will react, or having one and only one definitive solution. These are things that many adventures, regardless of system, would benefit from. It's the sort of thing I'd like to see more often.

re Sanity as Inventory: The concept of overwriting components of one's character sheet because of death-spiral and other mechanics has come up, and I might like to play more with that. Fr'ex:

- In *Fate of Cthulhu*, Aspects can become Corrupted. When this happens to an Aspect, the player

rewrites and redefines it -- and gets a new Corruption Stunt, which is powerful and useful, and if one uses it, one is likely to rapidly gain more Corruption and repeat the cycle at a faster pace.

- Drives and Pillars of Sanity in *Trail of Cthulhu* are, to some degree, mental armor, and as they get whittled away, the character should definitely change, mentally and emotionally as well as mechanically.
- Cortex games allow a player to Challenge some statements attached to game mechanics. After this happens and is resolved, the player generally has to rewrite the statement that was Challenged. Aviatrix combined this with some Trail of Cthulhu mechanics, and it worked very well.
- In *Memento Mori*, the PCs are dying of plague. They have powerful supernatural abilities, but using them increases the supernatural corruption in their blood. Gradually, the players have to overwrite parts of their character sheet, including their character's name. Using that as an example, the core book explains that:
 - The player gives the PC a name and an epithet: Bredel the Outcast.
 - The first time the name is corrupted, the epithet is overwritten. The PC is now Bredel the Black Pariah.
 - This means that "Bredel the Outcast" no longer exists. The character is more powerful now. I'm sure that's fine.
 - The second time the name is corrupted, the player erases the name, leaving only the new epithet.
 - This means that "Bredel the Black Pariah" is now "The Black Pariah" and nothing else.
 - The character has *lost* their old identity. Any NPC who knew them before this happened will have a hard time remembering the existence of the person once known as "Bredel the Outcast" or even "Bredel the Black Pariah".
- 7th Edition *Call of Cthulhu* adds background items to the character sheet, often in the form of statements. One of these can be used to attempt to increase one's Sanity between sessions, and the odds are usually good that this will succeed. However, if it does not, the statement must be changed. When I played in the Harlem Unbound campaign, my PC William's failed rolls in this area led to a series of statements that formed a sort of mental/emotional story arc for him. (This worked for my PC in Aviatrix's Cortex/Trail mechanical mashup.)

re me: *Impossible Landscapes* is probably fun to play (in the sense that any surreal horror game is fun, possibly "type 2" fun, i.e., fun in retrospect). *God's Teeth* is not something to undertake lightly, either as a

GM or as a player because of the subject matter. If you are invited to play it, make sure the GM is ready and willing to back off as needed; neither I nor the authors hold with traumatizing players (as opposed to PCs). (Scaring players is a different matter, and while it should still be handled carefully, it is less fraught.)

GABRIEL ROARK: I'm glad you're recovered and enjoying ice skating with Celeste. re me: You're quite welcome. re igtheme: That's a fun way to use a "broken" ability.

LIMLI: Physical exhaustion requires a save vs poison? Is this an OSE thing? I'd have expected the equivalent of a generic CON save. I like the Broadwing map. It's clean and uncluttered and doesn't do things with shade and color that make it hard to read.

PAUL HOLMAN: Oof, sympathy on the back pain! re igtheme: Wait, I'm a little confused. Your PCs sold demon-destroying dirt to another PC, but your PCs weren't running the scam. Or were they? Did the other PC kill your PCs? re Myles Corcoran: It's a hyphen that joins words, an en-dash that joins numbers, and an em-dash that joins clauses.

AVRAM GRUMER: re Typst: I made the same incorrect assumption. re normalman and *Masks*: If you play *Masks* with another GM, I suspect it will feel very different, although that is a sidepoint to the idea about sexual energy being channeled into fights. re names of games: You're using acronyms already (GURPS and, arguably, d20). When I refer to some of the other system frameworks you mentioned, I often use PbtA (Powered by the Apocalypse) and FitD (Forged in the Dark), although I do use "Carved from Brindlewood" because I like the conceit. Belonging Outside Belonging is trickier because BoB is a bit too ambiguous.

re Monsterhearts mechanics: I'm trying to remember what Aviatrix once said to me about *Monsterhearts* resisting resolution. I've pinged her to see if she remembers. "Goal-based" may be correct, though; certainly, it seems like a fancier way of saying "what's at stake". Oooh, seating drama! *Miraculous Ladybug* had some of that.

re missing out on a lot of the fun because you had Steffan go to the mountains: I made a similar error in a convention one-shot *Monsterhearts* game, having my Infernal go ask his Dark Patron for permission to go to the school dance while all the other PCs went to the soda shop. re how Steffan "should have" pushed Drake around: I don't know. The GM was going hard for stuff immediately rather than ramping up, and that can make some of us feel backed into a corner OOC, as we wonder what on earth we should do to get a chance to play our character in some way resembling what we'd envisioned. Also, having Steffan do his level best to

avoid losing control makes the inevitable loss of control hit harder, no pun intended. I do like "Blue holds my leash" as a condition! The gun going off is exactly the sort of mess that fits *Monsterhearts*.

re Briar's complaint that the group hasn't "even started engaging with her plot": My snarky side says, "Er, did you even give them a chance to do so?" The GM hit the group with the double whammy of "everyone's gonna get searched by the cop" and "oh by the way, you're also losing control of yourself". If I'm about to wolf out, dealing with that, not looking into the why of it, is going to become my top priority. And then, if I want to lean into the roleplay, rather than go "Ah, I must go into Investigation mode" -- you know, leaning into the roleplay because this is *Monsterhearts*, not a GUMSHOE game -- things will get chaotic and messy, and as you note, that's "a sign of a good session".

Monsterhearts isn't, IMO, a game where the GM should be focused on a countdown to imposing their plot consequences on the PCs. Instead, they should look at what the PCs are doing and play to that. This isn't to say that the GM shouldn't have a plot or three in their back pocket; players can go passive unexpectedly. Now, going by what I read, it sounds like the players are all enjoying the game. It's just that "If you don't engage with my plot, it will keep on plotting" risks edging into the kind of *Monsterhearts* game I wrote up years ago, in *Alarums & Excursions*, where the GM had a Definite Plot with a Specific Resolution in mind. (I've not put that write up on the wiki I use, but if you want to read it, I can arrange that.) I'm mostly used to convention one-shots which tend to start slow and, mostly because of the choices the players make, become utterly chaotic by the end. Often, the GM just gives a small push via here and there.

re playlists: I find that music during rpgs is more of a distraction for me than an enhancement, but obviously, mileage varies. re last name change in the 2nd session: I've had games like that, both as a GM and as a player. re framing openings: It's a good follow up to the 1st session. And I do remember Aviatrix telling me that one of her tactics as a GM is to frame scenes aggressively. re who fired the gun: I think there's some test for powder or something that can be done to determine that, but a) I'm not sure and b) I don't know if that is a thing in the game world. Oooh, "Town Disappointment" is another good condition. I love Laeli's horrible relationship advice. It's very *Monsterhearts* and very Mortal.

Blink at the Volatile roll for rat-kicking. I'm used to more riding on a roll than that, but then, I don't know what would have happened on a mixed success or a failure. re reading the entrails: Yup, I figured that was a Gaze in the Abyss roll. And yep, among other things, having Steffan eat the rabbit on a failure makes sense.

re the risk of it being February before you get to the party: This is why Briar hard framed the cold opening.

re *Scum and Villainy*: I know that Forged in the Dark games are built around "eliminating the need for detailed planning", but I am not seeing this actually happening. I'm seeing is the system refusing to give players the kind of information it would be reasonable to ask for as PCs, and this means that when I dither, it's not "old habits die hard". It's me going "WTF? Everyone takes jobs without knowing what they are?" We're not talking "there will be things you don't know until you're in mid-job". That's fine. That's *Cowboy Bebop*, *Firefly*, and every show like it. Heck, that's *Leverage*. We're talking "We aren't even going to tell you what we want you to do until you agree to do it."

Maybe it's peculiar to *Scum and Villainy*. It isn't how the *Blades in the Dark* game Gareth ran for me, Josh, and a two of his friends went, which covered two jobs:

- The first was folks in the neighborhood were going missing, and as our gang was a cult of investigators, they decided to investigate. Sure, we didn't know what we'd find -- but we knew what we were looking for before we took the job!
- The second was the cult's patron saying, "This isn't an official request, let alone a demand, but if you happen to acquire this particular book, of which there's probably a copy in thus and such a place, I'll pay well for that." I think we had a couple of other options with similar amounts of information.

I'm going to have to read some of *Scum and Villainy*, I suspect, at least, if I'm to figure out if the system really does say that the PCs don't even know what they're being hired for until they accept the job, and just how to field requests for obvious information. And at some point, I should read *Blades in the Dark* itself. I see from your write up that the group got enough information to make semi-informed choices that could get them into enough trouble. While I wouldn't be surprised if *Blades* itself is a better game than *Scum and Villainy*, I'd have to actually read them both first. For *Blades* itself. Aviatrix noted that being level 0 sucks because one only gets 2 Downtime actions and must use them both for healing, iirc.

re me: I want my zines readable, but yeah, I can experiment. Note that I am not downloading fonts. (I've done so in the past, not from Google itself, for handwriting fonts for handouts in games.) re Harmony and Kenn: True. re Roger Bell West re using a map to figure out who's close enough to talk to each other in a dance: This is cool. It's a thing *Monsterhearts* does, to some extent, with the homeroom map. It's a thing I'd absolutely need to do with players who try to have their characters be everywhere at once, involved in every conversation simultaneously. Probably I'd go with Fate's concept of zones rather than a strict hex map. re Elf: I

don't think anyone's come up with a Belonging Outside Belonging game about the Church of the Subgenius, but obviously, I don't know everything that's out there.

BRIAN ROGERS: Sympathy on the mold. re Stoppard doing the last rewrite on *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*: I don't recall anything about it that strikes me as Stoppardian -- what did you catch? How was *Are the Bennett Girls OK*?

re write up: It's possible I used to own that issue of *Dragon*, but if so, I clearly don't remember it well. re me re D3 and Q1 modules: Ah, gotcha. It's been a long time since I read any of them, and then, I basically read them in backwards order. re Patrick Riley re players forgetting what they wrote about what their PCs would do if they had no inhibitions: With 20-20 hindsight, I'd suggest reminding them about this before running that plot, maybe printing out what they said and giving it back to them to peruse. Possibly, doing this at the end of the previous session or between sessions with a "let me know by X time if this has changed and how"?

re Dr. Hormone: That's a whole new level of WTF. I doubt *V&V* will ever be my system of choice, but I do like your broad levels of weaponry. re Weakness Detection: Ah, the Robert Downey Jr Sherlock Holmes shtick.

BRIAN MISIASZEK: I am so sorry about Sadie. re Mazorra: If you do publish this in full, you'll want to double check maps vs text to make sure everything's consistent. It's disconcerting to look for a letter or number assigned to an area on a map only to find that the map doesn't actually use those identifiers. (Also, you may want me or someone else to proofread for typos and missing words and the like.) re Lic. Israel Castellanos: Annoyingly, his HP should be 10, not 11. Prior to 7th edition, the formula for HP was (CON + SIZ)/2 rounded *up*. 7th edition is (CON + SIZ)/10 rounded *down*. The division's fine, but the change from rounding up to rounding down confuses everyone.

re the gun trap: I'm not sure that most players would figure out that not only did Vilela set it up to begin with, but that he essentially regularly sets and unsets it in his sleep. I might wind up having a backup method for them to figure out that someone else reset it, which is where Gumshoe's strengths come in handy.

re spending Luck if one triggers the trap: Yes. This is, perhaps, one of the better ways to spend Luck. Logically, this trap is set up that way, and it's quite likely to catch a PC unawares. It's the sort of thing that, narratively and genre-convention-wise, would be a near miss in a book or show or other similar media. Using Luck points makes it less likely a PC is killed off. I know all the arguments for letting the PC be killed off if that's

how the dice roll, and that's fine for other people's games. For mine, I'd rather avoid it because it's not very satisfying on a game level, at least, not for me and most of the folks I regularly game with, and while I could see allowing the chance of PC death if a player needed to leave early or to drop from the game, it also is a tone shift that one might not want. Note that you're using 7th edition, so you probably don't want DEX x 2 for a flinch back. You probably want Dodge, which is either at least pre-7th edition DEX x 2 or at least 7th edition DEX/2; both options give you the odds you're looking for.

re me: Thanks for the clarification of the medical terminology. re Patrick Riley re the opening train sequence: It's an interesting question. I think you should have the PCs meet as they board the train or while they're on the train, since you do want them bonding or at least getting to know each other. The combat/trauma is trickier, as you want to balance a few elements, including, but not limited to:

- The need to have certain things happen so your premise sticks vs the need to allow players agency. You're pretty open-ended here. The PCs can make a difference, and you'll want to explain what that difference means, mechanically. The PCs can even choose not to act. They just can't prevent the Weird Stuff from happening.
- The potential usefulness of a dangerous situation early on vs damaging the PCs, possibly quite severely, before they've even arrived, given that the healing rules for *Call of Cthulhu* are not particularly generous. This is something I've discussed in certain projects (reviews, editing, playtesting, and so on) (I'm going to be broad and vague):
 - The first combat encounter in an entire campaign, a purely mundane one, being potentially lethal. Is that realistic? Absolutely! But it's not, IMO, what the campaign necessarily needs, so we added ways to make it less lethal, at GM option, including "For this one only, just don't have the PCs die." I'm fine if every GM who ever runs the campaign decides they want to let the dice fall where they may and allow PC death. What I want to avoid is GMs feeling that they *must* allow it because that's what the rules and scenario say.
 - Combats that seem clearly intended as "speed bumps", but with foes whose stats do not reflect that. (Clearly not the case here.)
 - Cases where the author does not seem to realize that they've set up a potential or almost certain TPK (I've seen this at least twice in books I've reviewed).

- Cases where the specific combat situation isn't too harsh per se, but placed such that it wears the PCs down in terms of resources (hit points, skill pool points, endurance, whatever) so that when they get to the "cool" stuff -- the climax of the scenario or the more important combats - they won't have had opportunity to rest and heal, making what should be an interesting combat fall into "Oh -- we all just suck now" territory. E.g., situations where PCs are going to get somewhat battered and then have no chance to heal before hitting a sequence of events that are likely to wear them down, with no chance to catch their breath, and a real risk of not making it to the Good Parts of the scenario, or of getting there too worn down to be able to do anything. It's a very fine line between the PCs likely not having a chance and the PCs facing a challenging situation, and gauging that line is tricky.

re John Redden: So much cool material planned! You really could do this as a Miskatonic Repository book, or possibly itch.io (I don't know whether Chaosium does itch). Alternatively, you could do it as system free or with a different system (*Trail of Cthulhu* or *Esoterrorists* or *Fear Itself* for GUMSHOE, *Cthulhu Dark*, *Cthulhu Eternal*, *Delta Green*, any of a number I'm forgetting) and put it on itch.io or somewhere else if you want to deal with the fiddly details of it all (system swapping or removing system info, figuring out what licenses apply, how various platforms work, and so on). I don't know that it's a thing you want to do, of course, but it's certainly a thing you could do. re me re stat block error: You're quite welcome. This is in my wheelhouse.

ERICA FRANK: Sounds like *Wanderhome* and *Beneath Pirate Flags* are off to a reasonably good start. The locations you discuss are all in Glitch? The descriptions sound a bit like what I see in some PbtA games, such as *Monster of the Week*.

re igtheme: I see what you mean about the assumption that the person talking about what players have done is the GM, though I don't think that was how I answered the question. *Giggle* at the idea of feeding prisoners coffee to make them talk.

re me re files for Fate-ified *D&D* and *Shadowrun*: Many thanks! re playbooks: I think *Blades in the Dark* is balanced for only 1 of any given playbook being in play, but definitely don't take my word on that. re Avram Grumer re nothing online about how various GMless games play: See if you can find playthroughs. I know there are some for games like *Good Society* and its

various hacks, and I suspect at least some Belonging Outside Belonging games have been streamed.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: re igtheme: I think you're conflating 2 incidents. One was a PC luring the villain into a room rigged to explode. That's the villain that did eventually reincarnate. The other was an NPC shooting a different villain into space. This was one of a few villains who were Lovecraftian deities incarnated into humans, and I was allowing this to happen offstage because the PCs were dealing with many things, including other incarnated deities. The Outer God in question wasn't itself destroyed, just the human avatar, so I see why you are conflating the two, especially as I asked Theodore Miller about the math involved.

re me: *Swords of the Serpentine* also uses Drives to give players a way to get a +1 on a die when they're *this* close to succeeding. re the *Feng Shui* game: Who played the Abomination and the Transformed Cop? re Fast Talk: Yes. That's my feeling on how to use the skill. re *Lord of Mysteries*: Possibly because of the anime, the first volume of the series is now available for purchase, in English translation, as well. Or rather, *The Clown* is partially translated. Parts I and II are out, with Part III on the way. As far as I can tell, the 9 full volumes (of which the entire *The Clown* is the first one) start long and get longer, and then the last 2-3 get a lot shorter.

re *Phoenix Dawn Command*: I'm not sure the lack of balance between the Phoenix types is accidental. The GM was able to contact the author to ask about the Shrouded, and the author told him that, nope, not a mistake, the Shrouded really was intended to be that unbalanced. The GM, correctly, I think, decided to tweak the Shrouded for his campaign, given that in the campaign where he didn't do that, the Shrouded pretty much soloed all the fights (and the player, iirc, agreed that this shouldn't be something their PC could do).

re Brian Rogers re *Smallville*: I think Distinctions started at D6, but that's not the main point you're making. re Roger BW re generally only pointing out rules errors if they matter *and* doing so will be appreciated by the GM: Yes, that is how you operate, so long as:

- The GM is acting in good faith. I can think of one specific time that was not the case, and that was when all four of us players revolted.
- It matters enough that, even presuming good faith on the part of the GM, it's a problem if the error isn't corrected. The GM may or may not appreciate you pointing the error out at the time, but it's important that you do. I know you've done this, correctly, a few times over the years when I was gming.

Yes, I am including matching expectations, table assumptions, and spoken and unspoken promises here.

If I've had my NPC say something false and you have reason to believe that NPC wouldn't lie, asking me about that is correct. Sam Kopel did that at least once, and he was correct: I had forgotten I'd established something and hadn't meant to have the NPC contradict it.

re hyper-specialized games: Are you saying that hyper-specialized games are never "full roleplaying games"? I don't think that is correct. How are you defining "full roleplaying game"? My definition includes games such as:

- *Bluebeard's Bride* -- and other specialized games like *Monsterhearts* (you can break it out of a high school setting to some degree, but the playbooks and their arcs very much limit the scope of a campaign)
- *Montseigneur 1244* and variants, such as *Red Carnations on a Black Grave* and *Mars 244* (I think that was the name), or *Witch: The Road to Lindisfarne*, where there are almost no mechanics, and the ones that do exist mandate the arc of the game
- *The Mountain Witch*, which is always about a group of ronin going to fight the eponymous Mountain Witch
- *The World's Problems*, which is basically a Sandbaggers rpg

All of these limit a group's play, I think more than *D&D* does, and they're not frameworks the way *D&D* or *GURPS* or *Fate* or *GUMSHOE* are. Yet, when I sign up for rpgs at a convention, all of the ones in the list above are games I'd pick over *D&D* nearly every time, and one reason I'd give for this is that they allow for roleplay in ways *D&D* doesn't, even given their extremely narrow -- far narrower than *D&D*'s -- focus.

JIM VASSILAKOS: re spaceship repair detail: I wasn't pretending to speak for anyone other than myself. There are many kinds of realism I don't want to deal with in detail in an rpg.

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: re me: In some ways, a work that is frustrating enough you can't stop talking/thinking about it for a while is useful. I've been in a couple of larps like that. re Roger BW re "how much of a PC's skills/characteristics are "visible": This was something that came up the first time I ran the full *Eternal Lies* campaign. One of the other players wanted to know what Josh's character's abilities were, so they took the sheet, looked it over, and said, "Ah! You're an infiltrations expert!" Josh was a bit annoyed, iirc, as he didn't necessarily want that being known before he had a chance to have the character actually do infiltrating. Since then, we've moved to pushing for group character creation so that everyone's on the same page, and that does mean that even if the characters

don't know each other's abilities, the players probably do.

IGTHEME FOR Issue #7 – December 21st: The dumbest/silliest/craziest things the players ever did: I've remembered some.

In a larp, I forgot my PC could turn invisible. Would have really helped me retrieve some items for an important PC who was dangling a job several of us wanted.

In Ian Harac's *Star Wars* game, my character, hired for an assassination, hesitated at the door when she and another PC (Avram's) had the drop on the target, and she asked him, "Guns or grenades?" Naturally, the target took the opportunity to shoot.

The same PC later shot someone because the other PC (yup, still Avram's) told her to "take care of" that person, and she incorrectly assumed that meant "kill". I'm still surprised and impressed that the GM resisted the urge to throw consequences at my PC for this.

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

Stuff I got more or less by running games:

- Talk to your players and listen to them.
- Remember you are also a player.
- Cut yourself some slack, but also, own your mistakes.
- Do not make players roll to Find Plot!
- If you don't want the PCs to fail at something, don't call for a roll for it.
- The players have a different perspective from you.
 - This means that stuff you find obvious may be very opaque to them.
 - It also means that stuff you think is cool and wonderful may strike them as boring (e.g., a twist they can see coming a mile away) or terrible (e.g., you may think it's GREAT to nerf a PC's powers or take away their stuff, but unless you've checked with your players, it's likely they'll disagree).
- Generally, players and PCs should have agency. Not all railroading is bad, and folks will generally grant premise, but if you're having the PCs being captured and stripped of their resources No Matter What because the plot simply must happen that way, the players may get irritated. (I say "may" because context matters. If I'm playing *Bluebeard's Bride*, I accept that my character has very limited agency in certain ways. If the premise of the scenario is that the PCs start as prisoners, that's very different than if you're running a scenario that, after claiming one generally should not have the PCs captured No Matter What, insists, twice, that it's absolutely necessary that happen for the scenario to proceed.)

- If there is something that Absolutely Must Happen, have it have happened before the scenario/campaign starts and/or offstage.
- It's easy to let slip information that you want to keep secret, especially if your source material or notes for running a session have, fr'ex, an NPC's true name, as opposed to the name of their cover identity. Do your prep to avoid that sort of thing.
- Run for the group you have, not some ideal group. I hadn't thought of it in those terms until one of my players praised me for doing this.
- It's okay to take a moment to think about something. Calling for a break can help.
- Calling for a break after every hour or two is often a good idea.
- Generally, make everyone people. I'm told I do very good NPCs, and I've been praised for making the parents/guardians of each Monsterhearts PC in a game I ran some years back different and reasonably rounded and believable. This is the sort of thing that leads to my saying something as an NPC that I hadn't thought of consciously, but that feels right to everyone.
- But sometimes, it's okay not to round out every single NPC.
- Play with people (unless you're playing a solo game, obviously). This should be obvious, but I've noticed that sometimes a GM, including myself, is so focused on What Should Happen that they forget this is a game that involves playing with people.

Stuff I learned from Aviatrix:

- Aggressive scene framing. I'm not necessarily good at this. It's part of how Aviatrix keeps things on track in her games and makes every session self-contained. One can take this too far, of course; in one of the Kerberos Club Fate sessions, the players told me they were following the trail of a different plot than the one I'd been planning. This wasn't them going off the map so much as saying they weren't yet done with the corner of the map they were currently in.
- Make it your (plural) own. I've always changed scenarios and campaigns to fit my groups, and Aviatrix taught me that sometimes, you need to kick that up to 11. She's moved entire commercially published campaigns to different decades in time, moved sections in space, changed NPCs in every way from looks to personality and motivation.
- If you're creating a PC who starts off particularly unsympathetic, with the plan that they will do a heel-face turn, do that turn sooner rather than later.
- A collaboration document or other agreement a group of gamers make is not a suicide pact. Players (including you) may not know what they

think of something right away. They may change their minds.

Stuff I learned from Storybrewers and convention gaming:

- Is there anything else we want from this scene?" This is a way to implement Aviatrix's advice to frame scenes aggressively. Sometimes, folks do want something from the current scene, and this lets them say so. Sometimes, the scene's just going around and around, and the players need a nudge to remind them that it's okay to let it rest and to move on. Sometimes, it's going around and around because someone's forgotten the thing they want from the scene or hasn't yet figured out how to get it, in which case, saying what they want to get means the other players can help them get it.
- Check in regularly. If you have a collaboration document, a list of lines and veils, or something similar, do any players, including yourself, have something they want to add or change? Rereading such things is a useful refresher. Has anyone's schedule changed? Is someone planning to be out of town, or does someone need the game to have a different hard stop time than usual? Is there something someone wants to make sure happens in the game?
- Stars and Wishes. I'd seen this used at conventions before I joined the Storybrewers Discord, generally to give feedback to a game developer. In games arranged by folks on the server, I saw how useful it is for campaign play.
- Make a Scene List. This is something of a subcategory of Wishes. You won't always need to do this, but it can be useful to know that someone wants their PC to have a heart to heart talk with another, to check in with one or more NPCs (relatives, suitors, co-workers, mentors, et cetera), to have a verbal confrontation with the villain, to finally get to the big fight with the villain, to find out how to break a curse or get a mcguffin, and so on. For games that focus on relationships and emotions, I found scene lists extremely helpful.
- Callbacks are awesome! Whether you do it as a GM or a player, for one of your characters or someone else's, folks often appreciate it when someone picks up a piece of backstory and does something with it or refers to something that happened during the game or even just keeps a shared joke running (like a joke between the PCs about Indian elephants during a convention game of Clockwork: Dominion).

Stuff I learned from Pelgrane:

- If you start with the rule that the PCs *will* find all Core Clues (at least, if the players engage with the game), you look at scenarios and creating scenarios differently.

- You will (or at least, really should) also look at clues differently. A clue, from this perspective, is the information itself, not the wrapper for it.
- 15-minute prep routing from Noah Lloyd: <https://pelgranepress.com/2020/09/02/my-top-game-mastering-tip-with-noah-lloyd/>

Stuff I learned from folks at the Forge, whether there or in their games:

- As a player, make a PC you'd pay to see a movie about. (This one is from Ron Edwards, in, I think, *Sorcerer*.) If you don't want to find out what your character will do and what will happen to them, you probably have the wrong character.
- Story Now! It's easy for authors and GMs to try for what they think is a cool slow burn because it will all add up to a Really Cool Story at some point in the future, but if the players are bored or frustrated, that's not good. From the beginning, they should get to do cool stuff that matters. Yes, even if their PCs are not "important" to the game world from an in-world perspective. Yes, even if they're doomed to fail.
- People game for different reasons, and while one can't always cater to all of these reasons at once, knowing what folks want from a game gives you better odds of running a game they'll like. (Remember that this includes you!) The whole discussion of Gamist/Simulationist/Narrativist play boils down to this. Fr'ex, when I ran the Strange School PBEM, yes, the players were on board with narrativist emotional play, some of them also wanted at least some gamist elements, like their characters developing some of their supernatural abilities. They needed to remind me that while there had not necessarily been a lot of in-world time passing, we'd been playing for several months since their last "power-up".
- Fail forward. Sometimes, a roll that indicates failure shouldn't simply mean "You don't do the thing you were trying to do." Maybe it's a Find Plot roll. Maybe it's something the character really shouldn't be failing at. Maybe failure doesn't change the current situation, something many game designers have come to think is undesirable -- if you make a roll, whatever the result, something should change. Maybe your character finds the clue, but the villain sends people to beat them up. Maybe the strange ritual seems to fail, but actually summons a vampire who shows up later. Maybe the suave seducer successfully seduces someone, but is then challenged to a duel by a jealous suitor.
- Stakes. This can be part of Fail Forward. What is actually at stake when you roll the dice? In the first edition of *With Great Power*, *Spiderman* is trying to beat up some muggers, but what's at stake is "Do I impress Mary Jane?" He's going to beat up the muggers either way. Alas, he fails to impress Mary

Jane, beating up the muggers so quickly and efficiently that she never realizes her peril.

Stuff I learned from various rpg communities, whether at home, at conventions, or online:

- Say yes. I probably got that originally from Jonathan Tweet and *Over the Edge*, where he talks about how to challenge the PCs without nerfing their abilities.
- But sometimes, do actually say no. "Never say no" is, IMO, terrible advice.
- Safety tools can't prevent all problems, but if used in good faith, they do help.
- Session Zero is an awesome thing!
 - You get everyone on the same page (or at least, closer to it).
 - It's not enough creating a PC you'd be willing to pay to see a movie about. Everyone must be similarly invested in all of the PCs.
- Josh is the one who taught me that if you pay attention, whether in a larp or in a tabletop, you can generally find an in-character justification for whatever you want to do.
 - Don't abuse this. "I'm only playing my character" is the Nuremberg Defense of roleplayers, as Brian Rogers put it, and some of them aren't even having any fun playing a character in such a way as to make the game suck for everyone. Find a reason to have your PC do (or not do) what the game needs them to do (or not do). If you can't, make a different PC who will do it.
 - Corollary: "I'm only playing the world" is the GM's version of "I'm only playing my character."
- Realism isn't reality. I learned this in a class on Chaucer, actually. The professor noted that Chaucer was being more realistic than many previous or contemporary authors had been, but that said, his characters were probably not speaking in whatever form of verse he wrote any given section of *The Canterbury Tales* in, all of them could not possibly have been hearing a tale teller as they rode or walked along the way, and no one as drunk as the miller supposedly was could possibly have managed to tell his tale. Sure, *Call of Cthulhu* "purist" mode is more realistic than a Fate superhero game, but that doesn't mean that it's perfectly in line with our reality, even ignoring the Lovecraftian elements. Know what to gloss over and what will break the players' suspension of disbelief. remembering that you are also a player. Every group has different criteria. I would just as soon not have to play "Papers and Paychecks" or spend any length of time on car repair or searching for a bathroom in character. As a GM, I may handwave how the PCs return from a location,

even though it took them much effort to get to it for whatever adventure just happened.

- Simulationism might be genre simulationism. *Trail of Cthulhu* models Lovecraftian horror. *Night's Black Agents* is the Bourne movies if Treadwell were vampires. *Feng Shui* models Hong Kong action movies of the last quarter of the 20th century. This is important because it's about matching expectations. Josh and I played in one larp where a GM incorrectly nerfed a PC's special ability when the player was using it exactly as the game's author intended in exactly the right situation -- specifically, the PC was Maverick from the 1994 movie using the ability to win a climactic poker game. In contrast, Ken Hite allows a *Night's Black Agents* character to seduce someone the character had slapped earlier, saying, "I'll allow that because this is a spy thriller, and for no other reason!"
- Chaosium's Push rules for 7th edition *Call of Cthulhu*. These address earlier editions' problem of CoC players rolling multiple times until they succeed by saying that, at most, 2 rolls may be made. If a second roll after a failure is permitted, it's called a Push, and if the Push fails, the consequence, which the GM must describe before the player rolls for the second attempt, are worse than a fumble would be. Switching skills does not give extra attempts; using a Fast Talk roll after your Charm failed is still a Push. Josh noted that, in addition to cutting down on "roll until you succeed", Pushes mean that regular failures are not as bad as they might be. If you fail a roll to pick someone's pocket, your PC isn't caught. Sometimes "you just fail" is actually okay.
- Apropos of this, Jonathan Tweet discussed what he called a Kirkliness roll. When James Kirk tries to escape on the original *Star Trek*, he almost always succeeds, possibly leading to the audience wondering why he didn't do so earlier. Jonathan's theory is that he thought about it and sussed out the situation, and he realized that it wouldn't work. Mechanically, Kirk's player rolled and failed, and the player and GM interpreted this as realizing that an escape attempt would fail. I like this concept.
- No piece of advice works for everyone all that time. Fr'ex, *Over the Edge* 1st ed has a rule about how describing an attack in a boring ("I attack") or repetitive way means the player gets a penalty die. Sounded great! Chris Murray told me that it's also terrible. A player coming off a hard day at work does not want to be told they get penalized for not being able to describe their PC's attack cinematically!

WRITE UPS / SUMMARIES: Songs of the Fair Folk: Shared World Fae Courts

This will be more of a confusing summary by way of a cast list and various in-character letters than a write up. A couple years back, this was an 8 player Good Society game arranged on the Storybrewers Discord. It was 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'm a bit hazy on some details, and of course, coordinating 2 groups is always tricky.

I was in the Court of Silk group, and we used a lot of weaving and tapestry metaphors. In some ways, the fae of that court were like silk worms, having private conversations in the tapestry. The main characters were:

Dewspun of the Pathweavers, they/he, young enough to be naive, a Socialite of Humble Origins who wanted to change the Court of Silk for the better. Dewspun was Indebted to The Cut Thread and Childhood Friends with Stray Ribbon.

Basically a Cinnamon Roll, Dewspun intervened when their family, the Pathweavers, stole the Lifeblood of Fiorevanta of the Court of Shallows to use in a talisman of bond-thickening power. He put Fiorevanta's Lifeblood in a locket. Fiorevanta assumed Dewspun was the one who'd stolen zeir Lifeblood and cursed them. The curse almost killed Dewspun, but The Cut Thread saved him, and in return, Dewspun dedicated himself to supporting The Cut Thread's cause. There was, at some point, an agreement between Dewspun and Fiorevanta to wed, which may or may not have happened in the end. Certainly, Fiorevanta misunderstood Dewspun's intentions. I'm not sure how much Dewspun understood of various court machinations, but he had friends to protect him.

Promises made:

- I will help The Cut Thread exact their revenge. I think The Cut Thread released them from that promise at some point.
- Fiorevanta shall have zir revenge upon me.

Positive Reputation Tag: Giving

Negative Reputation Tag: Naive

Connections:

- **Felt of the Pathweavers**, played by Velvet Sundown's player: he/they, Dewspun's older sibling, and fairly protective of Dewspun. Felt wound up becoming the new ruler of the Court of Silks in the end.
- **Violet Chintz**, played by me: she/they, Dewspun's overprotective caretaker. I wrote a letter from Violet to Dewspun, but didn't do much beyond that.

The Cut Thread, played by me. They/them, old enough to think they know it all, young enough to be

passionately wrong. Dependent, Clergy (or equivalent), Desired Revenge on those who used them. Acquaintances/Linked To Velvet Sundown. Dewspun was Indebted to them. They were the Mentor of Filament/Fila Mentressor, a member of the Court of Silks who was sworn in service to someone in the Court of Shallows.

Formerly known as Tenacious Selvedge, and taken in by Soumak Weave, the head of the Court of Silk, after their family was killed, become Soumak Weave's secret assassin. They later realized that Soumak Weave was using them, among other things, to commit a murder for which Stray Thread had been blamed and exiled.

As my description says, "Now, they pretend ignorance, but have added Soumak Weave to their list of enemies. You know how some people have a secret Murder Wall? The Cut Thread has a secret Murder Tapestry."

The Cut Thread tried to maintain strictly proper etiquette and privately pursue vengeance, but kept trying to protect people like Dewspun and Velvet. Eventually, though, they got their vengeance and paid the price for it.

Promise made: I promised Velvet Sundown to serve Stray Ribbon's interests without saying why.
Positive Reputation Tag: Dependable
Negative Reputation Tags: Dependent, [Seditious]

Connections:

- **Soumak Weave**, played by Stray Ribbon's player: he/they, Guardian of the Cut Thread and considered them "my finest creation". When The Cut Thread finally assassinated Soumak Weave, their guardian died with a smile and a look of pride in their ward on their face.
- **Ravelled Edge**, played by Dewspun's player: Pronouns shift with Ravelled Edge's mood, twin of The Cut Thread/Tenacious Selvedge. Thinks the Cut Thread is: "Perhaps my sibling or perhaps who I might have been or should have been or am lucky not to be. Such games we shall play!"

The description I wrote for Ravelled Edge:

Many assume "Court of Shades" is just another name for "Court of Shadows". This is not the case. The Court of Shades is a court of insubstantial fae, unable to become tangible without powerful magics (maybe blood, maybe taking over or trading places with someone -- it isn't always clear what is required even inside the court, let alone outside it).

Where is this court? Wherever one doesn't look.

Who are the courtiers? Those we do not speak of. Those we forget. Those we wish not to remember. Those who do not wish to be remembered. Those who resent being forgotten or never having existed in the same was as their counterparts in other courts.

So it was with Ravelled Edge. Perhaps they would have existed if Tenacious Selvedge's family hadn't been destroyed. Or if Tenacious Selvedge had never been born. Or perhaps they were a true twin lost, forgotten, traded away, stolen and erased -- who knows?

Only recently have Ravelled Edge and The Cut Thread become aware of each other's existence, each looking into a mirror only to see a face that was at once their own and not. Did Ravelled Edge come into existence in that instance? Or have they always existed, just waiting for this moment?

Are they friend or foe or both? Only the shade Ravelled Edge knows -- the shadows do not know, whatever they might think.

Immediately after The Cut Thread killed Soumak Weave, they changed places with Ravelled Edge.

Stray Ribbon, formerly and eventually once again Chiffon Daydream, she/her, older than hoop skirts. New Arrival, Ill-Reputed, desiring to earn the forgiveness of her court and reclaim her powers. She was Childhood Friends with Dewspun, the Sibling of Velvet Sundown, and the Former Intended of Curious Star of the Court of Shallows.

Positive Reputation Tag: Penitent
Negative Reputation Tag: Lovesick
Promise Made: I will return to Velvet's side.

Stray Ribbon/Chiffon Daydream was framed for the murder of someone who was "a thorn in Star's side". By the end of the game, while I don't recall whether she'd proven her innocence or reestablished her engagement, she had reclaimed her name and position in the Court of Silk.

Connections:

- **Murmur in Twilight**, played by Dewspun's player: Ribbon's suitor from the Court of Shades. I'm pretty sure that Stray Ribbon did not accept this suit. (Yes, the same person played both Connections from the Court of Shades. I invented this court, keeping to the implicit, if absurd, rule that all the fae courts in this game had names that started with "S".)
- **Fringe**, played by Velvet Sundown's player: he/him, Stray Ribbon's chaperone, who considered

his charge "a loose thread that must be tucked in".
I don't recall anything else about him.

Velvet Sundown, he/she, fresh, a Meddler and Ill-Reputed. Velvet wanted to arrange a marriage and see it go off, and suggested to The Cut Thread that The Cut Thread should marry Soumak Weave. The Cut Thread reported this to Soumak, noting that Velvet was mischievous, but meant no harm, and that if this were want Soumak Weave thought best, The Cut Thread would, of course, agree.

Velvet was Stray Ribbon/Chiffon Daydream's sibling, and was linked to The Cut Thread. Basically, the two fae occasionally bodyswapped. This took Dewspun aback, as young Velvet was not good at pretending to be The Cut Thread, so The Cut Thread came clean to Dewspun about the bodyswap, and wrote a letter to Velvet with much advice on pulling off this sort of thing, on life in general, and on an enclosed magical mask they'd made for Velvet. Velvet was also best friends with Flavius Crustaseus of the Court of Shallows, or at least, Flavius thinks so.

Positive Reputation Tag: Regal

Negative Reputation Tag: Flippant

Connections:

- **Gilded Rose**, played by me: she/her, Velvet's bodyguard, from the Court of Steel. I didn't play her much, but Velvet's player made a really cool background for her. She and Velvet each wove "a sliver of the other's lifeblood into themselves, giving them some degree of power over one another." Apart from that, Gilded Rose follows the Steel tradition of keeping "her lifeblood in the pommel of her weapon; to be offered in surrender if she should ever fail as a duelist or a defender."
- **Pocketpebble**, played by Stray Ribbon/Chiffon Daydream's player: he/him, Velvet's guest from the Court of Stone, courting Velvet because he wants Velvet to agree to become the centerpiece ornament of his garden. Sure, he could force this by paralyzing Velvet, but he'd rather get his target/muse/prey to agree willingly. The Cut Thread tried to dissuade Velvet from this.

The other group was the Court of Shallows. I don't know a lot about what happened with them, so this will be even more cursory. I'm going to leave out the Connections as I have absolutely no idea what was going on with them.

Flavius Crustaseus, he/they, ageless like the crab. Careerist, Old Money. Desire: Rise in the ranks of your Court and ensure it achieves its objectives. Former Friend/Soulsharers Unwilling with Fiorevanta Gallasia, Best Friends with Curious Star, Best Friends (delusional? [sic]) with Velvet Sundown. Crab Knight

(literally a giant sentient crab), himbo, smarter than he lets on, and "Secretly SO Sad". Got into a tickle duel with Dewspun when the two courts met for the first time in game.

Positive Reputation Tags: Loyal, Formidable, Affable.

Negative Tags: Trusting, Naive

Positive Reputation Condition: Stay With Us: a welcome guest in any household.

Fiorevanta Muzetta Gallasia, ze/zir, Age ???

Hedonist, New Money. Desire: Woo your rival to secure their resources. Predestined Rivals with Fila. Unwilling Soulsharer with Flavius. Dewspun has cursed me but is in love with me.

The relationship between Dewspun and Fiorevanta was complicated enough that The Cut Thread barged into Fiorevanta's tent to yell at zem. They later sent a letter to zem, apologizing for that.

Promises

- To pull off an near impossible feat and find a carved down pearl that shines like morning light of Curious Star's request.
- I promised Dewspun my heart, til the end of my days.
- Had promised several things to Kalisia and the courts, as a young fae.

Positive Reputation Tags: Observant, Responsive, Cunning aka Chutzpah

Negative Tags: Calculating, Vile, Shrewd

Positive Reputation Condition: Angelic: One Connection believes you can do no wrong.

Negative Reputation Condition: Fracture: Someone close to you is appalled by your behavior and refuses to speak to you.

Fila Mentressor (Filament), she/her, Age ???

Cornerstone, Foreign. Desire: Free yourself from your service and return home. Sworn in service to Curious Star. Predestined Rivals with Fiorevanta. Mentee of The Cut Thread.

Promise: Can do no harm to Flavius Crustaseus no matter the circumstances.

Positive Reputation Tags: Devoted, Dutiful

Negative Tags: Stubborn, Petulant

Curious Star, she/they, born beneath the lunar first eclipse [sic]. Socialite, New Money. Desire: Convince the court leaders to step down and hand the power over to someone of your choosing. Best Friends with Flavius. Fila is Sworn in Service.

Promise: Dearest Stray Ribbon, I will never forget or misuse your True Name.

Positive Reputation Tags: Bright, Sly

Negative Tags: Manipulative, Cold, Instigator

Negative Reputation Condition: Probation: You are harshly chastised by your employer, and given restrictions or conditions you must abide by.

Letters I wrote during various Epistolary phases:

The words are wrapped in an embroidered ribbon, the kind of ribbon that has many possible uses, depending on the need of its owner. The ribbon is delivered to Soumak Weave, tied in a tidy bow and magically sealed such that only Soumak Weave can undo that bow and unwrap the words which unravel as they are read, forming a thread that can either be cut off or woven into the edge of the ribbon.

My Liege,

It is interesting that you ask whether I am in love. I do not think that I am, but this was also a matter of curiosity to, of all people, Velvet Sundown.

Velvet suggested -- no. That is too quiet a word. Velvet stated outright that a match between you and me was a thing I should be considering. I am rarely unsure how to take a statement, any statement, but in this case, I am. I know not whether I should be amused, offended on your behalf, or giving the matter serious consideration.

I am certain Velvet means no harm by this suggestion. That is not to say that Velvet means no mischief, but mischief is not harm. Velvet's suggestion, whatever one should think of it, does focus on weaving the threads of our court together, rather than tying them to another court, strengthening our tapestry.

My feelings toward yourself have ever been those of gratitude and loyalty, as is meet and proper. I would not and do not consider them to include being "in love" with you. Nor, as I said, would I consider them to include being "in love" with anyone else.

Whether this is a lack in myself or an opportunity for you, or perhaps both, I do not know. But I am currently free from entanglements of that kind, and thus available for use in such alliances as marriage entails as you deem fit, so long as being in love is not a requirement for them.

As for that other matter, I will, of course, be ever vigilant. From what I have thus far observed, Stray Ribbon does not seem to pine for Curious Star, but who knows what shall happen at tourney? I will watch and report.

Yours to weave into the tapestry of our court as you deem fit,
The Cut Thread

Delivered with a small package to Velvet Sundown. The words first say:

As requested. I hope it is to your liking.

This is written in what seems to be very thick thread. It is actually very thin thread repeating the pattern over and over to form the letters large and thick. The thread then rearranges, forming other words. After Velvet has read them, they unweave and form the original message again.

What you need to know:

1. Dewspun is aware we switched, but thinks it was the first time and a shock to us both.
2. I have told Dewspun I will "calm" you.
3. I don't think Dewspun will tell anyone.
4. Should you wish to become better at espionage or becoming me, I will happily instruct you. Your efforts were sufficiently lacking that Dewspun knew something was amiss.
5. Enclosed is a mask that will change the wearer's features to look like a member of Silk that no one clearly remembers, though everyone will assume they should. Let us call this simulacrum Chenille.
6. This is because you suggested Stray Ribbon disguise herself at the upcoming event with Shallows. It is your gift to her, to be donned and doffed as she will. I think appearing as both at the event will be useful and amusing.
7. I am aware you might decide to keep and use it yourself.
8. I have told Soumak Weave of your suggestion that we wed.
9. You are not the first Pocketpebble has courted. You will not be the last. I do not think being one of a series would suit you.

(OOC: Let's assume that the mask works basically the way Mean Magic works, and if folks want, I'll pay a Resolve Token which can be used by whoever wields it the first time it's used.)

[As Violet Chintz]

Left for Dewspun in their room. Woven into a long, warm scarf made of chintz in multiple shades of violet with violet flowers embroidered upon it. It is not signed as the maker is obvious -- nothing about this is subtle.

Dearest Dewspun, It is most cruel of Soumak Weave not to permit you to remain safely behind with me in this ill-omened event with Shallows. But as it is not to be, I will brave the waters and be by your side

throughout this event. I promise that I will not allow any harm to befall you. I will always protect you.

Delivered, openly, to Fila Mentressor, woven delicately into a handkerchief. The obvious subtext is that the sender has no secret message hidden in it and does not care if others read the words so long as it reaches its destination. Indeed, it's almost as if there's a whiff of contempt in the assumption that others in the Court of Shallows will read Fila's messages and search vainly for something that is not there. For Fila, the scent is more comforting, that of cherished thread carefully sorted and stored before use in a message for a beloved student.

Fila,

I look forward to seeing you soon. I hope you are well. Is there anything you would have me bring you from home?

-The Cut Thread

To Sir Flavius Crustaseus of the Court of Shallows --

Dewspun of the Pathweavers trusts you and counts you as a friend, and therefore, I shall trust you to be their friend and to keep the contents of this message to yourself. I know that our courts are enemies of old, but I confess I begin to wonder why. You have done no harm to any I hold dear and all that I hear of you indicates nothing but honor. It was a privilege and an honor to witness what was the most remarkable duel I have ever seen.

-- The Cut Thread of the Court of Silk

A silken thread floats to Fiorevanta when ze is alone and abruptly divides into smaller pieces which form letters of a message:

To Fiorevanta Muzetta Gallasia of the Court of Shallows --

I apologize for interfering in a personal matter. This is owed to you. I cannot recall the last time I saw Dewspun smile with pure joy. You have my gratitude. It is not required that you accept either my apology or my gratitude. You owe me nothing. There is no signature, as the author fully expects Fiorevanta to know their identity. How many people barge in on zem armed with sharp shears and indignation? Once the letter is read, the pieces join to

form an unbroken thread which pleats itself into something about a foot long, bows to Fiorevanta, and then, if permitted, departs.

Sent as a pale, almost colorless, fabric, perhaps a scarf or a large kerchief. The letters of the message appear in reflection when held up to a reflective surface. The letters are pale, but sufficiently darker than the fabric to be legible, although they grow paler when speaking as "I", and the last sentence of the final paragraph grows fainter and fainter, almost blending in on the last word.

To Felt, Ruler of the Court of Silk, do We of Shades Send Greetings --

To clarify, this is not the royal We, but the collective. I write for Shades, to keep things simple, but I do not rule Shades. I think no one does.

We have entangled ourselves with the Court of Silk, becoming part of the weave, and we think it best that we acknowledge this. In the past, it was a different matter, for Soumak Weave was, we believe, a different kind of ruler than Yourself.

We do not know if Soumak Weave was aware of us. We do not think so. Our presence -- the presence of some of us, that is -- our threads were spun from Soumak Weave's web, whether or not They were aware of this. Some of us merely shrug, for we are what we are, and it is hard to argue with that.

We would offer Silk alliance. We want Your rule to be different. We want to help. We want to help openly and cleanly, and to the extent Silk wishes, within reason.

We do not ask for trust. It is too early for this, the threads too raw. We do not entirely know ourselves, what we are, what we may become. We ask for the new beginning for Silk to extend to us as well. We ask for a chance. It is perilous to give an unknown court this chance, but it is also perilous to have it weave itself only by the light reflected in the mirrors.

We cannot fail to weave our own tapestry. We can only choose how and with whom to weave it, and we hope that we will rejoice in rather than regret our choices.

Postscript: I am not who I was before I came to Shades. I still care for Your sibling and hope it may become possible to attend his wedding, but I would prefer he not learn of my changed circumstances. I trust to your discretion and judgement in this matter, and ask for no promises in this regard.

OVERLORD'S ANNALS

ATTRONARCH, THE EXALTED OVERLORD OF UNCONTESTED VASTLANDS

VOLUME 5 · ISSUE 2 · FEBRUARY 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 five session reports from the *Conquering the Barbarian Altanis* Dungeons & Dragons campaign.

Adventurers deal with curses, logistics, death, and webs. Lots of webs.

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS CAMPAIGN

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

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

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

ATTRIBUTIONS

Text copyright © Attronarch, 2026.

Wailing, Crossing, and Hazing illustrations by IdleDoodler.

Watching guard and *Shattered dolmens* illustrations by Kickmaniac.

Bob asking the gods why his visage offends them model by Ryu-Ran.

Typeset in L^AT_EX with Charter, a print-friendly typeface.

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 94

Adventurers

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

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

Tarkus the Promising, cleric level 3. Follower of Bachontoi, God of Red Wisdom.

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

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

Bairstowbury the Chaotic, halfling level 3. Remarkably muscular for a halfling.

Sweetrain 1st, Airday

"Help me out, will you?"

Ambros donned ornate plate mail worn by the undead knights the party had vanquished moments ago. He lost his own armour in an acid vat not even an hour ago.

Bairstowbury the Chaotic finally showed up. He was apparently shadowing them the whole time, but choose to appear only when he deems so.

Six adventurers opted to thoroughly search the cursed king's chamber before proceeding down the steps hidden underneath the rubble of the king's tomb.

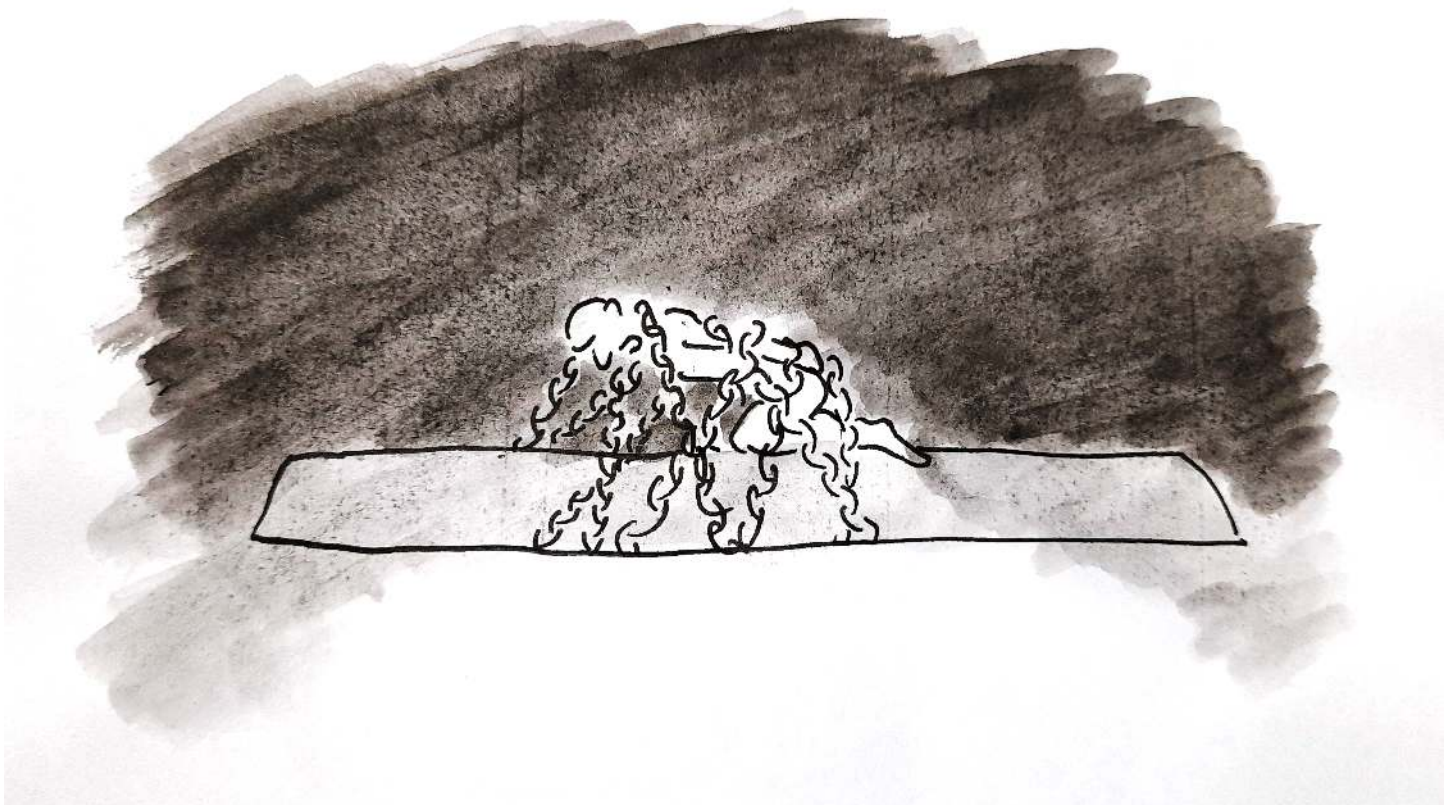
This was no tunnel, nor hewn spiral staircase. No, this was a hole in the ground, bored either by great might or magic. The slope was nearly vertical. The steps were nothing but formed soil and stone. It was a narrow one as well.

The party had to proceed in a single rank; they could only fight with small, one-handed weapons. Hagar took the lead.

Down and down they went. Deep. A hundred feet or more, if the dwarves are to be trusted.

Another twist, but this time ending with an opening into thick darkness, barely penetrated by the adventurers' torchlight.

"Help... me..."



Barely understandable cry could be heard. At first they misunderstood the accent as foreign; but after listening closely to some time they realised it is in fact Ancient Common.

Inching forwards soon revealed the sad predicament of the tortured one.

Upon a hexagonal plinth was a figure wrapped in chains; pinned to the ground like a ball, with face and belly pointing downwards. The chains were thick and of unknown material; two were anchored to each side of the platform. Figure itself was incorporeal, barely visible under all the chains.

"We are here to help! By the holy orders of Poseidon! Are you the wrongly accursed soul?" Hagar inquired.

But the figure only communicated with nonsense, cries, wails, sobs, and repetition of pleas for help.

Canvassing the cave revealed little. Chains were indeed real, and not an illusion. Upon closer inspection, it became obvious that all of them wrap around the figure, and then through its torso and down into the center of the platform.

Halfling made another discovery, something much more interesting than a king cursed to suffer for all eternity: nine chests of blackened wood. Five had a gilded lid, three silvered lid, and one jewelled lid. First was filled to the brim with gold pieces, second with silver pieces, and third with small gems.

By now three adventurers have climbed the platform and were attempting to speak with the figure. Two failed, but Beorg succeeded.

"Destroy... chains... please..."

Bob tapped his warhammer on the first link of one chain. Hammerhead shattered.

"Magic... use... magic..."

Everyone stepped off the platform.

Bob took out two-handed Wolfhammer.

He swung.

The link exploded, and the chain retracted like an angry eel, making the figure scream as it pulled through it.

Bob repeated this three times.

As the chains were broken one by one, the figure slowly rose to kneeling position, then to crouching, then slouching, and then to finally standing.

Without chains obscuring its shape, the adventurers could see a gauzy figure of a naked man. His body was broken, his regal face tortured but relaxed, his eyes sunk but radiating.

The man looked at each adventurer, as if he was studying them. They could feel the warmth of the gaze.

"Thank you."

The man vanished.

As the warmth slowly abandoned them, Beorg and Hagar felt a bit wiser from the whole experience.

The heavy chests contained a total of 7 500 gold pieces, 9 000 silver pieces, and 40 small gems.

The party discussed at great length how to get all this treasure out. There is an unreliable bridge over acid pool, there is a corridor with pendulums and scythes, and there is a crypt with hundreds of restless undead.

Having adventured for nearly sixteen hours straight, the adrenaline faded away, and exhaustion set in. What better place to rest at than cursed king's torture chamber? At least it has one entrance, they said.

Sweetrain 2nd, Waterday

"Oh no!"

In the morning the party had found all their standard rations spoiled. They also spent ten torches.

After another round of discussions, they decided to take all the gems, and load all the gold coins they could in their backpacks.

Heavily encumbered they moved on. It took them half an hour to get back up in the tomb! Low on torches, they opted to pour all their coins in one broken sarcophagus, and vowed to return for it all.

They successfully navigated the maze.

Their rope was where they left it, so they used it to cross the bridge.

When they opened the stone doors leading into the long trapped corridor a mass of burning flesh fell upon them, setting some on fire.

Although they stomped the flesh blobs wreathed in purple flame with ease, that still left some adventures a tad charred.

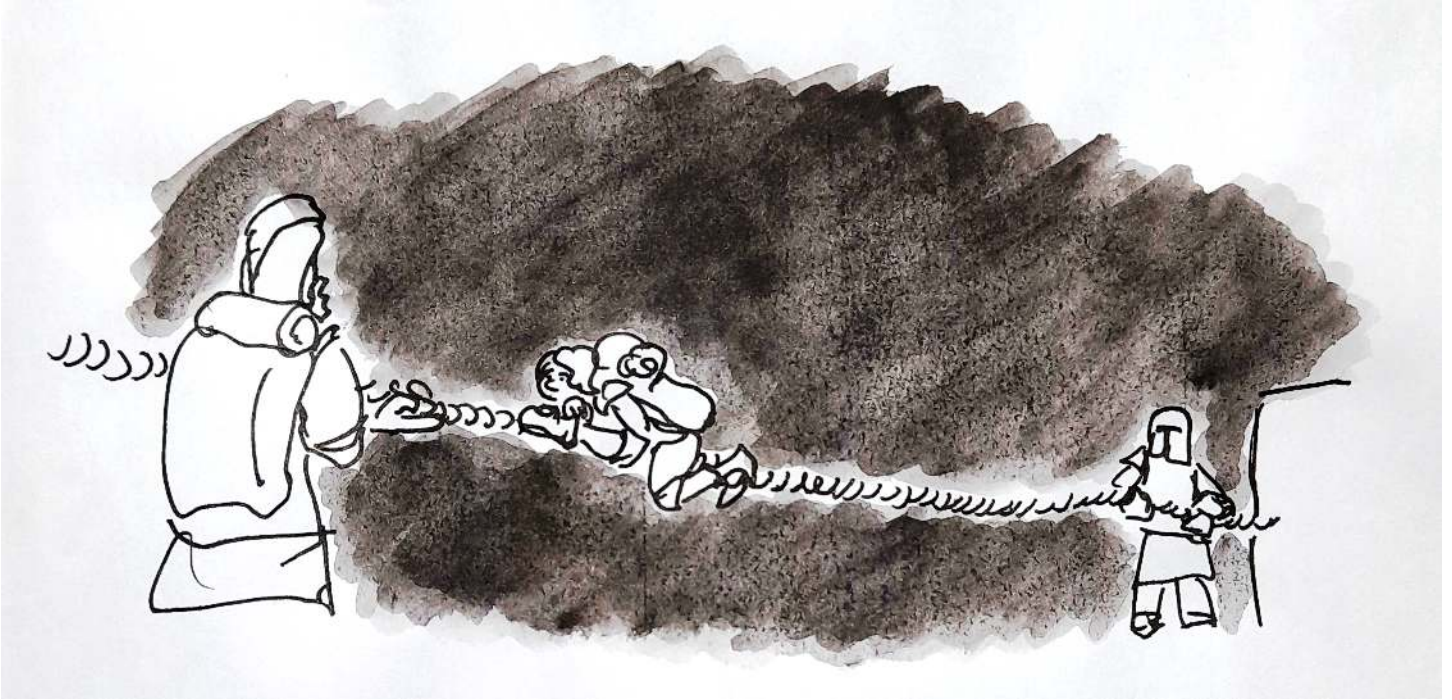
"What is this?"

The corridor was chock full of broken skeletons—bones and skulls all over the place.

"Were they following us?"

Pushing on led to another encounter with a mass of burning flesh; dispatched as easily as before. Afraid of descending into hip-tall purple fog, Bairstowbury the Chaotic climbed on top of Hagar's shoulders.





Not a bad call since the party indeed had to deploy their stomping boots once more. Four skeletons were turned to dust by Ambros's holiness. The party increased their pace dramatically, and exited this place uninterrupted.

They reached Midway by end of the day. The plan was to sleep and head to Hara for a multitude of reasons.

Sweetrain 4th, Fireday

Mavis, the High Priestess of Poseidon, confirmed that she doesn't have any visitations from the cursed spirit.

They did the right thing.

Hagar met with Zenon Coke, Headmaster of the Assassins' Guild, to negotiate terms on his life. Alas, since seven separate contracts were signed, Hagar would need to pay at least 8 600 gold coins.

"And that's why, my dear friend, I had helpfully indicated that one of your mithral bars would be sufficient to cover our expenses for cancelling the contracts. Think about it and let me know no later then by next Spiritday."

For a little bit of good news, the party found two letters waiting for them.

Both Imrael and Namelin, two of Hara's wealthiest and most influential merchant families, are interested in representing the adventurers in distant markets like Tarantis, Viridistan, and City State of the Invincible Overlord.

"Perhaps we can play them against each other!" Bob thought excitedly.

Beorg and Bairstowbury spent the day drinking and pub hopping. They learned that commoners are increasingly worried about ever growing tensions between Namelin and the Red Queen. Will Hara plunge in bloody civil war?

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 95

Adventurers

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

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

Tarkus the Promising, cleric level 3. Follower of Bachontoi, God of Red Wisdom.

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

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

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

Rorik, fighter level 3. A fighter.

Sweetrain 10th, Spiritday

"Pleasure dealing with you once more Master Dwarf." Zenon was polite as always "I promise we will not accept any new contracts pertaining to you until summer."

Hagar parted with one mithral bar; a minuscule price for his life.

Then he spent several days with Bob planning the extraction of treasure from the crypt.

The plan was as follows: create a “wash-line” system using block and tackle on opposing ends and several hundred feet of rope.

Fill fourteen backpacks with gold coins.

Hang them on the line and pull them across the acid pool instead of using the bridge.

Then carry it all out.

Forming a large party of seven adventurers—after all, somebody needs to carry all that treasure—they set out of Hara on morning of Sweetrain 10th.

Midway was their first stop.

There Wershaw, the constable, chastised them for not keeping their word and delaying closing the crypt.

He also conveyed Lord Kyle's deep disappointment in the party for not helping him as promised.

Adventurers hired Dubalan, the sweaty goatherd, to be their guide once more.

They reached the crypt by nightfall, and opted to rest before the delve.

Sweetrain 11th, Airday

18.

18 hours of hard, hard work.

That's how long it took them to execute their plan.

Getting to the tomb was easy.

Setting up the pulley system was easy, but time consuming.

Carrying 14 backpacks full of coin was slow.

Especially when you need to navigate a corridor full of swinging pendulums and scythes.

While skeletons and burning blobs of flesh are trying to distract you.

But they made it out of the crypt, proudly carrying 5 600 gold pieces.

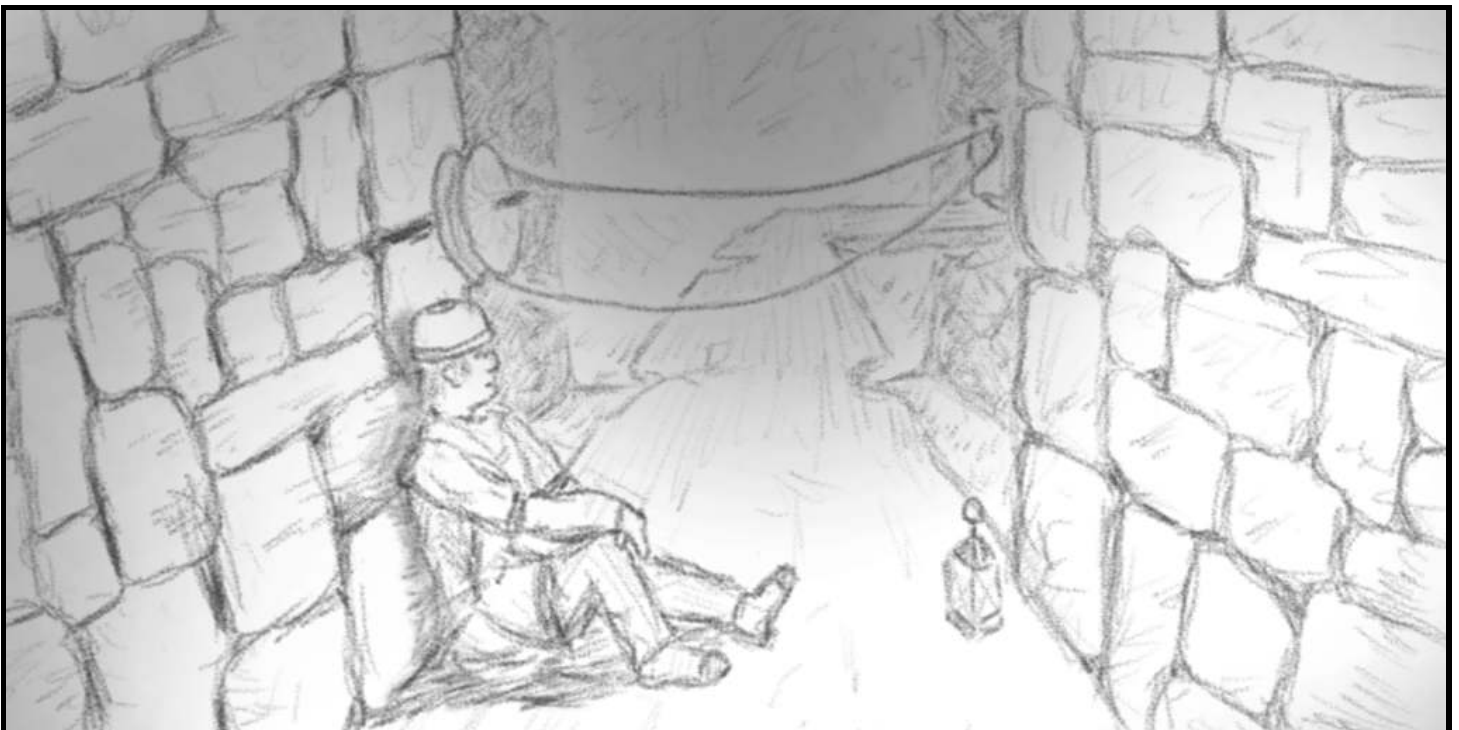
They left behind around 11 000 coins, of which approximately one fifth was gold.

Exhausted from hard work, they once more rested at Dubalan's “secret spot” hidden between the bushes and rocks.

Sweetrain 12th, Waterday

Rested, but encumbered, the party headed back to Midway. What usually took just two watches now required double time.

Having reached river Cedarwade by nightfall, the party decided to camp overnight and cross it in the early morning.



Sweetrain 13th, Earthday

"Get up!"

Beorg's yell was drowned out by tremendous noise create by a dozen of blood-red skinned barbarians charging the camp.

Everyone quickly jumped out of their bedrolls and grabbed their weapon. Altanians rapidly closed in on the party, unleashing a salvo of spears and handaxes as they did so.

Beorg checked the advance of several barbarians, but others successfully circumvented him and barged straight into the camp.

From there it was a violent, free-for-all skirmish. Barbarians laughed and jeered at the adventurers. In return, the adventurers hit hard. Whenever their blows connected, that is.

One of the clerics managed to stay out of melee for long enough to blind one of the attackers with Light spell. Bob and Hagar drew a lot of attention, both for being dwarves and for wielding unique looking weapons.

"First one to take dwarf scalp wins!" one of the barbarians roared.

Lo and behold, all but the blinded one disengaged and rushed to attack one of the dwarves. In the confusion, or rather, excitement, two barbarians were hacked down.

Hagar pushed off his would-be scalpers. Bob, on the other hand, wasn't so lucky. First he was beaten. Then he was manhandled and forced to the ground. And then he felt burning sensation as winning Altanian cut across his forehead. Sharp pain followed, as the man jerked off his scalp by pulling hard on the hair.

The man ran off, showing his butt to the adventurers. Other barbarians laughed and insulted the party as they ran off into the sunrise.

"Bob, you good?"

"No."

Clerical healing nursed the dwarf back to life. Faceless and scalplless, Bob was certainly taking on a rather ghoulish appearance.



"What about that guy?"

Blinded Altanian was still swinging madly. The party tied him up like a hog, and then dragged him with them.

Once at Midway, they hired a barge to take them to Hara. Much better than trudging along encumbered.

Entering through docks in northern Hara, the party registered their hard earned coins, paid the tax, and headed for their home.

Sweetrain 14th, Fireday

"We will kill you all! Burn the city to the ground! Rape you women! Feast on your children!" the Altanian kept yelling at his captors. Little useful information did he have. So they sold him at the market.

By now Hara has effectively been split in half. Southern portion was controlled by Namelin's thugs. They were patrolling in bands of four to six, always joined by at least one person displaying a compass rose icon—Namelin's family symbol—who seemed to be in charge. These bands never touched the party. In fact, the leader would always be polite, and make sure the adventurers have a free passage through the city, undisturbed.

Two areas in south Hara were devoid of Namelin's presence. One was Imrael's mansion, who deployed his own men around it. After all, he still is the wealthiest and most affluent merchant in Hara. Second was the keep overlooking the marketplace. Although there was no castellan, the few remaining soldiers decided to hole up there and maintain an illusion of control over the city.

Queen's island was closed off, with few rowboats going there and back.

Hagar, Bob, Rorik, and Tarkus accepted the invitation for lunch from Amulias Imrael, head of the family. There they were offered advice on dangers of flaunting their wealth. More importantly, Amulias wanted to know where they stand regarding the increasing tensions in Hara.

Hagar advocated for supporting the Queen, citing their previous help and good relations with Haermond II, the former castellan.

"New castellan will be appointed in the next few months. Namelin will nominate one of his sons, I'm sure of it. We will back Tagoler. He is a good man and has been doing stellar job at the Castle of the Wode. I'm afraid he will be assassinated on his way to Hara."

"You would be perfect to protect him. First, you have clearly demonstrated your fighting prowess. No one dares touch you here. Second, you are foreigners, meaning there is less dirt on you someone can try to leverage."

"While I admire your support for the queen, I must warn you that this might get ugly. Remember that crown you commissioned for some monster? Yes, you gave me a good explanation why, but surely you can see how that could easily get twisted and spinned?"

Adventurers discussed for a long time, reaching meek agreement on supporting the loyalists and protecting Tagoler.

"I shall let you know when he decides to set out for Hara. Expect that to be sometime within next two months, but definitely before the summer."

On the way home, which is actually just across the Imrael's mansion, the quartet was greeted by a young man dressed in fine clothes. He was bronze skinned, had a wide grin, big eyes, and small, round nose. A basket full of goods was in his left arm.

"Well met fine adventurers! May I ask if you are Hagar, good dwarf?" the man motioned at Bob.

"No, this one here is Hagar." the ugly dwarf pointed to another, less ugly, dwarf.

"Who are you and what do you want?" the muscled dwarf stepped forward and demanded sternly.

"I am Abek Namelin, and I am here to kindly request audience. We know you must be busy, and since you never replied to any of our letters and invitations, I decided to come here myself. You know how they say! If the mountain doesn't come to you, then you

come to the mountain!"

Abek smiled and laughed and was in cheerful mood. Quite the opposite of the adventurers. Behind him were eight men, all dressed in tight leather armours, and armed with short swords and spears.

"We are very tired and would like to go home. Come some other time." Hagar replied, unmoved by Abek's enthusiasm.

"Oh! Please, accept my deepest apologies for inconveniencing you! When would be a good time to come again? Please say so and I'll be there then!"

"This guy won't leave us alone, won't he." adventurers whispered amongst themselves.

"And friends, silly me, I have almost forgotten! I bring you some gifts! The finest wine from Viridistan! Even the Green Emperor drinks it! Breads and biscuits made from the finest ingredients! And last but not least, a selection of exotic spices to spice up... any adventure you might have, if you know what I'm talking about!"

"Please, we are tired and would like to go home. We cannot accept your gift. You can come in two days."

"But... Why? Why do you wound me so? What have I done wrong to you? This is a gift coming from our heart!" Abek stuttered, big tears rolling down his cheeks.

"Why would you turn away such generosity and kindness! Have you fallen for the slander of those envious of our success! No, you couldn't have, you are too wise for that!" Abek now spoke through tears, wiping them off with a piece of silk cloth.

"I shall respect your decision although it pains me greatly that you are refusing this gift. I will come at the time you say. And will bring something for the other dwarf! I hope you will accept my generosity then!"

And with those parting words Abek turned around, his cheeks puffy, red, and wet, and left the party. Adventurers exhaled and went home.

"We don't have much time. What do we do next?"

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 96

Adventurers

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

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

Tarkus the Promising, cleric level 3. Follower of Bachontoi, God of Red Wisdom.

Beorg the Gravedigger, fighter level 3. Inspired to adventure after burying several adventurers.

Sweetrain 14th, Fireday, Late Evening

"Good evening, Master Dwarf." Zenon Coke, Headmaster of the Assassins' Guild, hailed Hagar and his friends.

"Well met." the Dwarf replied politely. "What are you doing in our house?"

Indeed, the adventurers were surprised to find Zenon sitting in their living quarters. How and when did he enter, and how haven't they spotted him earlier? That remains to be answered another day.

"Worry not Hagar, I'm not here to deliver bad news in person. Rather, I'm here to ask for assistance with a small issue. Something, I believe, you and your friends could help with."

"We are listening!"

"Over the past few weeks several unlicensed assassinations have been conducted."

Zenon took a dramatic pause before continuing.

"Targets were of no import, but we cannot allow anyone to just go around and murder people for money. Only we can do that, you see."

"And how can we help?"

"Murders were done poorly, but that is beyond the point. We have tracked down the perpetrators. They have been hiding right in front of us! There is a secret trapdoor on the south side of the bridge connecting South and North Hara. It is located just underneath the bridge, and overhangs the river bank."

"Now, given your reputation, I believe you could help with the following. I want to make an example out of them. I want them to die messy deaths. I want their corpses to be found by the city guard."

"Why don't you dispose of them yourself?"

"Power. Example. Message. Yes, we could do so easily. But sending the most powerful adventuring party against them sends a clear message to everyone even dreaming about doing something so stupid like conducting unlicensed assassinations!"

"What is in it for us?"

"Assassins' Guild owning you favour surely is worth something?"

Negotiations lasted well over an hour, both between the adventurers—if they should even accept the offer, is this some sort of trap—and with Zenon—money, favours, immunities.

"I'm happy for you to discuss and verify the facts for yourself, but I need your answer now. I need this done tonight. As a sign of goodwill, we will disarm the trapdoor and leave a silk rope hanging from it. It will be strong enough to carry even the heaviest warrior amongst you."

Eventually adventurers agreed to do this in exchange for one month of immunity against assassination contracts for the whole adventuring company.

"Be by the bridge in the time it takes one lantern to expire. We will ensure that there is no one there. Easiest way to descend is by following the riverbank starting at the east side and moving westwards. Remember. Example! Oh, and if you happen to find any scrolls with names, please bring it to me."

Sweetrain 15th, Spiritday, First Night Watch

As promised, there was no one around or on the bridge. No guards, no random drunks, no "night owls" going for a walk. The party descended to the river bank, and found the hanging rope. Trapdoor was hidden really well—if it weren't for the hanging rope it'd be indistinguishable from the bridge stonework.

Hagar pulled on it, and trapdoor swung open. He climbed up and peeked in. It was a dark, narrow, and quite low crawlspace. He pulled up, and begun crawling down. Others followed. Some sixty feet later the tunnel opened up in a hewn corridor five feet wide and eight feet tall.

Tarkus held the lantern, partially covering it to avoid emitting too much light. In fact, there was a thin ray of light coming from underneath the wooden doors up ahead. Bursting in, the party jumped two figures sitting at wide wooden table.

Figures were dressed in simple grayish garbs, black leather armour, and wore partial skull-masks—think just the facial portion of skull. One was instantly slain by the adventurers, while the other one ran to the weapon rack in the south-west corner of the room. Person grabbed the spear, and then ran for the other doors on the east side of the room. Alas, it was cut off by the adventurers, and was summarily cut down.

Searching the corpses revealed them to be human, albeit of unfamiliar look. Possibly from far away? Beorg took one of the skull-mask and put it on. He liked it as a fashion statement.

The doors where the slain skull-man opened up to a staircase. The stairs turned and turned as they descended. Hagar took the lead.

"Stop."

The dwarf noticed something was amiss after the third turn. Steps there were flanked by scratch marks on the wall. A sure sign of sliding trap. Adventurers tied the rope around his waist, and Hagar proceeded on.

Indeed, halfway down the stairs dropped into a slide, sending Hagar into the chamber up ahead. He landed with control, and was immediately assaulted by two skull-faced men.

Hagar held his ground, and wounded one of his assailants. Once other adventurers joined him, the skull-men retreated through the door on the south side. Both could be heard yelling in unfamiliar language.

"Follow them!"

Rushing after them, they could see the men splitting. One turned east, while the other continued running south. Hagar followed the latter, while other three adventurers followed the former.

Ambros, Beorg, and Tarkus ran east, seeing the fleeing figure slamming doors in their face. They forced their way in, but were checked by the fleeing figure. Three bunk beds with four confused men indicated that these was a dorm of sorts.

The man yelled at the sleeping beauties to join the fray. Each grabbed the first weapon they could find, and joined in. Ambros hurt the roaring figure, forcing it to retreat few steps back. This created just enough space for the remaining adventurers to get into the chamber.

Wounded skull-man pulled himself on top of the bunk-bed by the east wall. There he laid on his belly and used crossbow to rain hell from above on the adventurers. He missed twice. Then he hit Beorg. The gravedigger felt something entering his bloodstream. But then he tensed really hard and all was good.

Tarkus crushed one of the charging men. Ambros killed two. Beorg cut down the fourth. Then all three rushed the bed and stabbed the prostrated figure to death.

"You know, I feel much better about this assignment after seeing these folks. No one Lawful would be carrying real human skulls!" Tarkus proclaimed. The trio proceeded to ransack the chamber.

Unbeknownst to them, Hagar was facing off a difficult foe.

The dwarf had chased south but stopped once the figure disappeared after yet another turn. He remained there to watch guard. But then a figure clad in black chainmail, with steel-gray robe adorned with skull face, wielding a short sword and mean looking dagger, came out of darkness and walked up. It also wore a skull-mask.

Dwarf and skull-man closed in, trading blows. Initially Hagar held the upper hand, striking the figure twice. But then the skull-man slashed at the Dwarf with his short sword. Hagar recoiled and the man used the opening to drive in the dagger. Hagar felt the stab. More worryingly, he felt muscles around the wound stiffen and contract.

Skull-man, bleeding and staggering, retreated backwards, facing Hagar. The dwarf charged after without hesitation, slaying the man in the process. With every passing moment he felt more and more of his muscles stiffen up.

Hagar slowly walked back to the junction where the party had split. There he saw his colleagues plundering the corpses and ransacking the footlockers.

"I've been badly injured. I will head out, but you should continue and finish what we started! There is at least one more left!"

✧

Hagar dragged himself out, becoming slower and slower with every step. He barely rappelled down the rope.

"I know you are out here! Assassins! I've been poisoned and need your help!" he moaned into the dark of the night.

No response.

The dwarf dragged himself up the river bank and onto the bridge. Then he crossed it to the North, heading to the temple of Poseidon. He kept on calling for help from Assassins' Guild.

✧

The trio bid luck to the Dwarf and then pressed on further south. Eventually they broke into a chamber overlooking a cave to southeast. A bronze statue of slender woman with a magpie's head facing east sat in the alcove to the north. A sound of running water could be heard coming from the cavern.

Investigating the statue revealed nothing of interest. On the other hand, the adventurers found a rope ladder hanging from the ledge. One by one, they slowly descended into the cave.

Ambros motioned to the others to look left.

There was a skull-masked man standing still, holding a sword, leaning against the cave pillar. He was barely visible, but noticeable none the less.

"Surrender and we will spare you!" adventurers offered.

No answer.

The party shrugged and surrounded the man. He yelled something incomprehensible, and then stabbed himself straight through the heart.

"These are no competing assassins!" Tarkus yelled. "This is a death cult!"

Surveying the cave revealed more evidence supporting the cleric's thesis. Prime candidates were a stone stained with dried blood—a sacrificial altar perhaps—and another, smaller stone, adorned with black cloth with skull motif on both sides. To add, a human skull and dagger made of human bone rested on it.

The trio took the ceremonial dagger, cut off heads of three skull-masked men, and ransacked some crates and barrels on their way out.

Once outside, they left a trail of heads leading from the bridge landing to the rope hanging from the trapdoor. Then they proceeded to report to the Assassin's Guild.

Sweetrain 15th, Spiritday, Sunrise

"Well, that was a bit crude." Zenon commented. "But you got the job done. Oh, I have almost forgotten! Our deal has changed. None of you will receive the agreed upon immunity. We found Hagar, stiff as a rock, just in front of the Poseidon's temple. He was poisoned, so we took him and administered an extremely potent antidote. He will recover in due time. We also captured three men that tried to rob him. Do with them as you please."

Happy that Hagar was alive, the party did not argue too much against changed terms. They shared everything they've seen in the skull-men's hideout. They also gave Zenon a scroll they had recovered from the heavily armoured cultist.

Finally, they let the three thieves go, but warned them to bring any news straight to them. Then they helped still groggy Hagar to return back home.

How many times will this dwarf cheat death?

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 97

Adventurers

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

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

Foxglove, thief level 4. A willowy human, long hair ties in a pony tail, looks a bit dangerous and dainty at the same time.

Darius, cleric level 4. Follower of Dacron, God of Craftsmen.

Rorik, fighter level 3. A fighter.

Vyrkainen, elf level 1. Has stunning long, flowing black hair which attracts many fair maidens who exploit his generosity and leave him destitute.

Meadowlark 2nd, Waterday

"What shall we do next?"

Adventurers wondered. Hagar has now been resting for a little over a week. Although alive, he was slowly recovering after his last bout with death. In addition, yesterday's encounters did not help his recovery whatsoever.

First, they encountered Abek Namelin for the second time. The man brought new gifts: exotic breads, cream for Bob's mangled face and scalp, and rejuvenating concoctions for Hagar.

Youngest son of Namelin tried his best to convince the adventurers that his family has been ruthlessly slandered, and that Imrael is behind all that is ill in Hara.

"Who do you think ordered no less than four separate assassination contracts on your head, master dwarf?!"

"These are strong accusations! Do you have any proof?"

"And what proof did they present to you that we are evil!"

Back and forth they went, bringing the young man to tears of frustration. He kept repeating that Klekless Racoba is the key to this mystery. Why else would Imrael's want him dead? He offered five thousand, yes!, five thousand platinum pieces to adventurers if they could capture Klekless alive and bring him back for questioning.

But adventurers were steadfast. They rejected Abek's gifts and his offer of friendship. Young man left in tears, but he left the gifts behind.

Vyrkainen devoured breads the moment Abek left.

"Oh, you guys don't know what you are missing out on! Tasty!"

"What if the cream and potions are cursed?"

"Even worse, what if they work and then we are in debt to Namelin?"

Second, worse encounter, was with Mavis the Magnificent, High Priestess of Poseidon. Wishing to check on Abek's claim, they pestered acolytes at the Temple for audience with High Priestess.

Initially they were rebuffed, but Vyrkainen's shenanigans eventually granted them a meeting at the end of the day. Hagar wanted to know who the Temple is aligned with.

"Everybody pays their respects to the Poseidon."

Few more similar questions received similar answers. Then Hagar tried to be more precise.

"High Priestess, who should we work with? Imrael? Or Namelin?"

"What do I care who you work with!" Mavis exploded in a fit of rage. Usually calm and composed, she jumped up like a force of nature, shaking the whole temple.

"You should be worrying about your divine debt instead of wasting my time!" Water in the basins and pools swirled and roared, mimicking her temper. "Get out!"

Acolytes ushered them all out, despite Vyrkainen's protests.

"I must remain home and rest." Hagar shared, more for himself than others.

"Listen. If we are siding with Imrael then let's focus on things that he asked for. There was this spider farm, right? He asked us to look for the lair of creatures that assaulted it. We could also visit Castle on the Wode on our way there and try to meet with Tagoler, whom we plans to back as new Castellan."

"Sounds good."

But that was yesterday, and now is today.

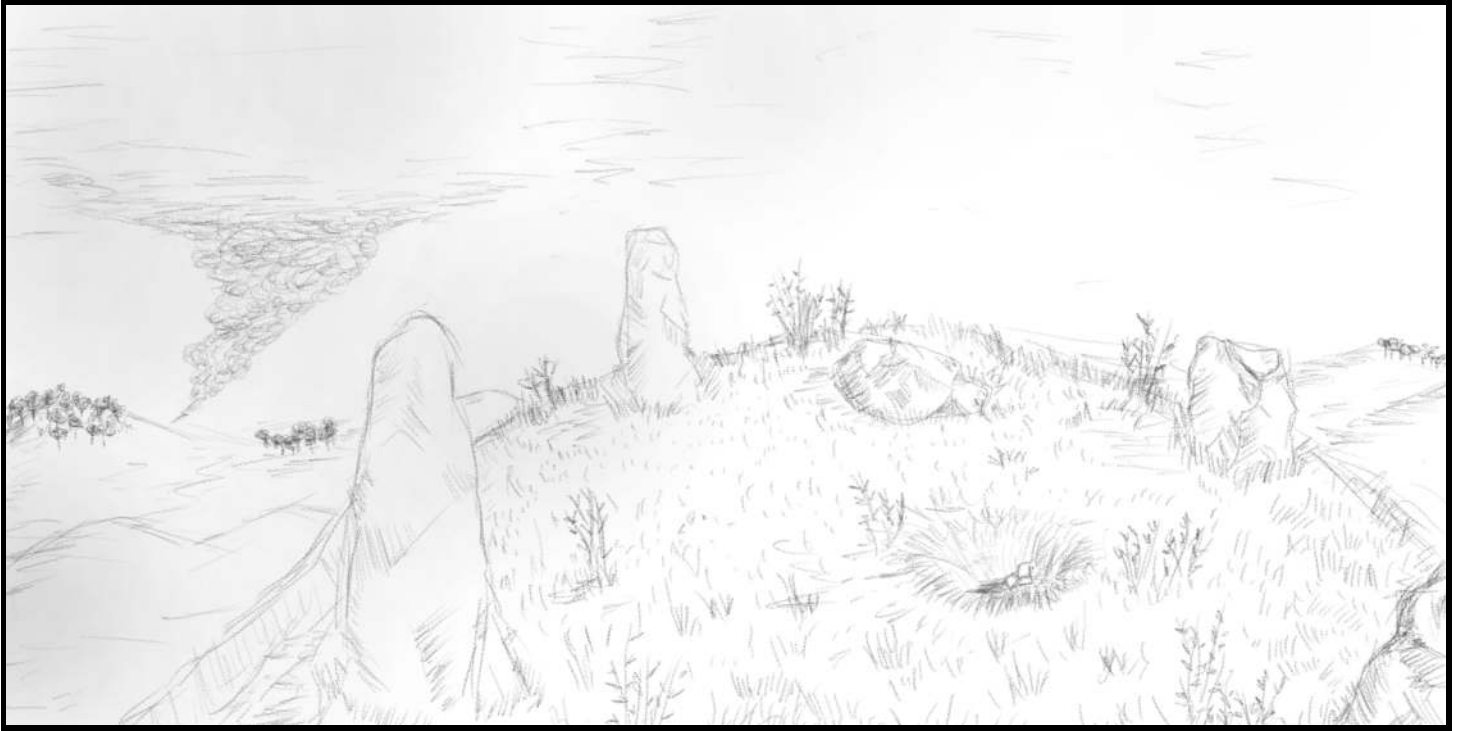
"Help? Of course I could use some help!"

Middle-aged man with short hair and trimmed beard roared, slamming a stack of parchments on broad wooden desk.

"There has been a dearth of capable men! Look at the map, come, look at it! You could take any of these routes and patrol them! What, not fancy enough for you?"

Tagoler was still sweaty and grimy, having returned from a patrol himself. His broad chest heaved with laughter, perhaps a nervous one, as he motioned over the area he has to keep safe with a handful of men residing at the Castle of the Wode.

To be fair, calling this simple keep with one tower a castle was an overstatement. But it served its purpose.



“Well if that is too mundane for you special folk, then I have some special problems you could help me with! Months ago, I lost a patrol on the hills north of here. Looked for them myself but no luck. Since I couldn’t spare any men, we had to drop our search.

“Locals tell tall tales of vampires, demons, and what not. Truth to be told I think they were done in by a wild beast, potentially an owlbear or cave bear. If you can track the patrol—alive or dead—and kill whatever waylaid them, that’d be greatly appreciated. It’d also allow me to reinstate a new patrol over the hills.

“Another pesky problem is the Pirate Queen that’s been raiding ships on their way out of the bay and into the open sea. Her lair should supposedly be somewhere between Ketch and Ahyf. That’s a lot of coast to search! I followed several leads, but all led nowhere!

“So, there it is. Anything worthy of your help?”

Adventurers conversed for a moment. Then they decided to head to the spider farm, and then to the Midnight Goddess Hills, where they would both search for the lair of black creatures, as well as the missing patrol.

Vyrkainen had an extra objective on his mind as well. He desired to meet the nude goddess that roams the hills when sister moons, Howla and Vannis, are both full.

Meadowlark 6th, Airday, Noon

“Up ahead!”

Rorik spotted a circle of white stone pillars atop the Midnight Goddess Hill summit. That by itself was nothing extraordinary. No, what was interesting were several toppled dolmens revealing a pitch black cavity.

Exploring the environs revealed several trails of broken grass leading to—or was it from?—the pit. Strong smell of earth, moisture and rot emanated from the hole. Sun shone in just enough to illuminate rounded steps

leading further down.

Vyrkainen volunteered to go first, for he as an elf could see in the dark. The adventurers did not want to risk not being able to surprise someone while carrying torches. They tied two hundred feet of rope around the elf, and down he went.

The steps went down and down, turning and turning. It was impossible to guess the depth, even using the rope to measure distance for it got tangled around the central column. Either way, after some time, Vyrkainen arrived at narrow landing which opened up into a straight corridor.

Up ahead he could see something hazy; and he could smell a curious mixture of strange spices, smoke, and dank copper. Thus, with his reconnaissance completed, he went back up and relayed this new information.

The party summed up their courage and descended down, together. A torch was lit. Now with light one could see all the small steps, plethora of cobwebs and stone dust.

"Hmmm. . ."

They couldn't see far down the corridor. A blue, impenetrable haze filled it. Foxglove, the thief, went first. Seeing nothing suspicious he edged to the mist. It was corporeal. Very real. Stabbing it left the instruments covered in small wet beads that evaporated in seconds.

Once in the mist, the thief could see some five feet ahead.

"Secure me!"

Party set Vyrkainen loose, and used fifty feet of rope to secure Foxglove. Two of them held the rope, attentive to any sign of distress, as the thief explored misty chamber.

Clang.

Stepping left resulted with the thief tumbling straight into a dark pit. Due to short distance, the party wasn't

able to tense the rope in time, and Foxglove found himself a bit roughed up, but otherwise fine.

"Pull me up!"

Clang.

Stepping right led to another pit trap, but this time the thief jumped back in time.

"Hmmm, maybe we should leave?" contemplated an adventurer best left unnamed. Surely these brave folk wouldn't be defeated by some pathetic pit traps in the first room of a dungeon!

Surely not!

Foxglove kept tapping through the mist, exploring. Others followed behind him, retracing safe ground he had covered.

And then thief walked straight into dragon's gaping maw.

Luckily for him, the dragon was merely a stone replica!

Dragon's open mouth framed stone doors with a latch to the side. Blue mist tardily rolled out of its nostrils.

"Hey. . . I have two cloaks. . . let's use them to jam 'em!"

That indeed worked, and chamber begun to slowly clear.

Rorik spotted bloated, wooden doors just to his left. The little hairs on the back of his neck warned him of danger. He looked around, and then he looked up.

At the edge of light, high in the north-east corner, a child-size creature stuck to the wall. Its feet were flush against the wall, and so were its palms. Other two hands covered its monstrous face—a face only a mother could love.

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 98

Adventurers

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

Foxglove, thief level 4. A willowy human, long hair ties in a pony tail, looks a bit dangerous and dainty at the same time.

Darius, cleric level 4. Follower of Dacron, God of Craftsmen.

Rorik, fighter level 3. A fighter.

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

Happy, halfling level 1. Short, very happy looking halfling. Hair covers his eyes and he is nothing but smiles.

Meadowlark 6th, Airday

An ugly, child-sized creature hung still in the north-east corner. It was up high, by the ceiling, leaning against

the wall with its feet and a pair of arms. Another pair of arms was covering its hideous face. Arms had four joints.

Rorik stood still, observing the creature. He subtly signalled to other adventures something is amiss. Hideous child ignored FoxGlove's communication attempts. It slowly crawled sideways along the wall until it stopped just above the dragon door.

Then it suddenly leaned forward, revealing to full extent its atrocious facial features, and jerked out coats stuffed in dragon's nostrils. Rorik shot it dead before the first puffs of blue haze dropped to the ground.

The thief climbed up the side of the dragon door and inspected the monster up close. Face was relatively human. Its eyes were elongated and almond-like. Two large mandibles protruded out of its mouth. Its body was covered in armour made of some

webbed and sticky material.

Foxglove gingerly pulled out a short-sword that hung by the creature's hip. It too was sticky and made from webbed material. Then he stuffed the cloaks back into the dragon's nostrils.

Forcing the north-east doors open led the party into a corridor blocked by dense, thick strands of pearl-gray webbing. After careful deliberation, Foxglove and Rorik began cutting through the web. They were slow and methodical, taking care not to get entangled or stuck. Up close they observed that the webs were coated in some oily substance.

Cutting through the rope was promptly rewarded by receiving two javelins to the face. Rorik shielded himself and then charged forth to face the daring assailants. He crashed against two four feet tall monsters, very similar but a bit sturdier than the one he killed earlier. Both had dark,

lanky black hair, four arms, and were dressed in webbed armours. Each held a sword, a shield, and a javelin, with fourth hand free.

Small monsters barely stood a chance against mighty Rorik and pious Ambros. Rest of the party splintered north, down the corridor with several doors. They were, of course, promptly flanked from both sides.

Bob received several javelins to his face and body, imitating a hedgehog. A number of four-armed spiderfolk spilt out of the west doors, filling the corridor. Alas, the adventurers were still mightier and slew them in droves.

Darius cast Light on the figure he deemed to be the leader. He came to such conclusion after seeing one of the four-armed creatures directing others. The monster screamed and wailed. Then it threw itself backwards and begun crawling up the wall.

"Murderers!" it cried in broken Common.

"Butchers!" it protested in anguish.

"Killers!" it spat in disgust.

"Huh?" adventurers wondered and chased the fleeing creatures.

With all doors shut, they now focused on the blinded one. It was soon brought back down to the ground and beaten mercilessly.

"I yield! What do you want?!" it cried, dropping its sword and shield.

"Why did you call us killers?!" Ambros demanded.

Such inquiry utterly confused the monster.

"You burst in our lair and start killing us! Killers!"

"Yeah, just kill him." could be heard in the background.

Unhappy with the creature's answer, the blade was raised for coup de grace.

"Enough!" in well spoken Common could be heard from darkness up north.

"You came into my home, slew my children, maimed my champion, and caused senseless destruction! Speak! What is it you want!"

Similar, but slightly larger and much better dressed, four-armed creature hung by the darkness at the edge of the adventurers' torchlight.

Soon they learned this is a lair of spiderfolk driven from below by "glowing hunters." They've been slowly exterminated, and have now holed up here. Since they've been denied return to the Woelands, they have been forced to come to the surface and hunt for food—cattle, goats, birds. . .

"We would like to help. How can we find these glowing hunters?"

"They will find you! All you need to do is step out of the mist through south doors. Beware the glowing chambers! Do not go into them! You must draw them out, else you will be doomed! And remember, remember this well! Should any one of you fall to the Glowing Hunter, then make sure to chop up the body without any further delay!"

Not much else of use was learned, and party retreated out of the spiderfolk's lair without further violence.

Happy promptly fell into previously discovered pit trap that has reset itself. Then he was drawn out and he almost fell into thus undiscovered pit trap.

Without ideas on how to reach doors that have a ten feet wide and long pit trap, the party decided to focus on bloated doors on the west side. There they found an abandoned guard room with attached weapon storage. Ransacking both yielded 13 gold pieces, 36 copper pieces, six yellowed, ivory charms carved to resemble grinning skulls, three long-swords, five daggers, one spear, and one two-

handed sword. Each weapon featured a carved skull in its pommel or shaft.

Then they returned to the dragon door and played a bit with it. Having agitated it enough, the dragon sneezed with such great force that both cloaks exploded out of the nostrils, followed by thick, voluminous stream of green gas. Everyone who inhaled heaved and coughed, spitting out a bit of blood.

And thus the party decided to retreat for the day and report their findings to Tagoler at the Castle of the Wode. They carried Happy to prevent him from falling in any new and old pit traps.

Meadowlark 9th, Fireday

"This is all news to me! Worrying news, at that! Listen, you offered help before. Special help, that is. Now, what would be really helpful is if you could go back and find my guys. It's been a while and no one here expects you to find them alive. But if you could recover their corpses then we would both have an idea where and why they perished, and we would give them a chance to rest closer to their families."

"They were five men. Cahaidh, rotund and with long brown hair; Eamhur, with lop-eared ears; Eithrael, with long arms and nails; Domnel, with crooked teeth and thinning hair; and Lochey who always looked like a kid despite being in his forties. All had standard equipment consisting of handaxe, dagger, spear, leather armour, shield, and backpack with supplies."

"These weapons you recovered look impressive! Well balanced! I wish I had such good weapons to equip my people with. . . Old Crus at Ironburg, just north-west of here, would surely know more about their provenance. Just tell him I sent you. That should grant you an audience with him."

What will the party do next?

IN NEXT ISSUE

Adventurers hunt the glowing hunters. Then they revisit an old favourite, which goes as every time before that.



Twisting the Rope #8

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Boy-Being Meets Girl-Being Beneath a Silvery Moon¹

I hope everyone had a good and restorative holiday season. The family and I did the usual split, spending a few days over Christmas with Sam's mother and then a few days around New Year's Day in Dublin visiting my mother, brother and his family.

I enjoyed the break and was well supplied with gaming gifts for Christmas and my birthday at the start of January. The new games were *Mists Over Carcassonne*, *Just One*, *Innovation*, *TRND* (an Oink game in the traditional tiny box), and an expansion for *Sea Salt & Paper* called *Extra Pepper*. Coincidentally, a Kickstarter book arrived just before the break so I also have Graham Walmsley's new *Cosmic Dark*² to look forward to.

Work has been quite busy despite the students only returning to lectures on the 12th of January. I'm involved in a project to move away from our current virtual desktop solution (Citrix) before the next license renewal and it looks like we will be tight for time.

IgTheme: The dumbest/silliest/craziest things the players ever did

Two anecdotes stick with me more than any others.

At least 40 years ago in high school I ran a game of Call of Cthulhu which included the stereotypical letter from a distant uncle describing odd goings-on at the remote farm where the scenario was to take place. One of my players read the letter aloud in character and was doing well until the fateful line, paraphrased from memory:

"As I looked over the hill into the grove below I could hardly believe my eyes. I was flaggerbastard."

We were unable to continue with the session due to laughter and loss of a suitable mood for horror.

In the much-loved *Amber Diceless Roleplaying* campaign from college one PC named Gauss was entrusted with a crucial note relating to some conspiracy the Amberites were

¹ Which then explodes for no adequately explored reason.

² A reworking of Walmsley's *Cthulhu Dark* for games of science-fiction horror.

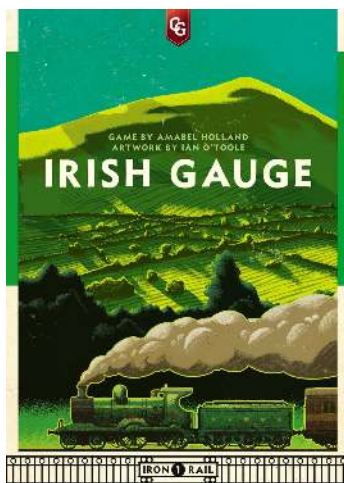
trying to thwart. Without reading it, he stuffed it in his pocket, only to find a trump³ in the pocket he didn't recall putting there. The trump card depicted a wooden door and warmed at his touch. Gauss, the brightest mind of his generation (or so the auction would have us believe) activated the trump and stepped through.

Into a burning hellscape.

He managed to pattern-walk away before being badly burnt. Later when explaining the events to his cousins they all asked him, "where is the note?"

"Here in my pocket," he replied, patting the absent robe he was no longer wearing. "Or, rather, here it would be if I hadn't got my clothes burnt to a crisp."

Mutterings



I played *Irish Gauge* with my brother and Sam over our New Year's Dublin visit. It's a railway & stock market boardgame designed by Amabel Holland from Winsome Games⁴. The stock market is fairly simple, with fixed but increasing prices per share in the various railways, and dividends paying out when a player is willing to spend an action to trigger the dividend. Cornering a company completely is difficult so dividends usually benefit the other players as well as the acting player, so judging when to spend an action on the cash payout is a core concern.

Laying track connects towns and cities, which generate cash when the appropriate dividend is drawn from a bag, so not every line is guaranteed a payout with each round of share payouts. Manipulating the coloured cubes in the bag gives players some control over the likelihood of a given railway company generating a payout.

The game is nicely put together, with brightly coloured painted wooden train-meeples and cubes, and a green-on-green map as befits the Emerald Isle. I'd like to play it again.

A Mausritter Campaign

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

The characters are:

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

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

³ A trump is a magical playing card in the Amber setting, much like a tarot card, depicting a person or place, that can be used both as a telephone for cross-shadow communication and as a portal between the wielder and the person/place shown.

⁴ <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/161882/irish-gauge>

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

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

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

Back in Oak Home the mouse adventurers returned to their daily lives. Gwen and Sky made sure to check in with the elder mouse, Burdock Pipp, and told him of their exploits while passing on the well-wishes of Boulder Face, the talking rock.

During their conversation, Burdock mentioned a recent tragedy. The death of a young river-boat mouse, Pepper Chit, apparently murdered by Fergus, a tax collector for the Earl of Larkspur. "Mayor Moira has offered a 60 pip reward for the capture of the fugitive Fergus."

Encouraged by the possibility of a new job, the mice met with Moira to inquire further. "The poor lad died on the wharf in River Nest," she said, "and no one has seen Fergus since. Best get down to River Nest and ask around. Take care not to get on Aldermouse Wendy's bad side. She's already all in a bother over the killing, and doesn't much like Oak Home mice to start with."

The mice gathered their necessary belongings and made for the docks, not far from Oak Home through the woods. There they met Horace Thimble, a river-boat trader with a boat for hire. For a few pips, he polled his flat boat down river and soon the mice disembarked at River Nest. A disturbing dark stain on the planks of the wharf reminded them of the task ahead.

"First things first," said Gwen, "let's get to the Trout's Tale tavern and get refreshments, then start asking around." The others agreed and all made their way up to the town in search of the tavern.

Once inside and suitably supplied with drinks – "Not a patch on my brew," Gwen muttered – they began chatting with the other bar patrons. One fellow, a strangely tall, white-furred, foreign mouse by the name of Norbury Blue⁵ took a shine to Sky when she introduced herself as a sparrow rider. "Ah, the sinews of the mouse nation, connecting together nests and burrows far and wide." Pressing her advantage, Sky asked about Pepper Chit.

Norbury recalled overhearing an argument between Pepper Chit and Fergus on the docks. He didn't see anything, "for I was below the jetty examining fresh-water molluscs, a passion of mine,"

"I did, however, hear their arguing. Fergus seemed to want something from the young Chit, who refused to part with whatever it was. By the time I extricated myself from the mud of the river bank the poor lad was crumpled on the jetty and a guard came running. I made myself scarce; River Nest isn't the most welcoming town I've visited."

⁵ Described as "Stephen Merchant if he were a mouse."

The mice split their tasks. Gwen and CanCan went to talk to Wendy Foxtail, the Aldermouse of River Nest, in hopes of getting to view Pepper's body, while the others, Odette, Ambrose and Sky, returned to the wharf to examine the scene of the murder and question the guard for their memories of that night.

Wendy Foxtail was blunt and annoyed with the inquisitive mice from Oak Home, but eventually allowed CanCan and Gwen to view the body, still above ground in a storage hut by the cemetery. While neither mouse was well acquainted with death, they steeled themselves for the task and looked over Pepper Chit's corpse thoroughly. The cause of death was clear: a single knife wound to the heart. Gwen helped CanCan turn the body over and they wondered at a strange mark around the dead mouse's neck. "It's like a rope or a cord left a friction burn," said Gwen, parting the fur to reveal a red welt in Pepper's skin.

At the docks, the other mice met Robert Arrow, the guard and his assistant Birch. Neither man was present at the precise time of the murder, but both had plenty of opinions to share. As Sky patiently listened to their sometimes contradictory reports of the night of the murder, Ambrose and Odette nosed about the scene of the murder. Odette said she thought she smelled something like a whiff of a bird of prey, and the two investigators knelt down to get a better nose-full.

Ambrose's whiskers twitched as he looked over the edge of the jetty, and spied a small leather purse tucked in between the logs of the uprights and the decking. With Odette holding firmly onto Ambrose's legs, the wireworker mouse stretched over the edge and gripped the purse in his finger tips. He quickly hid the purse in his own waist pouch and gestured to Odette as the guards noticed their odd antics. By the time they got past Sky, Ambrose and Odette were all innocent. "Leaning over the edge? Yes, I was looking for evidence."

"Did you find anything?" demanded Robert Arrow.

"Nope. I would have the rope stays on your uprights looked at though. This whole jetty is at risk of collapse."

The two guards-mice retreated to the safety of the river bank in a hurry. The Oak Home mice conferred and chose to keep the purse hidden. They withdrew to exchange findings with CanCan and Gwen somewhere they would not be overheard.

Back in the Trout's Tale tavern they assembled in an upstairs room. Ambrose revealed the hidden purse and undid the ties. The purse contained a curious silver ring with a blue stone. "Man-made," whispered Ambrose. "The ring would fit a mouse's arm loosely though it was probably made for a small human's finger."

"Valuable?" asked Odette.

"Enough to kill for, apparently," replied Sky.

The group then returned to the docks and questioned Horace Thimble about Pepper Chit, who admitted that Pepper was working on his boat earlier on the day he died. He didn't recall any pouch or cord at Pepper's neck. "Spent most of his time fishing off the back of the boat," claimed Horace.

One of the guard mice did recall a pouch at Pepper's neck when he disembarked. Was Horace unobservant or hiding something?

CanCan, Ambrose and Sky decided to stake out the docks that night, hoping that Fergus would come looking for the missing purse.

CanCan was spotted by the guard, Robert, and flimflammed him with some tale of sleepwalking. She managed to convince him to escort her back to the tavern. "Who know what sort of perverts roam the streets of River Nest after dark?" asked CanCan.

"Apart from you?" asked all the other players.

This left the docks unguarded for a time. Ambrose took the opportunity to hide himself on the jetty between some barrels, where he waited for developments.

Shortly after, he heard the sound of a dull splash and muffled oars in the locks. He spied a shadowy figure in a small rowboat as it approached and passed under the jetty where it stopped. Ambrose heard a mutter curse, and recognized Horace Thimble's voice.

"What are you about, Horace Thimble?" bellowed Ambrose. The furtive boatmouse startled and fell backwards from his boat into the river.

Dragged ashore, Horace was a sorry sight. The three mice surrounded him and questioned him. He did see the pouch, he admitted guiltily. "I saw Pepper fish something out of the river. All bright and shiny. He stuffed it in his neck pouch before Fergus or I could have a look at it."

"I saw Fergus and Pepper arguing about it, right here on that jetty. They were pushing and shoving, but Pepper stood his ground and drove Fergus off with a proper clout round the ears. He must have hidden the pouch then, because he was surprised when Fergus returned."

"Never saw it coming, poor kid. Fergus straight up stabbed him in the chest as he rose from the decking. Turned right into the knife and fell like a sack of acorns."

The mice from Oak Home conferred and decided that Horace was probably telling the truth and that he was not directly involved in Pepper's death. They plodded back to the tavern, unnerved by the details of the young mouse's final moments.

When they got to the top of the stairs and into their shared room CanCan pointed at the sleeping Odette. She lay on her cot with the ring-filled purse clutched in her paws⁶. "She won't have me take it," CanCan muttered. "And believe me I've tried."

⁶ "Ah, there's the plot," said Pete. "Let's go the other way."

Kriegsmesser – Landau Before the War

Continuing the write-up of the campaign of *Kriegsmesser* set in the German city of Landau in the summer of 1617 shortly 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 11 (2023-01-05)

Weimer and Miglioresi leave their beer stools and head into the Rathaus, so the group head off to other tasks.

Udo and Franzis go to the university, intending to return the book Udo borrowed before Urzula finds the scholar and relieves him of the book. After safely returning the book, Franzis spies Urzula and her favourite thug loitering in the street outside the university. The scholar and soldier decide to take a different exit from the university and end up speaking to the sexton of the chapel who has keys to a side door. After some admonishments to pure thought and decent behaviour, the sexton opens the side gate and lets the two fellows out.

Jaroslav hides the wooden printing block he received from Martin Richter at Franzis's digs before visiting the fortifications again. There he bumps into Udo and Franzis, and changes his mind about his destination. The artist and the soldier return to the Rathaus to investigate Klepper's business dealings, where they discover that the Rosicrucian, Klepper, before his death paid for a shipment of pepper with freshly minted Spanish silver. This raises questions about Klepper's funding and ultimately who he answered to.

While at the Rathaus, Franzis once again spots Urzula's thug, and sneaks up and takes him by surprise as the villain tries to do the same to Jaroslav in the colonnade along the front of the Rathaus. Franzis quickly subdues the thug by bashing him off a wall before trussing him firmly. Jaroslav and Franzis march their captive to Alfonzo's house for questioning.

At Udo's lodgings, Udo is stashing his meagre belongings. He decided to move digs as he suspects Urzula of knowing too much about where he lives and is bugging out. Lazaro lends a hand. A tall, thin man dressed in expensive black clothes approaches, and asks after Udo the scholar. Udo plays safe and pretends to be someone else. "That young scholar? He's already scarpered, rent unpaid!"

The stranger is disappointed and leaves. Lazaro suspects him of some involvement with Metzner and Ferber, the corpse-dissectors.

Alfonzo and Franzis make short work of Urzula's thug, Thomas by name. He tells them that Urzula hired him to rough up "those meddlers", but he lets slip that he was also involved in the murder of Markus Klepper, the lawyer found with the dead workmen at the fortifications site.

Franzis tells Thomas to leave Landau for good. They untie him and Lazaro escorts him to the edge of the town.

The group discusses whether they should squeal to as many authorities as possible, but hesitate when it comes to actually identifying the wrong 'uns.

With a scrap of paper and charcoal, Udo draws up a list:

Urzula Breitbrandt, Anders Fetter, Dirk Bobbler, Taccino Miglioresi, Dirk Weimer, Jan van der Gulvert, Nikolaus Metzner and Thomas Ferber.

Someone proposes dropping them all in Gaius's tomb with some barrels of gunpowder and a match but perhaps that would only achieve their aim of undermining the fortifications?

Udo and Jaroslav ask around the fortifications again. They talk to some of the regular workmen to learn about Fetter and Bobbler, the Dutch labour organisers brought in by Urzula Breitbrandt. The two men are not liked by the local German workers. "They have us run ragged, and we haven't even got to fill in that old tomb yet."

While there, Udo starts a rumour about Spanish silver coming into Landau, flashed about by Hapsburg spies.

(I cannot find my notes for Session 11. Drat. Obviously the group uncovered an attempt to blow up the fortifications but I don't remember the details.)

Session 12 (2023-01-12)

Jaroslav and Franzis pay Pflaume the Architect a visit to warn him of the undermined fortifications at the Tomb of Gaius, Son of Gaius. Pflaume is outraged and takes them with him to the Tomb, where they interrupt Weimer and some workmen unloading barrels of gunpowder and filling the Tomb with explosives. Weimer escapes on horse-back. As he flees, Lazaro and his companions, Udo and Alfonzo, give chase, bursting from a stand of trees near the tomb where they were watching the proceedings.

Franzis bullies the abandoned workmen to remove the gunpowder barrels from the tomb, and suitably intimidated, they do so, complaining that unloading and loading are different jobs and they should be paid double.

Carriage and horse careen along the rutted trackway until Weimer pulls up and dives from his mount into a deep ditch. Lazaro halts his carriage and dismounts as a musket ball whips over his head. He advances cautiously, blunderbuss drawn, using the carriage as cover until he's right on top of Weimer's position.

To his horror, the conspirator has a second pistol, which he discharges at the coachman simultaneously with the deafening report of Lazaro's blunderbuss. As the gunsmoke clears, Lazaro is injured by a musket ball to the shoulder. Thankfully the brunt of its power was spent against Lazaro's thick coachman's jacket. Weimer is not so lucky but Udo's quick and deft healing hands save him from immediate peril.

Alfonzo and Udo load the injured Weimer onto Lazaro's carriage and get him to the camp surgeon for further treatment. Alfonzo, no fool, makes sure the horse, the two pistols and Weimer's sword are stowed away for safekeeping. Udo makes a sling for Lazaro's wounded arm, and thanks the Divine for his protection, as the coachman is bruised but his limb is unbroken.

Back at Pflaume's tent, Udo briefs the architect about recent events, which prompts him to call immediately for van der Gulvert's arrest.

Jaroslav deciphers some of the Dutch artillerist's communications, which name a Spanish financier behind the Rosicrucians, Constanza Garcia Conti. She wrote to van der Gulvert to put him in contact with one Ludovic Wernberg, in the pay of the Prince Bishop of Speyer.

The group then retires to Landau to celebrate and recover. Lazaro and Udo feed his horses and the dog while Alfonzo and Jaroslav visit Sforbeck, the captain of the Guard, to fill him in on the details.

The captain is not fully convinced of Alfonzo's innocence, but Jaroslav corroborates the gravedigger's confusing testimony and adds details of the conspirators to placate the grumpy Sforbeck. Eventually, he sends them on their way with a warning that Urzula Breitbrandt is still at large.

Jaroslav asks around and determines that Wernberg is a Reichsgraf and a colonel commanding troops for Speyer, but with some business holdings in Landau.

The two fellows return to Alfonzo's home with food and drink and they all celebrate.

During the evening, Jaroslav translates the letter from Conti to van der Gulvert and uncovers evidence that Wernberg has paid van der Gulvert, and is involved in two named conspiracies or plots: The Landau Star Project and The Red Ribbons, both under orders ultimately from Emperor Ferdinand.

Session 13 (2023-01-19)

Franzis and Lazaro prepare for the evening job and invite Jaroslav along. Alfonzo and Udo make their own way to the Hiller Ball, hired on as extra hands.

Before the evening, Jaroslav, while out hunting down gossip, runs afoul of two heavies at the Reiksverben Livery and Stables. He manages to do a runner through a yard full of manure and escapes unscathed if not unscented.

That evening the carriage driver and friends arrive at the Nachtmann residence to collect Isabella, her chaperone Maria Kunstler, and a large barrel of expensive wine. As they reach the Hiller estate where the ball is to be held, Franzis notices Isabella watching him as he climbs down from the carriage. Maria hurriedly moves Isabella along, as she lingers to watch the young soldier.

Alfonzo and Jaroslav are masked, but move in different circles. Jaroslav and Franzis mingle and soon find the young Isabella surrounded by young noblemen, paying suit. Franzis is alarmed to spot Balthazar Rumbold behind a fox's mask and alerts Maria to the man's obvious unsuitability. Udo curries favour with the older woman in conversation and stays to watch the young lady.

Meanwhile, the gravedigger Alfonzo is busy carrying wine from the house to a series of trestle tables near the hedge maze when he bumps into Lazaro. As they talk, Lazaro spies a shadow of a figure on the roof of the mansion, silhouetted briefly against the moon.

As Franzis arrives to tell his friend about Balthazar, the carriage driver spots the figure descend from the roof and break into a third floor room by the window. Lazaro and Jaroslav hurry into the building as Franzis and Alfonzo stand watch.

Inside the upper storeys are dark, with deep, moon-cast shadows here and there to confuse the eye.

Session 14 (2023-02-02)

Jaroslav poses as an art critic and quickly gathers a group of noblemen as he holds forth on the various artworks in the house. The group follow Jaroslav up the stairs to the 2nd storey as Lazaro tags along at the back of the group, using them as cover to get to the stairs and sneak to the third floor, where he saw the intruder entering the window.

Cautiously moving along the corridor, Lazaro sees a light from under the door of the bedroom he calculates matches the one the intruder broke into. As he listens at the door he is nearly struck from behind, pulling his head out of the way of the blow at the last second. He draws his sword and prepares to fight.

Outside, Franzis escorts Maria and Isabella into the hedge maze, hoping to keep the young woman from the predatory young noblemen at the ball. The featureless green vegetation make all the passages alike, but eventually the partygoers emerge into a large open space at the centre of the maze. A huge man with a bull's head stands brandishing a massive sword and bellows a challenge. The various noblemen scatter in fear, but Franzis holds his nerve and flourishes his own sword with confident ease. The minotaur collapses in defeat and the servant removes his papier-mâché head, sweetmeats and trinkets pouring out of it. Isabelle is very taken with the soldier's bravery, and links her arm with his as Maria tuts.

At the rear of the house Alfonzo and Udo are helping with the serving of the wine when they spot Urzula moving through the crowd. They hide behind an ornamental pillar as

she passes. Alfonzo follows at a safe distance as the Dutch woman hurries towards the hedge maze. Udo runs into the house to alert Jaroslav and Lazaro.

Upstairs Lazaro and his mysterious assailant exchange feints, and Lazaro throws his cloak forward hoping to befuddle his opponent. However, the unnamed figure is too clever and uses the distraction to land a blow with a cosh that leaves the coachman's ears ringing. The stranger flees away down the corridor towards the eastern end of the house.

Downstairs, Jaroslav and Udo hear the scuffle and footfalls. Jaroslav musters his rag-tag group of drunken noblemen and would-be art fanciers as Udo grabs nearby candles to light their way. Emboldened, the group climb the stairs bravely if not silently. At the top of the stairs they see the fleeing stranger and the addled Lazaro. The two drunks quickly give chase, with hollering and mirth. Udo tends to his dazed friend as Jaroslav surveys the scene. Through the keyhole they spy a woman, dressed in dark cloak and britches, bent over a small jewellery box on the bed as she attempts to open the box.

Lazaro, now back on his feet, gives the door an appraising eye and throws himself against the 'weak spot' before ricocheting off with a thud. "They put the weak spot in the wrong place!"

Udo and Jaroslav hear the approach of the house staff simultaneously and try a nearby door, before ushering the shaken coachman and themselves into an adjacent room out of sight.

They find themselves in a bedroom similar to the one with the lady intruder. Lazaro goes out on the balcony and springs across to the one outside the locked room. He slips quietly into the room, and is surprised to find it empty. Where is the lady burglar?

A moment's thought tells Lazaro she must still be in the room, and he notes that the chairs by the table near the door are disarranged. Stepping closer, he speaks. "A lovely night, my lady, T'would be a shame to be stuck under a table."

The woman emerges, and exchanges a bon mot or two with Lazaro, all the while circling him to get closer to the window. Lazaro allows this, and the woman leaves with a grin thinking she has fooled the coachman.

On the balcony, Jaroslav stands in wait at one side, Udo at the other, a curtain rope pulled taut between them. The woman trips and stumbles, but nonetheless cuts at Jaroslav with her dagger. She is swift, but not as swift as the bar-fight honed reflexes of the young artist. Jaroslav brains her with a flower pot and she collapses on the balcony.

Comments on E&A #7

General comments: Thanks for the kind words on the Traveller solo game. I enjoyed playing it, and enjoyed sharing it with the APA. I must return to it, or something like it soon.

On readability, I've read arguments either way as to which is more readable, serif or sans serif. I did find an interesting animation in an article on font readability⁷ that simulated some dyslexic people's experience of letters 'jumping around' on the page. A freeze frame of the gif looks like this⁸:

Dseiylxa

A freind who has dexilsya dseebcird to me how she eexiecrepns rdenaig. She *can* read, but it tekas a lot of cttnaorconien, and the lettres seems to "jmup anruod".

I remebmreed reidnag abuot **tyloigpmecya**. Wodlun't it be pissbole to do it ieliecntatvry on a wbsiete wthi Jcaasprvit? Srue it wluod.

Feel like mnikag a bakoormlket of tihs or siehonmtg? **Fork it** on gtiuhb.

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Dlemaenvpotel mneaidg dsireodr (DRD) is the most comomn lireanng dbitliaisy. Dsxylea is the most reezcnigd of redniag desroidrs, hveweor not all rdiaeng drioersds are likend to deiylxsa.

I found it eye-opening (and headache inducing) to try to read the animated version, as the letters change and move around in the words. Related studies do suggest that sans serif and/or monospaced typefaces work best for readers with dyslexia.

Roger BW: Re noisy mice: So true! I don't know how the old phrase got started. Clearly not referencing the mice we've experienced. I remember a line from somewhere. "If you think you've got rats in the attic, it's mice. If you think you've got elephants, it's rats."

Re tech stocks and unrealistic expectations of growth: You've hit the nail on the head. So much of what I see from MS, Google, etc. nowadays are features in search of someone who wants to actually use them, which get forced on end users regardless.

I like the idea of *Fudge on the Fly* and other systems where the character abilities and stats are revealed in play. It's not to everyone's taste, but I've used it a couple of times in one-shots where it worked well. A half-way house, where you stat up your character but hold some points in reserve to respond to developments in play works too, and I seem to remember someone, possibly in *A&E*, modelling Han Solo and Luke Skywalker as two PCs, Han, the one where all the points were spent up front, and Luke who held back enough points to develop Jedi powers when needed.

⁷ <https://geniusee.com/single-blog/font-readability-research-famous-designers-vs-scientists>

⁸ The original animation is here: <https://geniusee.com/storage/app/media/blog91/14.gif>

Erica Frank (Elf): I have fond memories of Glitch and missed it terribly when it shut down. I loved the exploration and the wonder of it. The community gardens and the habit most players had of replanting as they harvested feels like something from an earlier internet with fewer trolls and griefers.



I think *Wanderhome* makes a good fit for the Glitch feel and sense of place. Your descriptions of the locations re-imagined for *Wanderhome* are cool. I got all nostalgic for the MMORPG and pleasant journeys of exploration from years ago. May your butterfly milk never curdle.

Michael Cule: I'm sorry to hear that your *Mausritter* game fell apart. You might be better off using a system you're well versed in and declaring the PCs to be mice *ab initio*. In our games of *Mausritter*, we rarely use more than straight d20 rolls against attributes and handwave the rest. The encumbrance mechanics are too fiddly for me, and once I started pruning I found there are a lot of rules I don't really call upon.

Re assigning skills/stats in play: Thank you! I had forgotten to mention *Hero Wars/HeroQuest* as an example of improvised character generation. I agree that some sort of defining characteristic or trait is needed to get started, or the PC might as well be a sort of Morph figure made of plasticine⁹.

Lisa Padol: Thanks for the sympathy on the sleep issues.

Re *Mausritter* write-up: Philbert was reckless it's true, and I probably unconsciously played him to move the otherwise indecisive players along, but also I saw him as a human in a frog body and not really aware of the dangers his new size and body was prone to.

Re the solo *Traveller*: I enjoyed the surprises the dice threw at me. The dialogue from all the characters was just off the top of my head, with thumbnail sketches of the navigator and engineer as best friends who loved to bicker with one another as a starting point.

Re ticks/checks: Ireland has ticks like so: ☒ or ☒, but separate them from check, which in this context is a verb. One might check (i.e. roll against) a skill in *BRP* for example and on success, tick the box. We don't check a check box, but tick a tick box.

Re distributing points in play after character generation: Yep, you remembered that from *Hero Wars* too. I want to say that I saw it in other *BRP*-derived games, but I can't pinpoint it before HW.

Re *Smallville* and other *Cortex RPG* games: I agree that a playmat helps. "One from the red box, one from the blue box and any two from the yellow box" sounds like a solid shortcut for building a dice pool.

⁹ Though there's likely a SF setting that could start with freshly decanted vat-people as PCs.

RYCT Michael Cule re the *Everway* Powers system: I liked that too, and generally shoehorned magic and wizardly powers into a power definition instead of using the Magic system rules.

Re T. Kingfisher's Sworn Soldier books: They are *good*, aren't they? I particularly enjoy the relationship between the main character and their batman/sergeant companion.

Pum (Paul Holman): Re en dashes: The red-headed stepchild of the Hyphen family! I admit that most of the time I shove a hyphen in and make do.

I loved the demon destroying dirt story. It echoes many foolish schemes cooked up by my *D&D* players in secondary school.

Avram Grumer: RYCT Lisa Padol re margins: Lastish I fiddled with the margins when I was thinking about line lengths, 1- vs 2-column layouts and the like. Narrower margins fought against my attempts to keep the line lengths a comfortable number of characters. I guess there's a reason that typesetting and layout are skilled, paid jobs if you want them done right.

Brian Rogers: Sorry to hear about the mould problem. Living in Ireland and in contact with a variety of students over the years I've heard many horror stories about mould in student flats that good taste requires I refrain from airing¹⁰.

HR as "People and Culture": Like Michael Cule, Personnel always worked for me. A name change like HR to People and Culture smacks of Newspeak to me.

I too have fond memories of the *Tudor Talents* game, and we can still get a rise out of Alex by referring to his "ponk-hole", which the group gave as a nickname to his interdimensional space.

Re *Dungeon Crawler Carl*: I enjoyed books 2-5 too, but found number 6 (with the collectable card game element) less satisfying, and I've delayed starting number 7 as a result.

Kriegsmesser doesn't have a hit location system. In fact the default rules don't have hit points or any wounds system. What this particular campaign has, however, is an occasionally cruel GM with a sense of humour. It worked particularly well when Sam's acolyte/scholar PC repeatedly ended up bandaging Pete's wagoneer's head and chiding him about avoiding alcohol while concussed:

Pete as Lazaro: "So no brandy before lunch?"

Sam as Udo: "No alcohol at all!"

Pete as Lazaro: "Not even wine with breakfast?"

Sam as Udo: "None!"

Pete as Lazaro: "Alright, alright," conceded the wagoneer as he uncorked a bottle of beer.

¹⁰ "See? That's your problem. Open all the windows and freeze the little mycelial bastards!"

More excellent insanity in the Regrettable Hero Doctor Hormone and your expansion of the V&V skills and heightened attribute powers looks good. When you mentioned ‘non-gendered ass-kicker’ in your expanded pet skill, Companion, I immediately thought of a couple more: non-binary buddy and gender-fluid friend, likely all part of Ace Ally’s team of queer heroes.

I’m never likely to run V&V again, but I really enjoyed the Legion of Superheroes PBEM game where you bore the brunt of the rules wrangling.

Brian Misiaszek: As expressed in email, I’m very sorry for your loss of Sadie. She was a good dog.

Did you create the various maps for *The Mazorra* from scratch? They’re very good.

I hope you enjoy *What Stalks the Deep*. I don’t think I’ve read anything by T. Kingfisher that I haven’t enjoyed. Her more explicitly written-as-horror novels like *The Hollow Places*, *A House With Good Bones* and *The Twisted Ones* are all great reads, and a lot of her fantasy works have a horrific element not far beneath the surface. The isolated farmer and wife in *Minor Mage* and the ending of *Nine Goblins* had shivers down my spine when I read them.

I’m glad the write-ups hit the mark. I found the solo Traveller-esque experience much more compelling than I expected. I’ve tried a few published solo games before, like *Four Against Darkness*, but I found the home-brewed simplicity worked well for me.

Joshua Kronengold: I hope you’re surviving the job hunt, or better yet have secured a new post with a company you feel comfortable working for. An old friend recently left Google after over 20 years when they signed a contract with a well-known miltech supplier to use Gemini AI in some project. He’s ended up at another of the Big Six, though, so I hope his fire is less murderous than his frying pan was.

When I mentioned the idea to my players of a “quiet as mice” comment in a loud voice from one of the PCs we fell immediately into a rendition of Gilbert and Sullivan’s “With Cat-Like Tread...” with the customary gusto (and usually misremembered lyrics):

Re the body swapped Amber PC: The player was given a brief outline of what I wanted from Dworkin (sow chaos, mostly), and the occasional note. One of the cousins (Sam’s PC, Rhiannon) was surprised to find it incredibly difficult to contact Christiania (the swapped PC) via Trump, but persisted with some support from another Psyche-monster in the family. She in turn was very surprised to find herself welded to Christiania, soles of the feet to the other’s footsoles, spinning at alarming speed inside a magically resilient sphere somewhere way the hell out in Shadow. They escaped eventually but not before Dworkin-Christianity had a hoot messing with the other PCs plans.

Jim Vasilakos and Timothy Collinson: (Jim) Re handling a misjump in the solo Traveller-esque game. I handwaved it. Without a pre-determined map there was no point in referring to rules for distance and direction. I just created a destination system that looked promising for the next chapter of the play. Jump physics in *Traveller* proper

have a primary purpose of keeping PCs' ships close to interesting destinations so I'm not surprised that the rules don't really go into misjumps to Oort clouds and other distant locations, but as I understand the pseudo-physics of jump travel even misjumping ships are likely to emerge close to a gravity well.

Re the ancient Earth sage: Pterry is one of the names Terry Pratchett was fondly known by. Re Pterry's upper atmosphere: I don't retain the combination of thermodynamics and fluid dynamics knowledge to model the distribution of heat in a gas giant's atmosphere and consequent diffusion, but I'm happy to say that with sufficient rotation I'd imagine the heating is fairly well distributed. As with the misjump, I didn't bother with the details of matching the gravitational pull of the gas giant against the manoeuvre drive's G-rating. I don't see why skimming ships in *Traveller* wouldn't stand on their tails in the skimming process just to get the full G-rating of the thruster plates.

(Tim) I'm glad you enjoyed the coffee stain map. It would probably drive a proper geologist or geographer bonkers, but I did find the resulting circle of islands pleasing. Perhaps when the local inhabitants discover the shape of their wider world they create a myth of Ra's Great Coffee Cup, or how the Great God Budweiser made the world from a beer mat.

Limli the Librarian: Welcome to the APA party!

Everyone else: SRAEBNC.

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DENIZENS OF THE LIBRARY #7

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All About Me

I had had clever plans about hammering this issue out early during my Christmas vacation, getting 1.5 months of comments in, and then we all got the flu. So alas Christmas was delayed a bit and not much of anything got done on my time off. Such is the way of the world.

I was supposed to have a session with my daughter's HS game group over their break that was also derailed due to flu (one of the other players); I keep hoping we can get some gaming in since the last time we saw them their ship was literally sailing into Hell to rescue their lost comrades and it would be nice to close that off someday.

I did, however, get to run a one shot of the WEG d6 Star Wars this month, mostly as a way to get two new gamers I'd met in town together. The woman who played the Young Senatorial is a burgeoning DM (she runs D&D 5E for her siblings on line) who really wanted a chance to play and see how someone else GM'd as she is otherwise learning from podcasts. The notes for this game as well as a write up festooned with footnotes on what I was thinking when I was running it are in this ish, but I really wrote it that way as a learning tool for her: she was there when I made these decisions, and now she has some notes as to the hows and whys of my choices. Honestly going back and interrogating myself as to when and why I made some decisions in the flow of play is a fascinating experiment. I recommend it. She's talking about trying to keep the group going with alternating GMs, but with my special needs dad schedule that's not something I can commit to. Hopefully the others can.

Inside the Library:

The *Knave of Ridgefield* continue an anarchic romp through *The Keep at Koralgesh*¹ where their wanderings have skipped a lot of the treasure but did let Blanche use her *Sculpt Elements* spell to free three guards petrified by the traitor court wizard a century ago. Two have signed on to her as henchmen as she is a fellow worshipper or Kor (God of Roads and the Elderly, whose symbol is the Sun) and had 2 Charisma free. A disastrous reaction roll for the third led to him storming off.

Remus, the animated terra cotta statue werewolf that was once a temple guardian for Oshalla (goddess of Disease and Abjuration, who spreads lycanthropy so her wolf-kin can hunt the warlocks & hags that once threatened the island's refugees; eventually the cure was worse than the disease and her temples were torn down) who travels with these people at his goddess' command: they are to help him find the city Sangkon Bhet² (the source of an extradimensional incursion, not that the PCs know that yet, but all the nearby monsters are from the *Fiend Folio* to show how abnormal they are) has secured the Keep's crystal ball, along with maps & a book of Sangkon Bhet lore. He is hoping to find the third guard to convert the disillusioned Kor worshipper to his fell deity.

Eldon of Harthill and his companion Finn accidentally completed the ritual that laid all the undead of the Keep to rest, and from there located the treacherous wizard's chamber, found the chest containing his seven (!) spell books, and with Blanche's help, defeated an Epadrazzil, another demon-bound-in-a-painting of the sort they had found before. Alas, one of the ghouls that had been captured by the demon in the painting escaped out the window Keep's mountainside window, and they cannot be certain of its demise as the fog shrouded its fall.

They group returned to their ship to drop off the treasures found thus far; and are returning for to search for further treasures in hopes of leveling up again before the trek to Sangkon Bhet. (Eldon is about 1000 xp from 4th, Blanche is halfway through 2nd, Remus just 1st.)

Only Eldon and Remus made the next session, so just they (and Finn, Eldon's henchman) returned to the dungeon. They speed ran it as much as possible, trying to find the treasure room so that they didn't have to split the XP for treasure with Blanche and her 2 henchmen. It was a bit cheesy, but the dice, their decisions, and their finding 3 healing potions that let them keep pushing forward let them succeed in their goal... just as time ran out. I told them they would be able to get just enough to level out and scarper back to the ship, or all of it but we would pick up right here next session and they might have to split it with Blanche or lose it to wandering monsters. They grumpily accepted option A.

¹ From *Dungeon* #2, written by Robert B. Giacomozzi and Jonathan H Simmons

² An adventure site from the 3.5E supplement *Lords of Madness: The Book of Aberrations* by Richard Baker, James Jacobs, and Steve Winter

An Age of Reckoning...

While unconnected from the games for the kids, I am using the library space to run a **WEG d6 Star Wars**. The players are one from my HS game group (1:15 away), one from my college group (15 min away) – both of whom are familiar with the system – and new players in town who have only played D&D 5E for a couple years.

The initial premise for the game is “If The Mandalorian is Star Wars bounty hunting as Lone Wolf and Cub, this is Star Wars bounty hunting as Cowboy Bebop”: the PCs were to be jobbing hunters looking for imperial officers guilty of war crimes who need to be brought in for trial in the New Republic. The templates the Players selected changed that a bit, as well as the ideas shifting as I put the plot together, but the rough idea holds.

IGN8Tius is a bounty hunter droid of the IG-88 model (built by taking the IG-88 stats from Galaxy Guide 3 and tweaking a little). His travel companion is **Roist'r Vaazinj**, a Xexto³ teenager (using the kid template), the orphan of a pirate who the Empire killed in the closing days of the war. He sees the droid as an emotionally distant father figure, he sees the kid as a useful asset but isn't indifferent to him. Both have been hired by **Seris Valorum**, a Young Senatorial trying to start a *War Crimes Tribunal* with a list of people she needs to bring in. She has an Abyssin⁴ bodyguard **Rooka Patzi** (a Big Frekin' Alien). If it turns out a potential 5th player can make it, she will be **Lady Valorum**, the Senator's sister and an embarrassing Quixotic Jedi. We lost the “we need to keep getting jobs to keep flying” vibe, but it works.

I came into this knowing I wanted one part of the adventure to be ‘survival on an alien world’, so the 5-act structure is as follows

- 1) Seris names the assignment (Admiral Iaxic Grenau, orchestrator of the Mon Cala ‘rain of death’), gets the others, and heads for the Yaterro system; upon their drop to sub-light they are caught in a crossfire of a starship battle, are hit, and must make an emergency landing on the planet. (crawl and script)
- 2) Yaterro is a world of long islands of parallel mountain ranges, running coast/jungle/range/desert/range/jungle/coast. The players will pick if they want to go down on the coast or desert side of their mountain-settlement target, and must make their way to the settlement, Mos Kraytos, while Gsen's astromech droid R3-KT (Katie) repairs the ship (or they bring Katie with them?).

- a. If they opt for desert they discover the source of Mos Kraytos wealth: Admiral Grenau had brought a Flakax⁵ mother to a Yaterro desert, and she is unaware that the Empire has fallen. Her drone children labor in the mines under the mountains. The PCs encounter rogue drones on the surface that might lead them to the truth of this and turn the Flakax mother to their side. Beast Riding will be necessary!
 - b. If the opt for coastline they encounter members of Mos Kraytos' bohemians: the city houses the children of the Imperial rich, moved here to shield them from the spreading war; these are unaware of the evils undergirding their wealth. Sufficiently impassioned speech etc. might get the PCs allies among these idle youth... or they could stun them and steal their IDs.
- 3) In Mos Kraytos, they must infiltrate the city center – Kuat Gardens – is where Grenau holds court. He promises these wealthy families comfort and security for their fealty, exporting Flakax-mined ores for the former & using a squad of Storm Troopers for the latter. Exactly how the PCs get access to Grenau is up to them; I'll be making it up as I go for timing and such.
 - 4) Once they get to Grenau it's up to them to figure out how to get him off the planet. Gsen's mandate is for a live return, but there is a half bounty if her report declares that there was no other way. (the Kid needs the whole bounty to fully repair and upgrade her ship, the last of her father's fleet.) Maybe they steal one of his ships. Maybe they steal a repulsorlift to get to their ship. Maybe Katie repairs their ship and flies it to them. If we don't have time, getting the ship out of atmo ends the game
 - 5) If we have time left, Mos Kraytos TIE fighters take off after them, as the Admiral left standing orders that he was not to be taken off the planet alive. This gives space for a starship battle before they can jump to hyperspace and get away.

I think that covers everything. We have 4 hours in the library room, but we're meeting for lunch an hour before for everyone to get their final character sheets and go over the Crawl, so we can jump into Act 2 as soon as we get into the room. That's theoretically an hour plus for each act. Of course, the players might decide to mobilize a Flakax army, or lead a youth rebellion, or some other fool nonsense. They are players, after all.

³ <https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Xexto>

⁴ <https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Abyssin>

⁵ <https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Flakax>

Act I

As is classic, the Star Wars first act happens 90% off screen with the opening crawl, followed by the script. If you're not familiar with the WEG Star Wars line, each published module starts with a script that the GM is supposed to assign roles to the PCs as a way to do an en media res infodump as fast as possible. Naturally I also include an opening crawl just like the movies in order to provide even more context for where this falls.



The Crawl

It is a period of reconstruction. With Emperor Palpatine's death the Galactic Empire collapsed. The Rebellion moved quickly to establish galactic governance. The core worlds are firmly in the New Republic, but corrupt regional governors control key territories and the Rim remains ungoverned.

*War criminals from naval command, ISB members, and core world government have fled to the rim or 'dark regions' to avoid accountability for their actions. **Senator Seris Valorum** struggles to establish a War Crimes Tribunal over calls for general amnesty or personal vengeance. She is tracking key targets to bring in to force the Senate's hand.*

*Her first target is **Admiral Iaxic Grenau**, who engineered Calamar's 'rain of death'. Bringing Grenau in for trial will swing the Mon Calamari coalition to her plan. Seris, her droid **R3-KT**, bodyguard **Rooka Patzi** the droid bounty hunter **IG-N80-S**, and Iggy's interlocutor **Roist'r Vaazinj** are en-route to **Mos Kraytos** in the Yaterro system, which Seris has identified as Grenau's bolt hole.*

The Script

Roust'r Vaazinj: All right Senator, we're closing on a system where your R3's coordinates said it would be. Must be Yaterro.

R3-KT: Beep bloop wrrrrrrClick bleep [Anyone with Languages 4d+ hears "The kid isn't bad either".]

Rooka Patzi: [inarticulate Abyssin language sounds that will likely only be occurring during this intro scene]

Senator Valorum: The Coordinates were expensive, Rooka, but worth it. Admiral Grenau went to great lengths to keep Yaterro hidden from the Mon Calamari.

IGN8ius: Their interest is why this organic has high value to you?

Senator Valorum: Alive, Ignatius. We need him alive to stand trial.

IGN8ius: Our contract stipulates a half bounty for an identifiable organic remnant.

Roust'r Vaazinj: But Iggy, that won't keep the ship in repair! We need to bring him in.

IGN8ius: <several seconds pause> Acceptable.

Senator Valorum: Look, the plan is sound. We drop out of hyperspace, KT transmits the recovered ISB codes. We're in Mos Kraytos, his mountain city-slash-fortress, at Grenau's invitation. Approach, isolate, extract.

Rooka Patzi: [inarticulate Abyssin language sounds]

Roust'r Vaazinj: No, she's right... lots of Imps travel with security entourages these days. You and Iggy will blend right in, and I'm her "servant".

[If she's here, **Lady Valorum:** "Something is wrong...." Which everyone ignores because quixotic jedi.]

Roust'r Vaazinj: Dropping hyperspace in 3, 2, 1... Poodoo! [or some other star wars equivalent swear] There's a battle going on out there?! We just caught a stray bolt! You! Big guy, take the repair console!

Rooka Patzi: [inarticulate Abyssin language sounds]

IGN8ius: I read six attack craft, 74% probability pirate, attacking two medium cargo transport leaving the planet. I calculate that this was not part of the plan?

Senator Valorum: This makes no sense! Pirates have to be targeting something! Where would a disgraced admiral get a workforce for resource extraction! Can we talk to the pirates?

Roust'r Vaazinj: Don't dare. If they register we are here they will kill us. It's what I would do. We have to get into atmo.

Rooka Patzi: [inarticulate Abyssin language sounds]

Roust'r Vaazinj: I didn't get that....

Senator Valorum: He said the drive got hit; we won't be able to make a standard approach to Mod Kraytos.

IGN8ius: Based on the terrain we have two equally poor options: off the coast or in the desert, on opposing sides of Mos Kraytos' mountain.

Roust'r Vaazinj: Well someone needs to pick one soon!

Act II

Consensus is that water landing is safer. The Senator is clearly flustered by being in the middle of a starfight, and it's Roust'r who remembers the mission brief about Yaterro⁶ – the biome of the planet is Baja California, with shallow coastlines and no big nasty ocean life near the coast – and the kid brings Iggy's ship down to kiss the ground before going out to assess the damage. It's nothing KT can't repair given time: she can get them airborne again in 6 hours, or space worthy again shortly after nightfall.⁷ Seris and Rooka have been evaluating the trip up and make it at about 6 hours to Mos Kraytos. IGn8ius briefly recommends just waiting the repairs out, but everyone opts to push forward in case their landing was not unnoticed.

The trip includes about 3 hours of forested part followed by 3 hours of light scrub; the jungle trip was uneventful, other than Roust'r getting dehydrated and needing to down one of his highly restorative fizzyglugs⁸ as Rooka at the rear has to keep pulling the kid up. At the scrub line IGn8ius picks up movement – an incoming speeder with six occupants.

The group duck back into the jungle and observe a highly tricked out speeder – *Star Wars* by way of *American Graffiti* – stop not far from them. Since they aren't close enough to hear Roust'r sneaks up, quickly determining that these are effete wealthy teenagers going down to the shore for a picnic. The Xexto leaps up and starts talking to them, trying to establish that he is a planet native... the kid's goal is to get them out of the speeder to steal it. The 'leader' of the teens pulls out an archaic hunting rifle during this but doesn't point it at Roust'r. Not knowing what just happened, Seris nods agreement to IGn8ius

dropping the leader with its sonic stunner. The kid drops his rifle and goes down⁹. At the soundburst the senator and her bodyguard drop two more with stun blasts. The rest of the new Republic agents charge as two remaining teens flee and the third dives for the speeder controls.

Roust'r settles out of the way, blaster pointed at the stunned teen, while Iggy closes, stands on the rifle, and points his blaster at the head of the one going for the controls, while Seris seizes the controls. Rooka leaps the speeder completely, lands and snags the two fleeing ones, slamming them together into unconsciousness.

The Senator being unwilling to engage in the wholesale slaughter of kids, they instead tie up the teens after a desultory questioning. (Seris felt Roust'r's intro & the fight had 'queered the pitch' for further discussion) Iggy checked all their IDs against the Senator's target list, but none of their parents are worse than those who profited from the Empire and didn't fight against it. Not her favorite people, but not targets. The kids reveal that they know nothing of the pirates but ore transports leave regularly, which raises questions, and that they, but not their parents, are here... it's a boarding school, which raises *way more* questions. Leaving the kids there – having established there are no local predators and not wanting to deal with hostages – they steal the speeder to get close to Mos Kraytos, and walk the rest of the way¹⁰.

Approaching the city they go over the modified plan: she *Almar Pyr*, the agent of ISB Colonel Myn Felis – recently captured head of ISB assassination teams as well as other network activities (IGn8ius: “a dilettante.”) and recently in receipt of Admiral Grenau's invitation – send by Felis to assess Grenau's offer.

⁶ I told everyone they could make Planetary Systems rolls even though everyone except Seris is at 2d-ish and she's at 4d, and she gets one of her only crappy rolls of the day with an 8 while the kid gets a 14. His player's statement of “I just reread the mission brief” while her being flustered with the unexpected battle was perfect to explain this lapse.

⁷ I totally and complexly ignored the actual Starship Repair rules here. WEG d6 is a totally binary skill system: you either succeed or you don't based on the target numbers, and the outcome is either fixed or settled by a second roll. This is very unsatisfying in a dice pool game where when you get big damn numbers it should mean something. So I implemented a more loopy-goosy “the higher you roll the faster it's done” forgetting how high an astromech's 7d of Starship Repair can get. Seris rolled a 27, so I set the numbers above, which were short enough that the PCs considered waiting out the repairs. If they had done so, I would have skipped the encounter with the Young Bohemians and gone right to the city.

⁸ You will note that I'd planned for part of this to be ‘survival on an alien world’ and then none of that happened. Part of

this is the realization that our time constraints were too high based on the volume of player banter I had seen, and part of it was my lazy ass lack of prep left me uninspired for what that might actually be... so I allowed another Systems roll to determine that with the local fauna they would be, as Iggy's player put it, bitten not eaten. If we come back to this one session will be entirely a Star Wars reskin of Voltaris from *Star Frontiers*, but that's not today.

⁹ Like a chump I hadn't looked up the stats on this so free formed it for ‘maybe it hits crowds? On a good roll?’ But note that even that is outside the SW binary outcome design. The real answer is ‘it's short range but silent other than to the target’, which would have placed it outside the range Iggy needed for the attack. The lesson here is quickly make a decision and move on; if we play again later ask Iggy's player if he prefers short range silent or medium range area.

¹⁰ There was SOOOO much more they could have gotten from here – more local intel, allies, teen revolt etc. – but after I pushed once with the leader trying to engage with them I let it lie. Story dead end, actions have consequences, move on.

Act III

Mos Kraytos has the enormous stone battlements seen in places that might expect Walker fire. Inside is a beauty of a city with one central spire 20+ stories high. Seris' 'Almar' mien and the look of her escort clearly worry the Storm Troopers at the gate¹¹, and IGn8ius picks up their comms chatter agreeing this is 'above their pay grade'. They call their lieutenant who meets 'Almar' at the gate and accepts her invitation code with all possible solicitation, calling a speeder to save them to the walk to city center. They spot more Stormtroopers, lots of youths ages 7-22ish with a generally equal number of adults all dressed to indicate great wealth, and some strange insectoid being wearing decorated collars that mark them as property. Seris recognizes them as Flakax¹² and postulates that Grenau must have relocated an egg or infant hive mother here into the desert.

The trip through town 'Almar' subtly grills the lieutenant on the situation, dropping what knowledge she already has to confirm that the Flakax are a labor force not just for the local noble families but the mines, and the sale of ores – which he didn't identify¹³ – funds the Admiral's operation. Meanwhile Rooka scans the area for threats, confirming that they aren't being lead into any sort of trap and the locals are not threats, and IGn8ius calculates based on what it sees that Grenau has a half company – fifty or so – Stormtroopers here¹⁴. The speeder deposits them at the tower, and they are led to their rooms and informed to make ready for the evening's party¹⁵.

While Roust'r replicates some servant clothes they run through their options. Their original multi-day plan of gaining trust is shot – with the missing teenagers they have tonight. If the Flakax hive mother is nearby maybe the Senator can negotiate seeing it? That means getting an audience with the Admiral, but if there's a party any old Imperial like Grenau will be having social meetings

throughout it. They decide to let him come to "Felis' Agent", he invited her, he has a pitch, let that guide how they isolate him. IGn8ius and Rooka will accompany 'Almar' to the party to reinforce her basassosity, while Roust'r will take Seris' commlink and sneak about as a servant to gather more intel that might prove useful¹⁶.

Act IV

At the designated time a Flakax servant arrives and with a chitter and gestures them to follow. Seris translates¹⁷ the chitter as "it is the hive mother's will that I lead you elsewhere.". She responds in Flakax to gather more info – all orders are the will of the hive mother, and that order is to listen to certain meat-beings direction – but the individual drone is not smart. Seris remembers when the Hive Mothers were informed that the Empire had fallen the drones slaughtered all the Imperials on Flakax.

Once the others have left, Roust'r makes use of being a four armed arboreal race and dangles out the window to start his sneak... and immediately¹⁸ oversees that the room below them is a security office. He overhears that the security forces are now on alert due to the missing teens, and the operating assumption is that the teens are doing something stupid and hiding in the tower; half the city's Stormtroopers are coming in to search, and half the remainder are out on speederbikes searching outside the city. Their timetable and options are narrowing.

At the party everyone takes stock: 'Almar' lets herself be brought around by one of the bored local wealthy, Deng Cardas, who uses her as a fascinating new conversation topic to bolster his status while she confirms that this party is a weekly occurrence. The room is older children, parents visting their children, and teachers. It's not a boarding school. It's an Imperial finishing academy to train the next generation during this brief interregnum. She seethes, but prepares for Grenau.

¹¹ Seris blew the doors off the Con check, and I'm following the general theory of "one check should last as long as you can reasonably make it" to keep the story flowing an assume PC competency. The more often you roll, the greater a chance of failing – less so in dice pools than in D&D's d20, but still....

¹² Another excellent knowledge based role! Information is the currency of the game economy – circulate it!

¹³ It wasn't identified because I didn't know and didn't care. The pirates were an excuse to get the cold open ship crash land not be a PC's fault. For there to be pirates there had to be something to steal. The Flakax are to have desert encounter and a slave race for the PCs to rescue if they went that way. The mines became the thing the Flakax were doing that gave the pirates something to steal. The players got *super* interested in the logistics of this, so let it play out. *Mystery!*

¹⁴ Making sure each PCs who asks has some data point they feel good about collecting! Emotional response is good!

¹⁵ "Tower? What happened to *Kuat Gardens* from your notes?" you ask. Totally forgot about it. The big phallic image ended up fitting the mildly lech old man personality Grenau got.

¹⁶ Utterly irrelevant to the plot, but Roust'r's player boosted their Sneak skill, and the players were hung up on the logistics and identification of the ore. Better to improv a thing along those lines rather than leave the player(s) frustrated.

¹⁷ Another case of Seris' players crazy dice luck, her 4D Languages comes through in the mid 20's, so I did a bit of Improv to give her a moment.

¹⁸ With a failure due to a Wild Die complication from the bad initial Stealth roll just having the PC get caught is the *worst* option. Instead I made the overall situation worse – no, this was not part of the plan, this was from the dice – and let him know it. Information is currency, and here it ratchets tension.

Rooka stays at most a couple meters from 'Almar', looking obviously unhappy if anyone got close enough to touch her, while scanning the room for threats. There were 10 other plainclothes security here guarding the legitimately wealthy, but they were humans. If needs be he could handle all of them¹⁹. IGn8ius maintained a space on the periphery, keeping contact with Roust'r and scanning local comms. When the kid let them know about the security changes he arranged to pass by and whisper the intel to Rooka.

Roust'r decided to travel more openly as a servant, and patrolling Stormtroopers gave him a cuff or two upside the head for his trouble while the local servants wanted nothing to do with him²⁰. Finally he quit that and broke into one of the offices, looking for anything. There he found the shopping schedules confirming everything the group suspected, as well as where the ore was moving to. It still didn't identify the ore, but he pulled all of it to data crystals and pocketed it... right before the door chime indicated Stormtroopers entering the room²¹. "Alright kids, you triggered a motion sensor, we know you're in there..." Roust'r managed to slip just outside their search and escape into the suspended ceiling when they were looking elsewhere. He hears the Troopers work out that if the alarm went off and but no kids... maybe it's not the kids. Maybe it's someone else? They call the suspicion in and the lieutenant orders a hover-platform search of the tower's exterior. Once they leave Roust'r ties a bit of string²² to the windowframe to make it look like a rope remnant. IGn8ius tells the kid to stay put... but calculates a very low chance this will happen.

"Rear Admiral Deng, you can't expect to keep this new guest all to yourself..." Seris allows herself to get whisked off by the Admiral, who sweeps her to a balcony (sans railing because *Star Wars*) with a lovely moonlit view of the desert. Off in the distance she can see a

facility that likely houses, or at least threatens, the Hive Mother. She's not in the city... but maybe they can still play this? As 'Almar' she lets Grenau guide the conversation around his wants and his pride, slowly bargaining for being able to see the operation tomorrow morning to report to Felis. It's clear that Grenau respects 'Almar's boss and wants her resources housed out of Mos Kraytos, but that respect doesn't stop him from putting his arm around 'Almar's shoulder as he points out the breadth of his domain.²³

Iggy is tracking the hover-platform, which having found evidence of a break in is circling the building 2 floors below and manages to whisper that to Rooka. Rooka, aside from wanting to rip Grenau's arm off, sizes up the Admiral's bodyguard and hates him completely for being competent enough to be dangerous ("I want to rip his arm off too"). He is increasingly worried about getting out of this room but has no way to feed the Senator the information he's getting from IGn8ius about the deteriorating security situation. Then the answer presents itself, and the Abyssin bides his time. The IG droid catches comms chatter to Grenau's bodyguard about the search and he makes a face, glancing between 'Almar' and her security before raising his hand in a way that starts the other plain clothes security approaching.

Approaching the security chief IGn8ius asks "Do we have a problem?" "Yes, I think so..." and the two killers draw on each other simultaneously! Iggy grabs the chief's gun hand before he can bring his blaster on line and unleashes his sonic stunner, but the chief is already in motion, moving with a complex flip that keeps his head clear from the stunner and frees his gun hand. Stalemate²⁴. Rooka trusts the Force and charges, with a flying tackle taking both the Senator and the Admiral off the balcony! He twists mid-air, getting himself under them before they crash land hard on the hover-platform

¹⁹ This is a case of inserting new gaming tech. I suspect the experience was improved by my adding *Feng Shui* RPG principles of every skill carrying a knowledge aspect, so with his 5d+2 Brawling he was able to make and assess the other "security" in the room. The players mentioned scene in from the Denzel Washington *Equalizer* where he calculated how long it would take to handle a room of Russian mobsters. Knowing that other than the targets head guy he was the baddest baddass there hit a player sweet spot at zero cost.

²⁰ A case of the players bad dice luck continuing, with his Con skill failing twice. I felt bad but letting open dice rolls fail when they obviously fail is better for table play than fudging.

²¹ He had succeeded in his search and stealth rolls but with a complication, so he found what he wanted before being cornered! I repeat: none of this data matters! But for players in the moment it felt like it mattered, which is all that matters. Plus for the rest of the scene his dice finally started liking him!

²² The kid template starts with 1 pet (alive or dead), 2 bottles of fizzyglug, and the player was doing a Checkov's Gun run and trying to use everything on the list in play somehow. He was all ready to spray fizzyglug into an imperial security officer's eyes if it came up

²³ I told the player that alas there's no way to sell a midnight trip to the mining operation as romantic, she asked "so he's now straight up hitting on me?" "Consider it more old man mild misogyny; it's something you could play on if you want." "I extricate myself from his arm; I am an assassins agent."

²⁴ Note that I broke the rules again here as the security chief's declared action of "Shoot Iggy" became impossible when Iggy won initiative and grabbed his gun, so I shifted it to 'break free' to keep the dramatic tension up. No one questioned this, but it does spotlight some issues with SW's declare up, act down initiative system. It makes some sense, but it's also very hard to keep in your head if you're used to other rules.

two stories below. Unaware this was coming the Senator still responds, grabbing the Admiral in a neck hold to keep the old man stunned. She had heard several of her bodyguards ribs go on the landing and didn't know what shape he was in²⁵. The two stormtroopers at the controls are shocked into temporary inaction²⁶.

IGN8ius calculates a way to leap to the rising platform while occupying the guards with his flamethrower, but first has to evade a shot from the security chief, then resist a half-dozen collapsable batons and blades from the lesser security. A lucky shot from one of those severs a servo link and the droid goes down²⁷. With a chuckle the security chief grabs the droid's leg and drags him to the edge to drop him over. The two stormtroopers on the platform overcome their shock; one draws a blaster, which the Senator tries to grab and gets rudely pushed away for her efforts²⁸. The other runs for the controls ... only to find a Xexto kid already there!

See, a few minutes earlier Roust'r had stayed out of sight while the Stormtroopers took the bait about assuming someone was outside, and then began the ordered perimeter sweep. Roust'r had trusted the force and scampered out onto the hover platform's cargo webbing just before it vanished, as there was no longer any other way out of the room! Desperately hoping for a chance to get off elsewhere, he felt the impact of his allies on it, glanced up, and seized the initiative. Seeing Iggy slipping over the edge he yanked the controls up just as IGN8ius, who was tracking the platform with his motion sensors, kicked off the wall and the droid landed harmlessly in the spot Rooka had just vacated. Rooka had stood up and thrown a Trooper heading for the controls off.

Alas, with the platform rising the six security officers have a chance to leap over! Seris, undaunted, trusts the Force and again leaps for the Stormtroopers blaster, grabbing it and sending the two of them spinning, with the Trooper flying into one of the leaping security, sending both staggering back onto the platform. Rooka assists three in their leaps – well, he heaves one in midair and grabs another by the leg to slap him into a third – as the rain of bodies continues. Two manage to land and land blows on the Abyssin, but nothing he can't shrug off. He reaches out to snag one of the security... The room beyond the balcony is emptying of guests and filling with troopers. Seris realizes she can call KT to for evac... she reaches for her commlink... and Roust'r realizes he has it. Iggy resets and sits up to shoot one of the remaining security and realizes he doesn't have his blaster... but Seris has one. She tosses it the blaster, while Roust'r lobs her the commlink. Roust'r looks over and makes eye contact with the security chief, down the barrel of the chief's gun.

Roust'r ducks his long head and janks the platform down, throwing off Iggy and Rooka's attacks, while KT announces that while the ship is repaired she is unable to get it ariborn²⁹. Seris can't walk her through it because the Admiral is crawling off the platform back to the balcony. Seris grabs binders from her purse and latches the old mans ankle to the cargo webbing just as the Kid pulled them away, pushing the platform speed to get to the tricked out speeder and escape. Silhouette two security being heaved into the moonlit air.³⁰ Back on the ship the Senator gets to look at Roust'r's find, identifying the ore as unprocessed Doonium, the core component of spacecraft hulls....

²⁵ Actually he was fine – I had ruled what with the 47 outcome and force point he would immediately regenerate whatever damage he took. The whole idea of landing to take the damage for his cargo was the players, and I assumed he was landing without damage. But let the player's ask to be cool work.

²⁶ i.e., I forgot to include them in the initiative.

²⁷ This was the only point of mechanical complaint Iggy's player was unhappy with the combination of the declare up act down initiative, the 2E damage rules (points above resistance roll not multiples of resistance roll), my setting resistance the average roll, and how harsh the wound penalties are in the action economy. Their side lost initiative, he declared a neat, complex action, and then got hit by an attack he expected to soak but the wild die exploded and he took a wound. That meant he lost his next action and the cool thing. To me this is a legit complaint in the declare up/act down; there's too long a gap between idea and execution for a larger emotional attachment to the idea, so it hurts more if it fails.

²⁸ The Senators dice finally ran cold. Sometimes it does feel like the dice know the drama.

²⁹ At the 3:40 mark in our 4 hour game time the dice turned against them. Seris' player rolled for KT's 2d Starship Piloting. Outcome? 0. Wild die came up a 1 and eliminated the 3 on the other die. "What does that even mean?" Asked the Abyssin. He and the Bounty Hunter played out R3-KT's failing to get the engine to catch once, twice, then flooding it. It was again pitch perfect Star Wars, but with 20 minutes left I should have hand waved the "inevitable" We had no time for more fight. But dummy me called for more fight. This is like rookie GM error nonsense. "Iggy" misses. The Abyssin misses. The kid is only saved from getting his head blown off by my wild die coming up a 1 and eliminating my 6. If this were a campaign and not a likely one shot? Sure... having everything go pear shaped cliffhanger is right in genre. But for a one shot? Ugh

³⁰ If we had had time, totally a tricked out speeder vs speederbike chaise in the jungle, rather than a starship fight scene because we more established for the former... though no one was any good at Pilot Repulsorlift.... Might have been time for Iggy to use his Force point. I just looked up and added the Doonium thing now. IRRELEVANT!

Stating up Regrets 7: Hugh Hazzard & Bozo the Robot

As we discussed over the last couple of months, we are operating in the 1970's of The Iron Skull where WWII lasted until 1955 and the subversion of the 'hero' Doctor Hormone was one domino to get to that timeline. The other domino is the freelance hero Hugh Hazzard and his robot, Bozo. ³¹ Yes, Bozo. And yes, he always has that expression on his face.

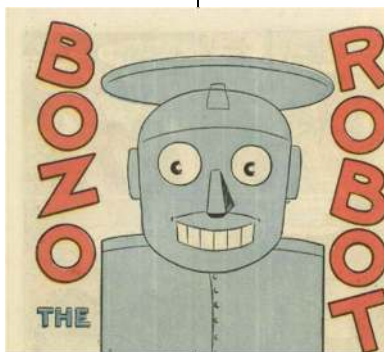
While the police and fire departments willingness to call on Hugh implies that he has an extensive experience with this sort of thing (the police commissioner keeps a flare gun to fire into the night sky if they can't reach Hugh any other way), the first time we meet him is when the city is unable to stop a marauding robot, whose rampage is causing untold destruction. Hugh is able to temporarily deactivate the robot, climb inside, and hitch a ride to its HQ. There he learns that the robot is not a free-willed entity, but under the remote control of its villainous creator, Dr. Van Thorp. ³² While Hugh might not be a match for the robot, he easily defeated its creator, and then stole the robot rather than let the authorities send it out to be sunk in a garbage scow.

Over 40 more appearances Hugh would control Bozo via radio, or while hanging on his back, or from inside by riding in the aforementioned compartment. One may wonder about the sense of scale in this art, but it was a simpler time. He also installed Bozo's distinctive beanie propellor, allowing the robot to fly at 400 mph.

Ultimately the authorities' cavalier treatment of this mechanical marvel returns as the last panels we see of Bozo are its being chased by a horde of patriotic youth collecting metal for a scrap drive. The... End? *We will get back to this!*

Building this in *Villains & Vigilantes* is simple: Hugh is our PC, and he has an *Animated Servant*, which does what it says on the tin: the character has a non-human/animal ally. The rulebook is delightfully clear that as the *Animated*

Servant is part of the PC's abilities it is always under the player's control, even if they are separated (but the player should only act on available info to each character). Given how other supers games put the PC's allies under GM control, this is refreshing. Still, Hugh is a man of action and likely has more than just *Animated Servant* (he doesn't *need* more, but c'mon the police captain has his summon-flare) To the oracular bones of St. Cuthbert!



Hugh rolled a 2, so we roll 4 abilities + 1 weakness, dropping at least 1 ability or 2 abilities and his weakness. His first ability is *Animated Servant*, and let's roll on lastish's Skills table. *Heightened Defense*, *Heightened Attack* (for a broad group of attacks), *Willpower*. Pretty generic. His weakness is *Vulnerability*. I had been hoping for at least one heightened characteristic to split into Charisma to explain Hugh's famed status ...so drop *Willpower* and roll until I get one! 4 tries later *Heightened Endurance* hits and *damn* he's Fit, with +19 split between Endurance (+11) & Charisma (+8). As I plan to keep *Vulnerability*, I'm modifying the hell out of *Heightened Attack*: drop his broad group to a single attack and we get the unique power *Sharpshooter*: he has +4 to hit & +1d8 damage with his pistol, and a -4 to be hit by firearms. This clears the Sonic Powers Threshold, and gunfighter is a new niche.

Still, his real power is Bozo the Robot, which is also his *Vulnerability*. For Hugh, people with the right scientific know how can temporarily shut down or steal control of Bozo. We know this happened at least once, but it's always reason enough for Hugh to be extra cautious when facing technological foes (as he always did).



We stat out Bozo just like he was a PC, and we will use the *Robot Body* ability to get there. As we all remember from DotL 5 and the Iron Skull, robots get +2d10 Strength, x2-5 weight, a defense type, and a built-in Device. It can't heal on its own, needs to be recharged (but its batteries will slowly recover), and is only a % human in appearance. That sounds about right. This is *Animated Servant*, and the rules say we just define what we want, and Bozo is supposed to be *really* strong so let's say +20, for a

³¹ images from https://pdsh.fandom.com/wiki/Bozo_the_Robot and <https://comicvine.gamespot.com/bozo-the-robot/4005-55419/images/> Bozo and Hugh Hazard were created by George Brenner (as Wayne Reid) and first appeared in Smash Comics #1 in 1939. They are in the public domain but became part of National Periodicals's stable when they purchased Quality

Comics in 1956, so who knows whether DC comics would kick up a fuss about someone using him for profit. I hesitated to include him for this reason.

³² I am not sure if Van is the doctor's first name or Van Thorp indicates the villain is one of those untrustworthy Dutch. Van Thorp would appear again times to wrest control of Bozo from Hugh, before being shot by the police.

total strength of 36! Bozo is at best 42% human-appearing –huge, clanking, painted-on smile – no matter how much it has arms, legs, & head. It weighs 950 lbs. That gives him a -4 Agility modifier, so let's settle that at 9. Just high enough to not have any penalties, but still below average. A 12 Endurance and a 5 Intelligence to direct how it acts on Hugh's verbal instructions. This produces an 11-ton lift, a 3d10 HTH, and 60 HP.

Bozo is fireproof and nigh-invulnerable so let's make its internal device *Adaptation*, which drops all environment-related attack types to 0 and allows survival in space, underwater, or other terminal environments. And we know that his beanie propeller is a separate device that gives him 15 hours of *Flight* at 430 mph. He's fast, but not as fast as Speed Centaur.

Now, I could stop here, but... as you can see, the art staff has a very loose concept of scale, and I love the idea of giving Bozo a *Growth* device that isn't reflective of its changing size in real life, but instead how it effects the world relative to Hugh's control. When he is voice controlling the robot via radio its stats are normal. But there are stories where Hugh rides on Bozo to control it; in those cases, Bozo has x1.5 height so it's not ludicrous for a 5'11" Hugh to be on his back. There are also times when Hugh is inside, in which case it's x2 height and we use its abilities for both characters' actions. Again, Bozo is not actually growing. We are just ignoring the sense of scale in the images.

Unfortunately, the rules for *Growth* in V&V are, um... bustified due to the system's base principles: you weigh more when you get bigger and weight figures into Hit Points, Carrying Capacity, and Agility which in turn drives accuracy, damage modifiers, and initiative. The rulebook recommends a different character sheet for each size! Fortunately I have a fix for this, where the changes don't change HP and Agility, but

- 1) Multiply ground movement by height change.
- 2) Multiply carrying capacity by weight change (which is reflected in basic HTH)
- 3) Penalize the characters initiative interval by 2 for each level of growth: so instead of acting every 15 phases, when at 9' tall it acts every 17, and at 12 every 19. Bozo goes from needing to roll a 7+ on d10 for a 2nd action to 9+ to it not being possible to get a 2nd action.

- 4) Reduce incoming damage by weight modifier rather than add HP; this fits well with comics where grown humans shrug off firearms with "it tickles!" At 9' Bozo ignores 3 points from each hit, and at 12', 8 pts per hit.

This all combines for Bozo to be a proper "hey this thing can seriously damage a city!" menace.

But how do you play it?

"A boy and his monster" stories are common enough, especially in Golden Age comics, and even though you don't see them too often in RPGs *V&V* makes it easy by putting both the hero and the animated servant under the player's control. Doubly so in this case because Bozo is non-sentient and mute. As long as the player can keep up the split focus, I don't see how this would be a

problem, for play, either as a solo hero or part of a team... but he can't be a member of the Regrettables.

The Regrettable World

Because Bozo is part of the Regrettable World's. Its sad apparent end is due to the machinations of the Thinker – the evil astral time traveler responsible for sidelining with Dr. Hormone in DotL 6 – leading Hazard to abandon Bozo!³³ It is recovered again by his creator (the Thinker's faked Van Thorpe's death via mental illusions; Van Thorpe accepted a place in the Nazi's war machine. With

Dr. Hormone's bio-science being co-opted to create super-soldiers, Van Thorpe's tech is the other half of the Comic Nazi Threat: Giant War machines!

Regretting what I said to you...

Myles claims I am abusing the *V&V* rules with cheese like Iron Skull's bionics in a robot body: I prefer to think I am helping it fulfill its potential³⁴.

Jim Eckman: you use "Molding Age" lovingly, right? As it, it set the mold for all comics to come? Right?

Lisa seconds my preference for the original, take no substitutes version of the Iron Skull; I find it so bizarre that the stories continued under a new creative team who had clearly never read the original tales!

Joshua Kronengold has the temerity to imply that it's ridiculous to have a hero called the Iron Skull solve his problems by hitting them with his head. Pshaw, I say! ... OK... actually you're probably right on this one.



³³ This is not totally unfounded: issues 8 & 9 of *Smash!* comics have wish fulfillment tales of Bozo ending WWII. The Thinker messing with Hugh?

³⁴ It's taken decades of training at an obscure lamasery in rural Connecticut to master these powers!

More Comments on E&A 6

Pum (6): reYCT Elf: our daughter came out of the womb having already absorbed Dale Carnegie's lessons.

Mark A Wilson (6): Congrats on the new job! Frustrating re your landlord was being so unresponsive. A college friend is a property manager, and he keeps having to explain to property owners that the loss of rent from an empty place as you try to find a tenant swamps the cost of most repairs. Good maintenance is good business! reYCT Joshua about Barbarian/Monks: It's weird that fiddly bits work in *D&D* drives me nuts, but I engage in such abuse of *V&V*. I think it's because *V&V* is so free form, but it could be because I'm a bog old hypocrite! (Especially since in my 2E days I would play clerics who would load blessings on top of faerie fires on top of prayers - I had a bag made that was just translucent enough to turn a continual light rock to twilight conditions maximize Faerie Fire - so I'm hardly immune to this stuff. RE Myriad: I was wondering how much Lady Jackie (who to mind looks like Jacquelin Kennedy remarried to Frank Sinatra) was assigning agreed on party roles or just pushing PCs around!

Matt Stevens (6): re Forkman - Fortitude 65?! Re BRP Combat: One of my hacks to *V&V* over the years was saves against stats of d20, d40, d60, d80, d100 and d120 so I could scale difficulty. I think it worked well conceptually.... I wonder if even just moving to d120, might help rather than the wide breadth.

Dylan Chapel (6): thanks for the *Bone Ship* reviews. re layout: I find I have been doing the 2 column layout for my gaming for so long that It helps me keep my thoughts concise; I edit to keep topics inside columns.

ELF (6): I admit I laughed out loud at your *Wanderhome* downloads, re wanderhome new players & D&D: is your concern because the players would be too used to a DM controlled grand adventure arc narrative?

Patrick Zoch (6): Glad you were productive during the furlough, and happy you're back at work. The car accident is just another parting shot from 2025. re *Isle of Dread*: it really feels like the DM didn't set themselves up for success. I have sympathy as my *Knave* game started with PCs clearing 2 rooms of my megadungeon before using their treasures to skip town to the closest port, hoping to loot enough treasure on the way to buy a ship. There is no predicting OSR PCs! re Gold/XP/Training loop: the whole structure is just strange in that the XP per level sets the absurd amount of currency in circulation, which then needs to be siphoned out of play by training costs. It's just bizarre.

Michael Cule (6): my friend Jason and I worked out a parallel world supers location based around explaining Basque's language origins. RE introduction order: the day may be young, but we are not.

Heath Row (6): The *Appendix N* reading nook is rather sweet. My wife wants to know how your wife took to having this sprung on her?

Brian Misiaszek (6): I remain amazed by the volume of your Cuba Cthulhu work. As for Nero Wolfe, I just finished "Before Midnight" which was... fine. But I read that one just because it fit in my jacket pocket!

Joshua Kronengold (6): re *Puffs*, see my comments to Lisa lastish. Re your treasure techniques being your 3.5E play <shakes head> that's just damn weird, man. I suppose part of it is 90% of the time I ran 3E, and kept spreadsheets to make sure the PCs had the right treasure per level because the game mechanics depended on it; the idea of snaking treasure out from under them given the rules set is just bizarre. Nowadays I'm running *13th Age* (level every 16 challenges, which *Draw Steel* borrows) and *Knave* (treasure = 100% of XP, divided among the PCs) which are diametrically different. RAE story game discussion with Matt Stevens: nicely comprehensive. REYCT Roger BW on *Feng Shui* 2E losing something by removing the PC creation minigame: Yeah, that was a huge issue. I understood the idea, but game read like "you can only play one of Robin's 36 pregens, and he's also leveled them up for you too." Umm, no, thanks - a tiny sidebar saying "Here are some minor mods you can make" doesn't cut it. (Strangely I have the same response with Jonathan Tweet's F20 world design having so damn many demons integrated in when demons have never interested me as foes; every creator's vision is gonna clash with yours somewhere.) REYCT Mitch Hyde about D&D 5e not working for rotating GM is just sad given the origins of D&D where everyone was playing multiple PCs between everyone's dungeons and one goal of 5e was stabilizing PCs to ease jumps between tables. RE YCT Myles on Amber arts and crafts outstripping your point rewards: when I ran it I had some players who immediately fell behind AND have a binder of before she got famous Elizabeth Bear short fiction as she was prolific as all get out. And yeah, SotS is a far better designed-to-play-in-my-style game than, say, Mutant City Blues, which I enjoyed but was so much more work.

Jim Vassilikos (6): re what simulationists wanted was RPGs becoming tactical wargames: that's a fascinating point! And likely correct.

Everyone else, more next month

Goodnight, Speed Centaur, wherever you are.



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Age of Menace

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Habana Horror: *The Mazorra* (Part 6)

Investigator's Gallery (*upgraded via ChatGPT 5.2*)



Dra. Isabela Coutinho



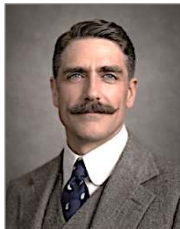
RN María del Sagrario



Charles 'Flash' Duvall



Dr. Margaret Ellery



Insp. L. Hargreaves



Sr. Alejandro Vargas

1. **Dr. Margaret Ellery** (36F) American psychiatrist; undercover League of Nations reformist
2. **Señor Alejandro Vargas** (35M) Cuban millionaire searching for a half-brother (secret A.B.C.)
3. **Insp. Lionel Hargreaves** (58M) British P.I., ex–Scotland Yard; hunting a missing woman
4. **Hermana María del Sagrario** (42F) RN; former Spanish nun seeking truth & vengeance for her sister
5. **Charles "Flash" Duvall** (27M) American photojournalist chasing a lurid story
6. **Dra. Isabela Coutinho** (41F) Mexican MD PhD researcher tracing *La Desvaneciente* (*The Fading*)

NPCs present for dinner (*see next page gallery*):

1. **Director Dr. Miguel Rodríguez Machado** (veterinarian not MD, Pres. Machado's 2nd cousin)
2. **Captain Alberto Gandía** (Supt., corrupt Porra member, fears pt. known as *the Persian*)
3. **Dra. Ramagosa** (Female Dept. psychiatrist)
4. **Dr. Arturo Vilela** (idealistic Child Psychiatrist, increasingly paranoid, many enemies)
5. **Dr. F. Llerena**: surgeon w/ neck collar & sunglasses after attack Porra ally, alcoholic
6. **Dr. Ramón Zorrilla** (Men's Dept MD, skipped tour, obsessed w/Voudan elixirs, visibly unwell)
7. **Dr. Santiago Prats**: Young, idealistic Men's Psychiatrist (secret A.B.C. member)
8. **Dra. Elda Real y Oro** Child psychologist; quietly devoted to the oblivious Dr. Viela
9. **Israel Castellanos**: Cuban Govt criminologist, *Dactyloscopic Director*; *Voudan knowledge*
10. **Chief RN Beatriz Montalvo** (47F) widowed, respected, hard intimidate
11. **Deputy Chief RN Rafael Yániz** (60M) (Porra, corrupt, Gandia ally, hostile to Dr. V & Chief RN)
12. **Mons. Bruno Aurelio** (70M), Catholic priest.)
13. **Senorita Esperanza Hidalgo-Gato** (25F), Director's private secretary
14. **Señor Enrique "Ricky" Morales**: Machado Govt. liaison; secret *Directorio* resource; PC ally
15. **Lt. Col. Vives** Spanish CEDA military attaché interested in Mazorra's 'special children'.

MAZORRA NPC IMAGE GALLERY



Director Dr. Miguel Machado



Esperanza Hidalgo-Gato



Capt. Alberto Gandia



Lt. Col. Francisco Vives



Enrique "Ricky" Morales



Dtr. Gilda Ramagusa



Dr. Arturo Viella



Dr. Francisco Llerena



Dr. Ramón Zorrilla



Dr. Santiago Prats



Dtr. Elda Real y Oro



Lic. Isreal Castellanos



Chief RN Beatriz Montalva



Deputy Chief RN Yániz



Mons. Bruno Aurelio



Lic. Evelio Gil

Horrors of the Mazorra:

A 1930s Pulp Cthulhu scenario (cont.)

Re-cap from AoM # 244 (slightly ret-conned): On their escorted walk from the M1 Operating Theatre to their visitor quarters in *La Oficina*, both Ricky and Dr. Prats briefly indicate without elaboration, that they too witnessed something unsettling. They caution the Investigators to remain silent within earshot of Mazorra guards; discretion is not optional here. After reconnoitring the layout of *La Oficina*, their rooms near to rooms belonging to some of the MDs and more and their preparation for getting freshened up to be collected for cocktails and dinner are interrupted by a gunshot. The Investigators encounter Dr. Vilela in visible physical and mental distress after falling victim to a vicious booby-trap. A pair of guards arrive belatedly but are waved off by Dr. Vilela. Even without the presence of unseen supernatural forces other forces make anyone's stay at the Mazorra's a danger filled. experience

Dinner at the Director's Manse

Ricky, their impeccably dressed government liaison, arrives at the quarters promptly at 6:45 p.m. His suit is pressed, a fresh carnation tucked into his lapel. If asked, he explains casually that a friend, Othello, the tuck shop manager in *La Oficina* quietly helped him clean it using supplies on hand.

If the Investigators attempt conversation, Ricky makes a small gesture and murmurs "...walls have ears." He suggests they wait until they are outside.

Once outside in the thick August heat, Ricky lowers his voice as they walk. His eyes move constantly, from the columns of palm trees, to the path, to the lit windows of the Manse.

"Whatever you saw back there, mis amigos," he says quietly, "do not describe it as supernatural. Not tonight. Not to anyone who was not present."

"What you and I and Dr. Prats and the others saw, this **Cosa**, this Thing, does not exist unless it can be reduced to drink, incompetence, or sabotage."

"When you live under a dictatorship," he adds, "reality is...flexible. Dr. Llerena will lie. Completely. He is a drunk, venal, loyal to the Porra...but he is not entirely stupid. He knows exactly which truths keep a man alive and employed."



"And if necessary," he adds after a beat, "I would be forced to deny it too."

"If the story is gas, panic, or foreign exaggeration, it can be buried. If it becomes Santería sorcery, monsters, or **fantasmas**. Then it becomes a reason to detain you for lunacy. Or sedition. Or to make you disappear."

"The Machado government has no use for miracles or monsters it cannot control. If you insist you will not be corrected. You will be removed for being a disruption."

Keeper's Note: A successful *Psychology* (Normal) reveals Ricky is repressing strong emotion, but he *thinks* he is telling the truth; a Hard success reveal both that and that he is scared and not admitting it.

Investigator Questions & Ricky's Answers

Investigator Question	Ricky's Response
"So Dr. Llerena knows he's lying?"	"Of course. He'll call it mass panic triggered by noxious gases, a staged A.B.C. or Directorio incident, anything medical or political. Those stories protect him."
"Will anyone back us up?"	"No. Not in public. Some believe something is wrong. But belief is not testimony when the Porra is listening."
"What happens if we speak openly?"	"Best case? You are dismissed as hysterics or foreign meddlers. Worst case, you are marked as politically dangerous. And dangerous people do not receive second invitations."
"Who decides which story stands?"	"Whoever's paperwork survives the morning."
"What happens to people who won't play along?"	"They do not argue. They vanish into Porra cells, padded rooms, or graves. It depends how inconvenient they are."
"And you?"	"I walk people past doors they should not open. That is my job."

What he Admits Privately on *Persuade* (Difficult)

Question	Ricky's Response
"What do <u>you</u> believe? You were on the train & in the OR too and saw Baron Kriminel!"	(He hesitates.) <i>"I believe I saw something that does not belong in any medical or government report. If I give it a name, it gains weight—and weight makes it harder to hide."</i> "So I tell myself this: something impossible happened, and the world did not end. That means thinking about it can be postponed."
"Why keep working for Machado if you oppose him?"	"Regimes like Machado's do not fall because good men resign. They fall because enough people are in the wrong places at the right time." <i>"I am not a hero. I am... an obstruction. And sometimes, that is enough."</i> <i>"Also—if I leave, someone worse takes my chair."</i>

Straightening as the steps of the Manse comes into view along with guards standing there. *"But enough. We are almost there."*

~7 to 7:15 pm: Arrival at the Director's Manse

As Ricky leads the Investigators to the Director's Manse for their welcoming dinner, they approach along the lantern-lit walkway. The Manse glows as its white walls catching the last peach-coloured light of sunset, columns throwing long shadows across the marble portico. From somewhere inside A phonograph plays soft [Danzón Cubano](#).

Two uniformed Mazorra guards can be seen outside at the bottom of the steps as they are met at the top by a slender young woman with short chestnut hair dressed in a silk evening gown with a clipboard tucked under one with two servants discretely standing nearby.

"Bienvenidos," she says with a smile, and then in perfect English. "I am *Señorita Esperanza Hidalgo-Gato*, Director Machado's personal and private secretary. The Director will be delighted you could join us this evening."

Referring to the clipboard she ticks off their names one by one, as servants efficiently take their hats and outerwear and quietly informs each arrival where they are expected to mingle first.

"You have a little time before dinner, enough for a conversation, perhaps two if you don't linger. I'll make sure all of you are introduced to Director Machado personally by myself."

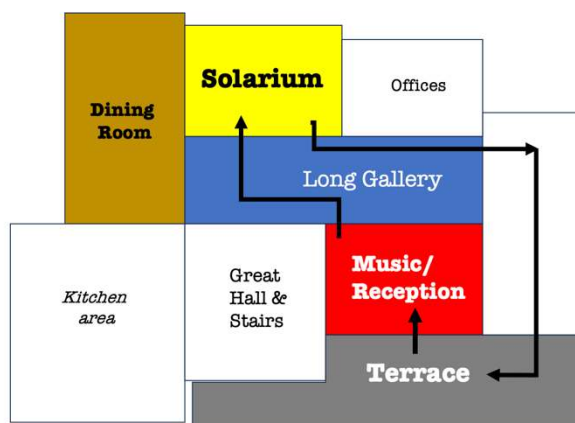


Only then does she gesture them through either the arched doors into the house or onto the terrace to her right.

1. [The Reception & Music Room](#): Sr. Vargas & Insp. Hargreaves.
2. [The Solarium](#): Dr. Ellery & Dra. Coutinho.
3. [The Terrace](#): Flash Duvall & RN Maria del Sagrario.

Keeper Notes: Pre-dinner mingling lasts ~45 minutes b both in game and in REAL TIME. Each Investigator may meaningfully engage with the other Mazorra staff with 1 or at most 2 locations, & in the second one more briefly. Choosing depth means missing other opportunities. This is deliberate in order to create information asymmetry among the Investigators. Most NPCs remain in place, with a few exceptions. Director Machado does not circulate so under Esperanza's direction. Investigators are brought to him in pairs for introductions. Circulation of each pair of Investigators is suggested as per the block-diagram below (see E&E #7 for the actual Director's Manse floorplan). Any remaining introductions with the last pair who had not already met with the Director will occur on the Terrace by Esperanza who will take the Director by the arm to meet these Investigators in this area. There is just time for him to ask one question just before she rings her silver bell to announce the 8:00 seating.

Investigators stepping off-script (lavatory, phone call, etc.) forfeits any remaining pre-dinner interactions, and may trigger chance encounters, suspicion, or events elsewhere (e.g., the Long Gallery). There is guard at the top & bottom of the stairs to shoo any wanting to explore.



Reception / Music Room



While ostensibly a space for music and conversation and presently filled with elegantly dressed guests, all men other than Esperanza, the room is arranged for display rather than comfort. A large painting on the far wall has been carefully shrouded in heavy cloth, and a uniformed guard stands quietly near the doorway, an unobtrusive but unmistakable reminder that this remains an institution, not a private home.

NPCs Present

- **Director Dr. Miguel Rodríguez Machado** greeting guests personally; polished and alert.
- **Alberto Gandía** watchful and intrusive.
- **Francisco Vives** composed and observant; selectively warm or cool.
- **Esperanza Hidalgo-Gato** managing the flow and timing of formal introductions.
- **Rafael Yániz** present at Gandía's request; formally dressed, watchful, mostly silent.
- **"Ricky" Morales** circulating, smoothing introductions, and quietly redirecting tension.
- **Servants:** One guard, various servants serving drinks and canapes

A. Director Miguel Machado

Machado wears a tailored dark blue suit of light Italian wool, a white carnation on his lapel. He already holds a drink. His smile is warm; his eyes never rest.

Keeper's Note:

- If Dr. Llerena survived, Machado is genial, faintly paternal, and Llerena's absence is unspoken. "I trust you are finding the Mazorra...illuminating."
- If Dr. Llerena died, he is cool, though without accusations. "I regret that your visit has already been...overly eventful."

Esperanza introduces each pair of Investigators beginning with Sr. Vargas & Insp. Hargreaves. Her phrasing shifts subtly as follows:

- **Female visitors:** "Miguel, may I present..."
- **Males:** "Director Machado, may I present..."

Opening questions from Director Machado:

- **Sr. Vargas:** "You move easily in refined rooms, yet carry yourself like someone used to trouble. Which version should I believe?"
- **Hargreaves:** "Our fingerprint lab was inspired by your Scotland Yard. Accurate identity brings order—and control. You would agree?"
- **'Flash' Duvall:** "A photograph can protect a man—or finish him. The difference is rarely visible in the negative, no?"
- **Dr. Margaret Ellery** "Stability sometimes matters more than explanation. Would you agree institutions require that?"
- **Dra. Isabela Coutinho:** "Some discoveries spread faster than they can be understood. Must every finding be revealed at once?"
- **Hermana María del Sagrario:** "A nurse's loyalty is often tested quietly. To whom does yours ultimately belong?"

Keeper's Note: Machado's questions above are not meant to be answered fully. They are *probes*. Machado is *categorizing* the Investigators, not trying to intimidate them. A brief, polite response earns approval. Elaboration even if honest creates risk.

The Director answers 1 question per Investigator:

- **To anyone re the General Strike:** "Our trains and our facilities have grown nervous during the general strike. Steel reflects the mood of the nation."
- **To anyone asking if he is related to President Geraldo Machado:** "But of course! Our dear leader and relation is my 2nd cousin on my mother's side of the family".
- **If either Baron K, Incident Is Mentioned:** "An unusual hallucinogenic a medical gas mishap, I am told. Unpleasant, rarely dangerous."
- **If injuries are mentioned:** "I am so very sorry our guests have sustained harm here through no fault of our own. Captain Gandía is preparing a report for per personally on the confusion in the regrettable incident you mention."
- **If Asked About the covered painting:** "Ah. A recent and most fascinating acquisition. We will speak of it after dinner."
- **He closes any topic he no longer wants to talk about with:** "Details later. Tonight is for hospitality!"

B. Teniente Coronel (Lt. Col) Francisco Vives

The Spanish Embassy's military attaché, Francisco Vives wears a light wool suit that somehow, on him, reads as a uniform. A small red, yellow, and white lapel pin of unusual design marks him subtly. He greets some Investigators more warmly than others, particularly native Spanish speakers and medical professionals. In a mild breach of protocol, he steps forward to address Dr. Ellery and Dra. Coutinho before Director Machado, pre-empting Esperanza's introductions.



Keeper's Note: Vives unconsciously assesses visitors for threat based on posture, reactions to authority, and mismatches between appearance and capability; characters with combat Talents or skills are immediately noted. He may make a passive CPS Stat **Cunning 75**¹ vs PC's **POW**, or **Stealth/Disguise** if higher.

- **Señor Vargas:** "Spain welcomes generosity, Señor. Do visit our Embassy." If recognized as dangerous: "Spain values men who move carefully, Señor Vargas. We notice."
- **Insp. Hargreaves:** Vives offers professional courtesy, tempered with wariness. "With your background, you understand how order is maintained—and how easily it frays."
- **Dr. Margaret Ellery:** "Spain follows developments in child health closely—especially *special* children, such as those here at Mazorra. Have you ever seen the like?"
- **RN María del Sagrario:** "Your skills would be welcome in our medical corps, *Enfermera* del Sagrario. Spain stands on the brink of greatness—you would begin as an officer."
- **'Flash' (American):** Polite but cool. "American newspapers have an eye for moments of...transition. How does it go? 'Remember the Maine...and the Hell with Spain?'"
- **To Dra. Coutinho:** "The 1925 Geneva Protocol limits use, not research. Spain has need of such expertise, *Doctora*. Visit our Embassy before you depart."

Keeper's Note: A successful **EDU** (Normal) roll from someone from Spain or with a news background or recently visited there will reveal this is the symbol of **CEDA, Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas** an early 1930s Spanish Political coalition that aligns Military & Catholic Church goals.



C. Ricky Morales & Esperanza

- **Ricky Morales** keeps conversations from lingering too long or turning sharp. If he notices Esperanza being too curious, he will intervene and say "*Careful, Esperanza! if you ask questions like that, our guests will think they've already been admitted,*" to both deflect and to warn the others.
- **Esperanza Hidalgo-Gato** subtly separates guests who draw attention, redirecting with a touch on an arm or a murmured aside. She is openly curious about the two younger male Investigators; too young, she believes for the confidence they carry.

NPC: Esperanza Hidalgo-Gato:

24F Executive Asst. & the Mazorra's *de facto* Director



Esperanza is one of the most intelligent people at the Mazorra, and, to the Investigators, possibly one of the more dangerous. Several years ago, she was hand-picked by Director Machado's wife to become his mistress, a role Esperanza accepted and then deliberately expanded into something far more durable. She cultivates an appearance of beauty and indulgence to disguise her true function: disciplined intelligence, institutional memory, and quiet control of paperwork. She is treated as ornamental. She is not.

In practice, Esperanza functions as the Mazorra's *de facto* director. Machado's laziness, boredom with administration, and frequent absences have led him to delegate authority informally; she signs routine orders on his behalf, her imitation of his signature now flawless—something Lic. Castellanos noticed long ago and chose not to challenge. Over time, she has learned the authorization marks and habits of other senior staff, allowing her to manufacture consensus, smooth conflicts, and quietly override decisions that would otherwise lead to abuse. Nothing she does reads as opposition. It reads as administration.

Esperanza's political loyalties are not with the Porra, nor with Spanish clerical authoritarianism or imported fascist sympathies. Though she must navigate Cuban factions carefully, her private

¹ See CPS or Condensed Power Stats table and explanation at end of this write-up.

convictions are secular, anti-fascist, and reformist. She has sympathies with both the ABC and the Directorio, but aligns herself fully with neither; both underestimate her, and both tolerate violence when it suits them, something she recoils from, not out of sentiment, but because it is crude and inefficient.

What makes Esperanza dangerous to the Investigators is *misclassification*. She automatically assumes they are like all other visitors to the Mazorra: venal, grasping, and morally compromised, else naïve and incompetent. Genuinely altruistic motives do not fit her model of the world. As a result, she works quietly against the; losing files, delaying approvals, recreating records, or rerouting requests, always without appearing to oppose them directly. Resistance, when reframed as procedure, attracts no attention.

Description: Pale, slender, dresses very well. Normally animated, she becomes almost unnaturally still when listening closely.

Keeper's Note: Until the Investigators demonstrate repeated, unrewarded altruism, Esperanza automatically introduces subtle procedural friction whenever their plans rely on access, timing, or documentation.

D. Captain Gandía & Deputy Chief RN Rafael Yániz

Capt. Gandía is in a cleaner better fitting uniform. The Superintendent often inserts such comments such as “*security procedure exists for a reason*”, and “*we must go over timelines together some time tomorrow. Informally of course.*” If Dr. Llerena has died, however, some of his comments have a more sinister undercurrent:

- “Witnesses are not always aware they are witnesses, Yuma².”
- “It is best everyone remains available to go over matters more formally tomorrow in my office in the Superintendent’s Manse.”
- “You ‘visitors’ always seem to be *en el pico de la piragua*.³ How do you explain that?”

Rafael Yániz is a political appointment arranged last January from officials in the capital to be embedded in the Mazorra. He was supposed to be assigned as Chief but the current Chief RN Beatriz Montalvo is just too competent and respected, and she indicated any demotion means her resignation, ditto. He is wearing an expensive suit way over his pay grade. He mostly listens and rarely speaks to voice an opinion of his own, but when he does, it always to reinforce Capt. Gandía.

Keeper's Note: Yániz’s presence at dinner and in this room is deliberate. As a fellow Porra asset embedded within Mazorra, a cooperative stooge in other ways, he reinforces Gandía’s authority & quietly reminds staff that hospital staff are not exempt from scrutiny. If a turn is spent watching how these two interact, there is a chance for this overheard exchange with a successful *Spot Hidden, Listen, or Read Lips* roll: **Gandía:** “*You’ll want a full list of names later.*” **Yániz:** “*Already kept.*”

The Solarium:



First Impressions from Solarium NPCs Present

(Not Present: Dr. Zorrilla & Dr. Llerena)

- **Gilda Ramagosa:** dressed in a blue frock, make-up; questioning Prats about something.
- **Santiago Prats:** watchful and uneasy, is answering Gilda’s questions reluctantly.
- **Arturo Vilela:** seated, visibly uncomfortable; his left arm in a sling from the gunshot wound; unclear whether his discomfort comes from the injury or from Elda’s attentions
- **Elda Real y Oro:** seated close enough that her hip touches Vilela’s; quietly attentive, unmistakably concerned.
- **Enrique “Ricky” Morales:** passes through briefly, mainly to caution the Investigators not to speak freely.

Conversational Topics

Dr. Margaret Ellery and **Dra. Isabela Coutinho**, the first two Investigators to arrive here are immediately recognized as colleagues rather than visitors by their shared medical training, medical language, an experience. Combined with early cocktails, this lends

² Foreigner.

³ “*At the tip of the canoe*”, a Cuban idiom meaning ‘in trouble’.

the room a marginally more relaxed air (*as long as Dr. Llerena is still alive*). Initial conversational topics are clinical: interesting patients, case impressions, shared frustrations, etc. Inevitably, it drifts toward:

- **The absence of Dr. Zorrilla** is noted as unusual, especially since he had expressed interest in comparing ethnobotanical and African diaspora religious beliefs with foreign visitors.
- **The shooting at La Oficina:** regarded as unfortunate; some may remark that Arturo perhaps has good reason to carry a gun at all times.
- **Dr. Llerena & the Operating Theatre incident:** framed as anaesthetic complications, heat exhaustion, unusual rigor, trapped gases—anything but something anomalous.

When questions edge too close to the extraordinary **Dr. Prats** redirects smoothly, lowering his voice and glancing toward the glass walls as if sound might carry. If necessary, he draws an Investigator a step aside and whisper harshly, “Whatever you think you saw,” he says quietly, “this is not the place to discuss it. Ricky was right to warn you.”

If pressed (*successful Persuade roll*), Prats admits: “Yes. I was present. I saw what you did. And no, it was not ordinary. Once that becomes the story, no other explanation survives, and we won’t either.”

Keeper’s Note: A successful *Psychology* roll reveals that Prats is not denying the incident, he is compartmentalizing it.

Keeper’s Note: How to Use Solarium NPC Reactions Disclosures Table Below:

Each Investigator present may engage one NPC. These conversations assume the Investigator is recognized as a medical professional.

Non-physician Investigators are treated as outsiders and receive only generalities unless a physician colleague vouches for them, or a successful social roll earns limited confidence. Even then, disclosures remain cautious and fragmentary. The † symbol means Dr. Llerena is dead and conversations are more guarded.

For any of the 4 other Investigators who arrive later and drop into the Solarium for a brief chat, the Cuban physicians present are noticeably stiffer and more reserved than they were with the doctors in their group.

They will not discuss uncanny events at all, instead retreating to safe topics: the heat, the General Strike, rail disruptions, & supply shortages. Dr. Zorrilla’s absence unless the spend considerable time and energy to persuade, which may take a good 30 minutes and a Persuade at Hard difficulty.

Keeper’s Note: Llerena was disliked, distrusted, and professionally embarrassing; there is little sorrow if he is dead. What unsettles the MDs is *who will notice*. His Porra ties mean scrutiny, retaliation, and forced silence may follow. The staff instinctively close ranks, not out of loyalty, but self-preservation.

SOLARIUM — NPC REACTIONS & DISCLOSURES

NPC	If Approached Casually	If Questioned Privately	If Pressed Too Hard
Dra. Gilda Ramagosa	“Bueno, we’re all living on nerves of late”	“I’ll protect my patients, whatever it costs. <i>Tambor</i> - no. I’ve said too much.” † “We must be careful with our stories. Very careful. The Porra...”	“This isn’t the place. Perhaps later.” † She looks down, takes a drink. Conversation ends.
Dr. Arturo Vilela	“It’s superficial—nothing to worry about, really”	“One earns enemies here by speaking plainly, Mazorra staff more than patients.” † He scans the room, hand near the gun. “Who will be blamed... and who profits?”	He winces. Elda intervenes. If †, he half-draws his gun before she stops him & pulls him away.
Dra. Elda Real	Offers a small nod. “It’s been a long day.”	“Trust Ricky with the patients. He understands <i>la gente</i> .” † “They will look for scapegoats first. Like—” and stops.	Ends conversation immediately † Ricky smoothly intervene/deflects.
Dr. Santiago Prats	“Better to speak of the patients than... other matters.”	“Talk of <i>fantasmos</i> is dangerous, unless one is among friends who are very <i>simpático</i> .” † “Here in Cuba today, the story matters more than truth. Death doesn’t change that.”	“No. Not here. Not now.” † “No.” Conversation ends.
‘Ricky’ Morales	“Mire, better not here. Please, have a drink.”	“Be wary of Gandía, Machado, & Yániz most of all.” † “Be careful. Llerena’s death will be politicized”	A faint smile, a small shake of the head, then he’s gone.

The Terrace:



This tiled outdoor space on the south side of the Manse opens onto the darkened grounds of the between it and *La Oficina*. Beyond it, flowering shrubs and royal palms stir faintly in the night air. Lantern light spills outward from the house, leaving much of the terrace in shadow, while guards with dogs are silhouetted against the last trace of sunset as they patrol the perimeter. The air here is cooler than inside, and a little damp and heavy.

Charles “Flash” Duvall and Enfermera María del Sagrario feel slightly out of place here, misfits, loosely grouped with other Mazorra misfits, by design chance, or the belief they are all fellow smokers.

Terrace NPCs Present & First Impressions

- **Monsignor Bruno Aurelio**, elderly and kind-eyed, lingers near the balustrade. He greets the Investigators gently, his voice low and measured. *“It is a troubled night,”* he says simply. *“For both Cubans and visitors alike, some places remember sorrow.”* He does not elaborate unless invited.
- **Lic. Israel Castellanos**, criminologist, smokes a pipe with ink-stained fingers. He does not initiate conversation. When he finally speaks, it is precise and quiet. *“Truth leaves patterns,”* he remarks once. *“Even when someone tries to erase them.”*
- **Chief RN Beatriz Montalvo**, upright and watchful, holds a cigarette she rarely lights. She acknowledges Enfermera Maria del Sagrario with a nod of recognition and respect, offering her a cigarette.
 - to her fellow RN Maria: *“You’ll be asked to look away sooner or later. Everyone is. The question isn’t if—it’s how much you remember afterward. But if you need a friend for other reason, within reason, you can count on me.”*
 - To Flash, she says quietly, *“If you publish only one image from this place, choose carefully. That will be the Mazorra, long after we’re gone.”*

- With the other men she is courteous but restrained. *“People think hospitals are about medicine,”* she adds. *“Mostly they are about endurance. I hope you endure in finding your missing persons”*
- To the women physicians, with a trace of wistfulness: *“In my day, Cuban women were discouraged from universities—certainly from professions like medicine. I envy you that chance.”*

- **Dra. Elda Real y Oro** drifts briefly in and out from the Solarium on a roll of 1 on 1d6, stepping out for a cigarette before returning to Dr. Vilela.
- **“Ricky” Morales** also drifts in and out for cigarettes; if Elda is present, he once takes a photograph using Flash’s camera, ensuring she is included.

Conversation on the Terrace

- Faith arises cautiously, especially in the presence of María del Sagrario & the Monsignor will say that Cuban Santería is described as a blending of Christian and African traditions, not a catalogue of miracles. When darker forces are mentioned *“...evil does not always announce itself loudly unless as misdirection.”*
- Any mention of Santería or Vodou draws close attention, but no names or past incidents are volunteered.
- Castellanos will be interested in Flash’s camera, but will not offer to touch it unless invited, and then he handles it like a pro. He’ll offer to Flash the opportunity to develop his film gratis, *“as long as I get to look at some of the images first, no?”*
- Authority and fear are discussed obliquely. No one names **Capt. Gandía** or local Porra, yet the meaning is clear. *“Order and cruelty are easily mistaken for one another.”*
- The Special Children are mentioned only in passing, It is agreed they should not be displayed to foreign visitors like zoological exhibits. Elda mentions that certain foreign officials have shown an unsettling interest.

Keeper’s Note: *If Llerena is dead:*

- **Beatriz Montalvo** comments on increased numbers of guards beyond the terrace; if in conversation Llerena name is mentioned, her jaw tightens & she murmurs to one Investigator, **“Hospitals survive many things. The truth is not always one of them.”**
- **Monsignor Aurelio** grows quieter as the evening wears on. If pressed about the days events, he replies **“There are deaths that demand prayers, & deaths that demand silence; tonight is the latter.”**
- If the Investigators mention the Operating Theatre or Llerena directly, **Castellanos** removes his pipe and says only, **“The real question is no longer what happened, but who decides what it will mean.”**

The Long Gallery



Anyone may pass through this connecting corridor, but certain NPCs are more likely to bump into and have brief & easily disengaged encounters with Investigators:

- **Capt. Gandía** may murmur one remark while walking past (choose one/PC):
 - *“Walls recall more than people think.”*
 - *“Nervous men make unfortunate choices.”* (If Dolz is relevant.)
 - *“Not everything arrives with luggage.”*
 - † *“Order depends on what we agree did **not** happen.”*
 - † *“You are guests—for now.”*
- **Esperanza** redirects anyone lingering near the roped-off stairs: *“The Director will seat us shortly. A tour can wait.”*
- **Ricky** murmurs in passing: *“Golden is the hue of silence. Even the wait staff here listen.”*
- **Dr. Zorrilla**: The last Investigator on their way to the Dining Room spots him coming in; he is pale, distracted; *“You know how it is: too many nights, too much coffee, and disinfectant that never quite leaves the skin,”* he says if stopped. Before the Investigator responds, he moves quickly toward the dining room.

Keeper’s Note: Observational skill checks on Dr. Z

Medicine or First Aid

- **Success:** Zorrilla appears unwell, and this is not simple fatigue or stress. He is also wearing flesh coloured concealing make-up. He smells of strong soap & carbolic acid. (Note: *First Aid* stops here)
- **Hard Success:** As above, but his discomfort seems systemic. He moves stiffly, guards his abdomen at times, and the skin beneath the makeup appears unnaturally uniform rather than inflamed.
- **Extreme Success:** Zorrilla is seriously unwell. His breathing is shallow, he sweats despite the room temperature, and there is something subtly *off* about his



colouring and eyes. Whatever this is, it warrants proper medical attention (but is clearly avoiding it).

- **Fumble:** The Investigator dismisses the signs as overwork. Zorrilla notices the attention and becomes more guarded; future observational Medicine rolls suffer a *Penalty Die*.

Spot Hidden / Disguise

- **Success:** Carefully applied makeup is visible on the face, neck, and hands.
- **Hard Success:** The makeup has been reapplied repeatedly, suggesting concealment of an ongoing change rather than a single flaw.
- **Extreme Success:** Beneath the makeup are **subtle** abnormal skin changes—a faint translucence or unnatural quality most evident at the neck, ears, and hairline.
- **Fumble:** The Investigator notices nothing, and their stare alerts Zorrilla, who becomes more secretive; future observations with a *Penalty die*.

8:00 CALL TO DINNER

Precisely at 8:00 a tiny silver bell is rung by Esperanza Hidalgo-Gato, who glides from room to room announcing in her silvery voice, *“La cena está servida...”* and then, in English, *“Dinner is being served, please make your way to the dining room.”*

Guests are shown into a high-ceilinged formal dining room, its long table laid with crystal, heavy silverware, and gold-rimmed plates discreetly stamped *Mazorra*. Each place bears a tent-card with the guest’s name, and a printed menu resting on the plate in both Spanish and English.

Dining Room Seating Plan

Director Dr. Miguel Machado (<i>host</i>)	
Capt. Alberto Gandia	Lt. Col. F. Vives
Dr. Margaret Ellery	Dr. Arturo Viella
Dr. Ramón Zorrilla	Sr. Alejandro Vargas
Dra. Isabela Coutinho	(empty, later Dr. L)
Dr. Santiago Prats	Dtr Gilda Ramagusa
Beatriz Montalva	Mons. Bruno Aurelio
Insp. Lionel Hargreaves	Deputy Chief RN Yaniz
Lic. Isreal Castellanos	RN María del Sagrario
Dtr. Elda Real y Oro	empty
‘Flash’ Duvall	“Ricky” Morales
Esperanza Hidalgo-Gato (<i>hostess</i>)	

Staff move smoothly among the guests, guiding the last arrivals to their seats, pushing chairs in, unfolding napkins, and placing them neatly on laps. Conversation remains low and polite, perhaps with

quiet introductions of persons are seated next to strangers.

At this point their host, Dr. Miguel Rodríguez Machado enters the room. He does not hurry, leans down and speaks a few words to Esperanza and then makes his way to the head of the table facing Esperanza at the other end where she is seated. He pauses standing just long enough to take in the table, the guests, the service already in motion.

“Good, good,” Machado says mildly, as if to no one in particular. “Everyone is comfortable, I hope. Please, this evening is meant to be... restorative. We have all had demanding days. Tonight, at least, the Mazorra offers us all its better face.”



He takes his seat, and the wait staff begin serving the *Entrada*: *Tostones con salsa de mojito*, fried green plantains with garlic and lime mojo; *Pulpo a la vinagreta*, octopus dressed in oil and vinegar; and *chicharrones salados*, salted pork cracklings arranged with careful restraint.

At a discreet signal from the Director, waiters begin pouring a white wine clockwise, leaving the host until last. No one touches bread or lifts a fork. The table waits until Director Machado rises from his chair, glass lifted just enough to command attention without inviting applause. His tone is warm and mellow, even in English.

“Friends, colleagues, this table brings together many disciplines, many paths of service. The

Mazorra has endured much in its long life, yet it remains what it has always been: a place of care, continuity, and patience. Tonight, we eat well. We speak freely among friends. And we remember that institutions, like people, survive not by haste, but by balance.

To health. To discretion. And to the quiet work that must go on, even when the world outside grows...impatient. Salud.! And as we say in Spanish, Buen apetito.”

He sits down again and the meal properly begins.

Keeper’s Note: If Llerena † the dinner becomes a political containment exercise, a loyalty and a quiet warning to everyone present. Rather than cancelling the meal, Machado is hosting to define the narrative before someone else does. It means chilled formality to establish authority and silence. His toast reflects this:

“Friends and colleagues,

This institution has always dealt in difficult truths. Illness. Failure. The limits of human effort. Today has reminded us that not every disturbance announces itself clearly, and not every event invites interpretation. What matters is not speculation, but discipline. Not rumour, but responsibility. The Mazorra endures because it knows the difference. To order. To restraint. And to those who understand when silence is not fear, but duty. Salud. Buen apetito.”

The dinner service staff proceeds with practiced invisibility. Bread is set within easy reach, broken rather than cut, resting directly on the table or at the rim of the plate; butter is notably absent. During the *Entrada*, Director Machado makes a few genial remarks to those nearest him: that the wine comes from grapes grown on Mazorra’s own grounds, that the cigars are rolled on site by selected patients, that much of the produce is cultivated and prepared within the institution itself.

The conversation remains carefully social rather than political: travel, Havana gossip, polite observations about the hospital and its surroundings. Exactly the dinner talk expected, and nothing more. As plates are cleared, the second course is brought out: *Sopa*; *Caldo Gallego*, a traditional soup of white beans, potatoes, and cured ham.

Keeper’s Note: Investigators may ask a few questions over dinner before other events unfold.

If they notice **Dr. Zorrilla** is looking unwell and is urged to attend the infirmary or examined more closely, Zorrilla smiles thinly and replies along the lines of: ***“It’s nothing exotic, tertian malarial fever. An old if unpleasant companion. I’ll take quinine in my quarters later. I assure you, I am under observation... my own.”*** He deflects gently but firmly, changes the subject, and does not submit to examination unless forcibly pressed. A (Hard) *Medicine* or *Psychology* roll success will indicate he is lying.

If Investigators ask about the **two empty seats** at the table, **Dr. Gilda Ramagusa** answers the first question “That was where Dr. Llerena was meant to be seated before, you know better than I.” If asked about the other missing guest, **Esperanza Hidalgo-Gato** begins, “A late regret—” but before she can finish, the interruption below cuts her off.

9:00 The Dinner Interruption.

The murmur of conversation falters as a figure in a wheelchair appears at the entrance to the dining room. **Dr. Llerena** is wheeled in by an attendant, his head bandaged, one arm in a sling, his face pale and bruised. He wears a dark suit over a rumpled white shirt, smoked glasses concealing bruised eyes a thick bandage wraps his head, partially hidden by a stiff neck brace. He moves with visible discomfort as he is settled into the empty place beside Señor Vargas and Dra. Ramagusa.

Director Machado rises at once, His expression flickers surprise first, then calculation. He moves over, placing a hand on the back of Llerena's chair and raising his glass. He welcomes him with exaggerated warmth, inviting the table to acknowledge "...the courage and resilience of our colleague, Dr. Francisco Llerena, who has returned to us despite his ordeal." Polite applause follows; several guests glance uneasily at one another.

Dinner resumes as the soup is cleared and the main course arrives: Ropa Vieja Carne de res deshebrada en salsa criolla acompañada de Arroz blanco, Plátanos maduros fritos, & Yuca con mojo (*Shredded beef stewed in a traditional Creole sauce served with white rice, fried ripe plantains, & Cassava with garlic citrus sauce*).

Despite the excellent food, it noticed that Dr. Llerena mostly pushes it around his plate and drinks far too much. When Dra. Ramagusa gently suggests he slow his wine, he shakes his head. "I need this," he says quietly. "To calm my nerves. To help me forget."

If questioned by the Investigators or other guests, his replies are brief and evasive. He never quite looks at the speaker, his attention fixed on the glass in his hand. Typical responses are along the lines of, "Yes... quite," "If you say so," or "I'm fine, really. I've had worse days." He then takes another drink and gestures faintly for more wine.

Then **Dr. Zorrilla** rises abruptly, murmuring an apology for being indisposed. As he turns to leave, Llerena watches him & chuckles softly. "Your understudy already left, I see," he says a little too loudly. "Brave to perform without him. And careful, Ramón- greasepaint, powder, it betrays you under these lights." Zorrilla does not reply & leaves the room.

As if triggered by the departure, Llerena begins to speak, about the operating theatre incident without naming it. He looks to the Investigators and talks of interference, of prepared tricks meant to deceive an audience of one. His voice loosens, the metaphors turning theatrical. "A spectacle," he says out loud. "*Out of Paris' Grand Guignol*. Stage misdirection,

Pepper's Ghost, humo y espejos." His accent thickens, blurred by more than alcohol. "What happened to me was not an accident. If this ends badly, it will not be because no one knew, but because too many chose not to listen."

Cutlery stills. Several guests glance toward Director Machado, who raises his glass slightly, not to interrupt, but to reclaim the room.

~9:40 Dr. Llerena's Removal

Before the tension can harden, **Esperanza** steps in. She crouches down places herself close enough that only Llerena and those nearest hear her first words.

"Doctor Llerena, please forgive the interruption. There is an urgent call for you from Porra Headquarters at *Antares Fortress*. They insist it cannot wait, and they would prefer to speak with you privately."



As Llerena hesitates, she adds, "They are asking for your account *directly* on what happened today."

Llerena beams. "In that case..."

Esperanza stands up and briefly catches the attention of Dr. Prats and Deputy Chief Yániz steps forward at once as Llerena struggles to stand. "Come, Francisco," he says evenly, guiding him back into the wheelchair.

The two, with Yániz pushing the wheelchair, follow Esperanza toward the doors to the exit. Dr. Prats rises and trails behind, and the sliding doors close.

Conversation slowly resumes. Glasses are lifted again. Machado smiles, broader now, and murmurs something about "...the hazards of overwork." The dinner continues, but something essential has shifted.

Keeper's Note: (Off-Scene Events): Once removed from the dining room, Dr. Prats with Rafael Yániz's help sedate Dr. Llerena despite his protests and withing a minute is drowsy, then snoring. Esperanza immediately contacts the main switchboard to arrange an urgent ambulance.

Before she can end the call, the switchboard operator apologetically interrupts: a coded telegram has just arrived, marked **URGENTE** and stamped **SOLO PARA LOS OJOS Y OÍDOS DEL DIRECTOR**. She asks how it should be handled. Irritated but alert, Esperanza asks for the sender and is told the message bears the designation **TU SEGUNDO PRIMO** a code she instantly recognizes as indicating the personal authority of **President Geraldo Machado** himself. Aware that such messages demand immediate, personal handling especially amid the current unrest in Havana Esperanza takes a guard for protection and proceeds at once to *La Oficina* to retrieve it. She leaves without delay.

10:05: A Move to the Reception Room

Aware that Dr. Llerena's abrupt removal, and the quiet disappearance of three others, has unsettled his guests, **Director Machado** waits. Five minutes pass on his elegant wrist-watch. Then ten. His expression remains genial, but the stillness around the table hardens. He becomes aware of the attention settling on him, the pause stretching, expectant.

At last, the sliding doors to the *Long Gallery* open and a guard stationed there appears, visibly apologetic. At Machado's nod, the man steps forward and murmurs in rapid Spanish that the ambulance has departed with the patient and medical staff, and that **Señorita Esperanza** was escorted to *La Oficina* by one of the guards.

Machado gives no immediate response as the guard withdraws. Then, with deliberate calm, he rises and announces, to the surprise of several guests, that the company will adjourn to the Reception Room. "Let us not linger here," he says pleasantly. "Dessert has been prepared. *Flan con azúcar caramelizada*. *Dulce de guayaba con queso blanco*, served properly. *Café cubano*, strong, as it should be. And for the gentlemen, a selection of *Habanos*." He smiles, as if granting a favour already earned. "Music, a small unveiling, nothing to burden the evening. A brief indulgence, and then we shall continue."

The tone is warm, almost generous, yet carries an unmistakable edge: the evening continues because he has decided that it will. But all does not go as planned. Upon reaching the Reception Room, the heavy wooden sliding doors are found closed and locked from the inside. The guard assigned to watch the painting does not respond to calls or pounding on the panels, and no key is immediately available.

Machado's irritation now shows. He knows Esperanza could open the doors with her keys, but she is not present. He glances at **Captain Gandía** and raises an eyebrow. Gandía responds at once, ordering a guard to go around to the terrace and force entry by breaking a pane of the French doors and reaching inside to unlatch them.

Keeper's Note: One of the Investigators may instead attempt to pick the lock, which is faster and less destructive than Gandía's approach.

Once entry is gained and the heavy doors are slid fully open, a sharp, sickening chemical-sweet odour spills out into the hall. Several guests recoil; conversation dies. Inside, the uniformed Mazorra guard lies motionless on the floor. In his fall, he has seized and torn down the cloth concealing the painting, leaving it fully exposed. The terror frozen on his face prompts at least one bystander to make the sign of the cross.

The enormous canvas reveals a man with round spectacles in a shredded laboratory coat, running in blind panic. There is something profoundly wrong with his skin: it appears to be coming apart optically from the outside inward, translucent in places, exposing muscle and bone not as wounds but as if he were becoming a living anatomical model. Details snap into focus. A waning gibbous moon hangs overhead. The *M2 Main Female Hospital & Assessment Clinic* looms behind him. Armed guards, motorcycles, and an armoured limousine choke the roadway as the man runs through a mass of female Mazorra patients—some recoiling, some reaching toward him.



out of breath, returning from *La Oficina* with a guard and the telegram. She takes in the doorway scene—her employer framed by onlookers, the exposed painting, the collapsed guard—and for a rare moment appears unsettled. This was not standard Mazorra procedure.

“**Evelio Gil**,” she whispers. “So that’s why—” She stops herself, regains composure, and hands the telegram to Machado.

Machado reads the coded message in silence, his frown deepening. He closes his eyes briefly, then opens them. With a sideways glance at Esperanza, he beckons **Captain Gandía** closer, gestures subtly with the telegram, and speaks urgently in a low voice while crumpling it and letting it fall from his hand.



Keeper’s Note: *Listen or Read Lips* to understand their conversation. “There is a credible bomb threat in one of the women’s pavilions—the Violent / Refractory wards. Gather as many guards as you can spare. Do not cause panic. Evacuate the patients across the street and secure the area. If anyone asks, there is an urgent problem with the drains with gas accumulating. A disposal unit is coming from the capital, but no earlier than midnight.”

Captain Gandía nods, and turning barks orders at once, clearing the hallway and sending nonessential staff back toward the dining room while he calls one guard to call others together urgently for a security operation. Another guard is dispatched to call for an ambulance. He does not enter the room himself.

Keeper’s Note: The guard has been overcome by toxic paint fumes and hallucinations after prolonged exposure in a sealed room to Isabella Varona’s painting. He is alive but gravely affected. An Investigator may think to open the terrace doors to ventilate the space or drag the guard into fresh air—both faster and safer than waiting. If no one acts, **Lt. Col. Vives** steps closer and murmurs, “Ventilate the room. Open the terrace doors. Get him into fresh air.” He glances once at the painting, then away. “This is a medical incident. Let’s keep it that way.”

Dra. Ramagosa (still in her evening dress) and **Dr. Vilela** (one arm in a sling, the other gripping a revolver) are the only physicians present. Both hesitate. **Chief RN Beatriz Montalvo** moves to enter, but **Lic. Castellanos** stops her gently. “*Espera. Algo anda mal con el aire.*”

Keeper’s Note: Opening the terrace doors or moving the guard outside improves and stabilizes his immediate condition and reduces further exposure. It does not reveal the cause. Both **First Aid** or **Medicine (Normal)** roll establishes that the guard is alive, with a pulse, but barely breathing. There is no obvious cause, *First Aid* will stabilize but not revive the man; a **Medicine Hard+** success on the *Medicine* roll reveals that the man is suffering from some form of toxidrome (from the painting’s fumes) and he clearly needs urgent care in a medical facility for GI or other decontamination.

Now that the party seemed to be over, everyone seemed trying to leave at once. Director Machado raises his voice. “My apologies to my distinguished guests, but this emergency must take precedence over our evening’s post meal festivities. Our guard has suffered a medical incident and will be attended to. I must ask that you depart as soon as possible.” Turning to Esperanza, he adds, “Please see that our visitors are provided their belongings and escorted with courtesy to their rooms in *La Oficina* for their safety”. He heads upstairs.

10:15–10:25 — Investigator Options

The Investigators have **approximately ten minutes** (in REAL TIME) before the Mazorra transport ambulance arrives to remove the stricken guard to the **M1 infirmary** before they themselves are shown the exit and escorted off. During this narrow time interval they may:

- **Talk to and question other NPCs about anything they want. FREX**
 - Ask who is Evelio Gil? Why does his name matter? Why would it be spoken aloud in this room?
 - **Study the painting:** Photograph it; note its unsettling freshness (tacky paint) and notice chemical-sweet fumes. Samples *could* be taken for later analysis.
 - **Ask about the signature I Varona**, painted in the lower left corner. Who is this? Why are her paintings...notorious?
- **Recover the dropped telegram** & attempt to puzzle out its message before noticed missing
- **Anything else they want to try**

Once the unconscious guard is removed and order is reasserted, the Investigators, Ricky, and the MDs quartered there are escorted only as far as the doors of *La Oficina*. At that point, the escort ends abruptly: guards have been redeployed elsewhere, and no one is formally assigned to watch them.

From here, the Investigators may retire for the night or act while unguarded:

- Talk to **Ricky** inside *La Oficina*
- Talk to **Castellanos** in his lab/develop film.
- Head to Main Switchboard (telegram copy?)
- Talk to other MDs before they lock themselves in their quarters for the night
- Find **Dr. Zorrilla** (in his quarters with a frantic **RN Heres** present)
- Locate **Brujo** (if alive in TB ward)
- Connect with **other NPCs** not present.
- Visit **Isabella Domínguez Varona**
- Track down **Evelio Gil** (in Zorrilla's lab)
- Player's Choice.

To be continued

Keepers Option:

Who Still Holds Power at the Mazorra?

NPC	CPS %	Defining Trait
Dir. Machado	A-85 · C-65 · R-40 ·	Flees early leaves others exposed.
Capt. Gandia	A-75 · V-70 · R-50 ·	Escalates violent force to regain control.
Lt. Col. Vives	A-70 · C-75 · R-65 ·	Special children = assets, diplomatic immunity amid chaos
Esperanza	C-85 · A-60 · R-70 ·	Controls access, files, forge signatures/orders.

Condensed Mazorra Power Stat (CPS) Key:

A = Authority · **C** = Cunning · **V** = Violence · **R** = Resolve

Keeper's Option: NPC Condensed Power Stats

Not every important figure at the Mazorra is meant to be confronted, fought, or "defeated" in the usual Pulp Cthulhu / Call of Cthulhu 7e sense. Several key individuals exert danger through authority, access, rumour, & institutional power rather than physical force. Their influence shapes events long before violence occurs.

To reflect how these figures actually function in play, certain NPCs use a Condensed Power Stat (CPS) format instead of a full CoC stat block. These values are narrative levers, not skill lists: they indicate how an NPC applies pressure, where they dominate, and where their control is most likely to fail under stress.

CPS values (1–100%) are weighed against Investigator skills, Luck spends, and narrative leverage (Persuade, Psychology, Credit Rating, Stealth, etc.) to determine which pressure prevails. If violence does occur, it is usually uneven or catastrophic and should be resolved narratively or by converting the NPC to standard Pulp-CoC rules only if absolutely necessary.

COMMENTS: E&A #7

EVERYONE: Thank you all for your kind words about both our daughter Laurens law school acceptances, and about our poor Sadie who passed 'over the rainbow bridge' the week before Christmas. Below, touching mementos gifted by some of my work colleagues.



ELF: RAE; Snork at term *Javacrucian priestess*. Re *Glitch MMO*: You wrote a very poignant memory of your time playing this now-defunct game in your hyperlink. Your description of Glitch's streets, carried over into a GM-less *Wanderhome* game, reads like a genuine love letter to that unique and gentle setting. Have you checked out the Patreon-supported *Old Giants* MMO fan-made remake? *RYCTM on solo fantasy games in the Fighting Fantasy mould*: you & fellow E&A-er Pedro Panhoca da Silva (& Camila Lourenço Panhoca) really ought to get together and talk about this. Pedro has been very passionate about Portuguese-language choice-based interactive fiction, and I believe he even earned his Master's degree on the subject. Re replay-ability, I wonder if making the map of *Firetop Mountain* was the game.

MYLES CORCORAN: I was glad to hear from your DM that your New Year's Eve fireworks celebration went well. Thank you as well for the recommendation of *Blindsight*—a compelling modern take on hostile

alien intelligences that exploit human perceptual blind spots rather than brute force. RAE the level of historical detail in your *Kriegsmesser* write-ups: is this drawn from the game itself, or from your own knowledge of the period around the Thirty Years' War? I laughed at the sign reading "No hawkers, panhandlers, grave-robbers, starving artists, or would-be duellists." Add cross-dressers and none of your PCs would be welcome at the Ferbers! RARE your solo *Traveller*-adjacent play: your point about honesty in solo games stayed with me—how, played this way, the dice can genuinely surprise the author, a rare and valuable experience. That said, I now want to know more about Ding, Dong, and the others...

MATT STEVENS: *RYQTM* for something related to your original question of fascist pulp heroes, you might look at Norman Spinrad's *The Iron Dream* (1972). Using a "story within a story" framing device, Spinrad imagines a world where Adolf Hitler, instead of entering German politics, emigrates to America and becomes a pulp illustrator & author, eventually even winning a Hugo Award. The novel's inner text, *Lord of the Swastika*, is presented as Hitler's own lurid science fantasy, supposedly published shortly before his death in 1953. Spinrad includes in this satire a fictional scholarly afterword by a literary critic who dissects the book's fascist elements, symbols, & uniforms.

ROGER BELL_WEST: *RYCTM* on *Mazorra Horror* feeling "on rails"—that's fair, and partly intentional at this stage. The opening sections are laying groundwork: establishing the Mazorra as a 1930s psychiatric institution in a foreign setting, and anchoring events to the real historical timeline around Machado's fall. On the page, that inevitably reads as more linear. The intent isn't to fix outcomes, but to provide a pulp plot scaffold for the Keeper to hold in mind if the PCs go off on a frolic. I've deliberately left PC agendas and secrets underdeveloped, expecting them to emerge through Pulp Archetypes and Talents (which your comment prompted me to expand but is bumped to next-ish).

A cautious investigative *Call of Cthulhu* group will experience Mazorra very differently from a *Pulp Cthulhu* crew emulating some or all of such classic pulp heroes as *Doc Savage*, *The Shadow*, or *The Spider*, where audacity and pre-emptive action tend to dissolve any apparent rails very quickly. And as Keepers have always done, unused excess material can simply be cut. To paraphrase *Lisa Padol's* comment to me lastish, it's easier to cut historical detail & a line of patter than to make it up. I hope later instalments make clearer how sharply player choices can diverge from the presented structure.

LISA PADOL: RAE. *RYCTM* on *Habana Horror*: I'm delighted you found the mealtime conversation chart and guided tour useful, exactly as you say, it's far easier and more fun to adapt concrete patter than to invent it on the fly. <> *RYCTM* on *APP* vs *POW*: I've tended to use *APP* as a shorthand for first-

impression charisma, surface charm, confidence, and social leverage, while *POW* reads to me as inner force, will, or spiritual presence. That said, your point about mapping Charisma or Presence to *POW* is a good one, and for some groups shifting that emphasis works if it better suits their tone.

JIM VASSILAKOS: *RYCTM* on Refusing to See "Reality" in *CoC*: *Thank you for the thoughtful critique, and for the kind words about the scene itself. What Dr. Llerena says aloud is not what he believes. He knows that something profoundly wrong and otherworldly happened in that operating theatre. What he also knows is the cost of acknowledging it. In 1930s Cuba, truth does not determine speech; survival does. As a politically appointed physician in a corrupt, authoritarian institution—already regarded as compromised—admitting to witnessing the impossible would not prompt investigation but invite ruin, confinement, or worse. His anger and belligerence are therefore not madness, but a conscious defensive performance aligned with institutional power. Seen this way, his denial reflects one of Call of Cthulhu's central paradoxes: those who tell the truth are judged insane, while those who deny what they have seen are judged stable. That inversion may feel uncomfortable or even perverse, but it is not accidental. Lovecraftian horror isn't only about seeing too much; it's also about what society forces you to pretend you didn't see.*

PATRICK ZOCH: RAE your story of your son channelling *Leeroy Jenkins*; wonderful. The *Bolt Action* figures you painted up and photographed so nicely look amazing too. I haven't picked up a brush in six months, but I've been experimenting with acrylic paint markers, which work surprisingly well to paint quickly large minis like horses.

JOHN REDDEN: *Re Stranger Things*; we accidentally timed the final episode of season 5 so it ended at exactly midnight on NYE. ☺ Nice sunset BTW.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: *RYCTM* *Re fiddle vs violin*: agreed. Same instrument, different traditions. I hadn't realized there's a similar harpist/harper distinction (classical/traditional).

GABRIEL ROARK: RAE. Would not Air-sharks have bladder-like organs filled with *hydrogen*?

ATTRONARCH: What, ~20 dead farmers in session 91, a sanity threatening a spider-house, crypt undead everywhere, and no PC deaths in 3 sessions, unlike the 97 deaths over in your link over 93 sessions where there are only 2 4th level PCs? ☺

Everyone Else: RAEBNC

Jan 21st 2026. BCM

Children's interactive fiction – part VIII: *Branca de neve e as sete versões* (2016)
by Pedro Panhoca da Silva <ppanhoca@yahoo.com.br> and Camila Lourenço Panhoca
<camiladopetro@gmail.com>

José Roberto Torero and Marcus Aurelius Pimenta, in another joint production, adapted the classic fairy tale *Snow White* into an interactive version: *Branca de neve e as sete versões*¹ (2016) – “Snow White and the Seven Versions”, in free translation. The illustrations were done by Bruna Assis Brasil.

The story begins as everyone knows: in a faraway kingdom, a king has a very white daughter, and decides to call her Snow White. Shortly thereafter, the queen dies. The king remarries. Then the king himself dies, and Snow White's stepmother begins to enslave the poor princess. To make matters worse, the stepmother was a sorceress and had a magic mirror that answered her questions.

The narrative structure of this interactive book is very simple, always offering the reader binary choices. One choice results in the sudden end of the story, and the other prolongs it a little longer until the next fork in the road. This occurs when the reader must decide whether:

- the mirror will reveal whether Snow White is more beautiful than her stepmother or not;
- the hunter kills Snow White or a deer to deliver the heart to her stepmother;
- when Snow White finds a house in the middle of the forest, she will enter and mess it up or tidy it up;
- Snow White accepts and eats the apple offered by the witch or not;
- The dwarfs, upon returning from the mine, bury Snow White or place her in a glass coffin;
- The hunter finds Snow White or not;
- Snow White lived happily ever after with the prince or not.

Like the others, there is a good dose of humor throughout the narrative, which gives the text a certain originality rather than just expanding the narrative. At Snow White's birth, for example, the king is unsure whether to name her “Egg White” or “White Moon.” At another point, if the reader chooses that the hunter should kill Snow White (and the story obviously ends), the hunter does indeed murder her, but hands her over to the police, who at the time used horses and swords instead of guns and cars.

The book is worth reading to give a false sense of interactivity and to introduce the technique of narrative branching to readers who are not yet familiar with it. In this collection of interactive books, this may be one of the first we suggest to readers.

¹ A sample of the book, with a statement from Torero himself and a partial reading of the interactive book, can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z0Np19wE7Qg&t=3s>. Unfortunately, there is no English version of the video.

Attacks of Opportunity

Issue 7, Dylan Capel

Playing

Boardgames

I had *Heat* the racing game as a Christmas present; I'm a big racing game fan and this is an immediate favourite. The card-driven game play is a great balance between luck and predictability.

Reading

Neoclassical Geek Revival

Overall as a game there are slightly too many rules and bits and pieces here for me but it is a wonderful treasure trove of ideas to pick up and play around with (rather like the excellent *Knock* magazine).

Piety is a pool of points that gets used to power miracles, anyone can gather *Piety* by performing actions from a set list but in general the points can only be spent on *Holy Ground* so the importance of shrines, temples and sacred places becomes far greater than in a regular *D&D* style game.

I think there's an interesting bit of cultural bias here in that the dominance of modern religions featuring omnipresent deities means that we've forgotten the importance of liminal places or the idea of having to attract a god's attention.

Definitely something I'm thinking of incorporating.

Tests are stepped, its a d20 add modifiers system and initially you take 10, then you can roll 3d6 and then you end up rolling d20. This is an interesting take on the swinging of the traditional d20 test system and I could definitely see it working well in scenarios where initially you might be cautious, stealthy or diplomatic and then having the action escalate as people are injured or start taking bigger risks.

I'm surprised that there hasn't been something like this before but I suppose most systems have previously either manipulated the minimum result (the Escalation die of *13th Age*) or applied fixed modifiers during a scene (*Index Card RPG*, *Rising Difficulty* technique).

I've also enjoyed the rule that when the character does something particularly epic in nature there is a chance that one of their possessions becomes a relic. I enjoy this idea in terms of commemorating the character and their deed but also the idea that it might make relics relatively common with people trying to hunt down the relics of their personal heroes or which have properties that would be helpful. It feels a lot less generic than conventional fantasy magic items and when it comes to the cliché of the sage identifying unknown items it makes a lot more sense for someone with an encyclopedic knowledge of such things to need to try and discover the key identifying properties of the relic.

Cosmic Dark

I hadn't appreciated that the game is a campaign of linked scenarios. I'm not sure what I was expecting but maybe something a bit more like the final *Cthulhu Dark* book.

Tower Dungeon

My copy of volume 2 arrived after the Christmas break so I ended up reading on the work commute. I was fairly non-plussed by the tone and content but it ended at a cliffhanger that had me immediately ordering volume 3 which was back in the groove that I had enjoyed in volume 1. But then it ended on a cliffhanger that I thought was a bit rubbish but there was a twist at the end that has me looking forward to the release of volume 4 at the start of next month.

I suspect that if I just chatted about my immediate reactions then it would be all I would be writing about as there is a lot to pick apart here. I think it would be better to maybe distil some of the things I've enjoyed and what I've found off-putting. Either way a definite recommend for fans of off-kilter grim fantasy.

Watching

I watched *Hamnet* and found it an incredible film and emotional journey, highly recommended.

I was also intrigued that Shakespeare's lack of biographical and personal detail combined with his ubiquity as a writer in the English language seems to make him and his domestic situation an evergreen subject for exploration. It is like he is part of the pantheon of British characters like Robin Hood and King Arthur.

Stranger Things 5

The critics were right that the show had gotten to the point where its cast was too big, the exposition too explicit and lore too convoluted. The people who said it was great were right too. Everyone got to do their crying acting, the overlap of an ensemble cast doing their last show and friends going their different ways worked perfectly and I actually liked that it had a heart and didn't kill anyone (except the depressed person of colour, which seemed a bit odd) and that apparently there are no repercussions from killing large numbers of US special operatives. The final wave of costuming was great, in particular for Nancy.

I loved all the dungeon aesthetics that the show applied in subtle and none subtle ways. I liked to see all the positive qualities of roleplaying that were celebrated. The continuing explanation of the parallel world in terms of *D&D* metaphors. The metaphor of ending a campaign as being a metaphor for the traditional teenage rite of passage definitely gave me a bit of an emotional punch as I'm sure many of the rest of you have experienced at the end of long-running games.

It was always most effective when focusing on children in peril, trying to navigate the twin dangerous worlds of the supernatural and impact of adults in their lives. It felt most emotionally real in the exploration of Dustin's grief and fear.

The ages of everyone involved had gotten increasingly confusing and I was glad by the end that everyone was a little closer to their real life ages and haircuts.

It's clearly one of the best uses of gaming and fantasy to frame a sci-fi show but I think it might be a while before I will want to go back and re-watch it.

I also noted that while the plot flirted with a redemption arc for the villain it ended with the villain confirming their choices and seeing the validity in them. I was struck by the similarity with the ill-fated *Obi-wan* show where Anakin claimed agency in his choice to become Darth Vader and denied Obi-wan's role in his transformation. In addition to being morally clarifying, it also a richer story to say monsters have bad things happen to them and can be sympathetic but they still make choices to be monstrous.

I've seen a few comments that the cast was just too large, which I think is fair, and I think there was an interesting interplay here where there were no obvious off-ramps for characters except death. When the stakes are the world ending there's no way for a character to fade into the background. Death is a difficult consequence to use without judgement if you're using it in a limited way. I personally felt in the end it was better to be a more big-hearted, merciful story and have a lot of endings and too many people who didn't really have enough to do.

28 years later: The Bone Temple

I wouldn't have said that *28 Days Later* really needed a sequel but both films have been really interesting and as a pair are much more interesting than as standalone stories. There are a few weird plot holes but the storytelling becomes much more interesting as the focus changes. Also in an era of very long films both are willing to trust their audiences and say less and keep the story moving.

Ralph Fiennes delivers the amazing performance that critics foreshadowed but it centres a lot of good performances that delivers something much better than Robert Kirkman's tedious "humans are the real monsters".

It is also fair to say that it makes good use of that adult rating without turning into gore porn.

Request for opinions

I've had the *Nochet* setting and scenarios promoted to me on DriveThru. They look good and I suspect I would probably like them but I don't know much about them or why you might want to play a game there rather than Prax or Dragon Pass. If anyone has opinions I'd be glad to hear them.

Meta

This issue I did start to parameterise my Typst template. It took me quite a while because it isn't clear whether parameters without defaults can still be named so I ended up mixing up positional arguments in the template and named arguments in the document. The resulting error message tells you that your trailing positional arguments are missing but not what the template is receiving and how the arguments passed are being assigned. The pain of dealing with something that is a bit more like a programming language but which is currently that well-defined.

I also tried moving myself over to metric measurements for the margins this time.

I create other zines with LibreOffice and as I mentioned very quick PDF zines with Google Docs. I think Typst has a bit more flexibility than Google Docs and has the same speed of production once you get your template sorted out. It is complex enough that I'm not sure I'd try and replace LibreOffice currently.

On Comments and Page Counts

I've always assumed that page lengths are there to guard against people dumping their heartbreakers, fanfic and other verbose material. I agree that comments and engagement with other zines are a vital part of having a community rather than a shared distribution channel. I've sometimes thought of maybe even trying to do a different comment zine with a different layout.

Perhaps there can be an honour rule of disregarding comments for the purposes of page count?

Comments

Roger BW

Thanks for the observation on sidebars versus footnotes, definitely makes more sense in a digital format.

I liked the dice table, the effect of a single bonus die was not what I would have intuited it to be. The effect of direct bonuses was interesting from a game design perspective in terms of what experience you're looking for and probably how often you expect to be rolling the dice. It was also interesting to overlay the *Apocalypse World* style success ranges over the probabilities.

Myles Corcoran

I've finally managed to read through all the back issues and catchup on all the writeups. I don't know many other people who have played *Kriegsmesser* so its fascinating to read a different take on it. I have quite a few rules questions, did you play with the *Troika* rules? It seems you didn't take the quite dark tone that Gregor has (unless things get really desperate later). Was the historical setting easier than the fantasy one? How much did you rely on skill tests? Did you use any of the combat ideas about unequal contests being resolved by common sense and the surrender of the weaker party.

I loved the idea of the frog-man knight Philbert. I also liked the way that so many of the NPCs were ambiguous in their intentions, purposes and in what they tell the mice. The idea of mystical carp reminded me of the Pharaoh Fish in *Holy Mountain Shaker*, I feel like Wax and Wane could appear in any fantasy setting. It was interesting to see the fish and the boulder offer more disinterested perspectives on the other more active NPCs.

One thing I do find a bit confusing about *Mausritter* is the scale. Generally when I play it everything is mouse scaled and I don't tend to use much in the way of human objects. I felt that most of the Moon temple was human scaled but in the confrontation when Philbert went up the stairs as a frog and descended as a man I realised that I hadn't really got a clue mentally as to what was going on.

I've also felt that the inventory system was a bit of a drag on the game. When it was first released I thought it was quite an important element of the storybook style of the game and with the emphasis on wilderness adventures where the rangers need to haul most of their gear themselves. Subsequently though it has felt less and less important as the various adventures have come out and focused more on single sites or not really featuring hex crawling.

To some extent I wonder if it would be easier to apply a mouse "skin" to the *Into the Odd* rules and just retain the magic rules.

I enjoyed your sci-fi solo adventure and the way that it moved along at quite a clip due to the simple oracle dice you were rolling. Certainly playing straight Traveller solo is a more sedate experience as the sub-systems can be more involved. It felt like the chance of a mis-jump was quite huge though, it felt a bit like 17th century ocean travel! The emergent little strands like the thieving passenger turned discrete ally was quite enjoyable to read.

I had a job where I had a dual screen where the monitors could swivel to portrait mode and it was brilliant for working on websites. Most of the monitors I have had since have the cables plug into the screen rather than the base which makes swivelling hard.

Joshua Kronengold

Good luck with your creative projects and ideas. I don't think I've ever met someone who actually regularly used *vi* and *emacs*.

Lisa Padol

I enjoyed your observations on Robin Laws as a designer and recognise and agree with most of them.

I thought your observation to Brian about the use or creation of Mythos monsters was very interesting. For my part most of the scenarios I create tend to be for one shots so I tend to start with my situation and the horror aspect you are hoping to invoke and the work backwards to what kind of being or affect might create that situation, if it maps to something existing great but otherwise I don't feel I need to stick to existing definitions of monsters or existing creatures.

I also find some of the existing mythology a bit tiresome unless it is filling some purpose in the game.

For me nothing says unspeakable horror like rigid comprehensive ontologies. As you say the *Delta Green* framing is different as it based a lot around the very speakable properties of a lot of the Mythos.

Patrick Zoch

I finally read through your *Dice Tower Retreat* report finally, I enjoy reading about it as much as you seem to enjoy attending! Thanks for the explanation of the various "span" games, I've never actually played any of them but they are very attractive as you mention.

What struck me about your report is the massive range of themes and colour in the games you mentioned. Obviously the relationship between theme and mechanics can sometimes be tenuous but it felt like there a tremendous range of human experience and natural life informing the designs from the cats exploring Kyoto to cheesemaking. The breadth of the games library must be really something.

Plankwell Collective

I was intrigued by the reference back to the previous captain zoning out. Have we had more detail about that before? Naturally the psi gear was in the captain's quarters so presumably they were psychic and Gus was chosen to be captain because of his psychic potential. I fear we're spinning into a conspiracy theory where everything happens in the Imperium happens because of psykers!

Heath Row

Your trip to Lake Geneva was intriguing, when I was younger it took me a while to figure out that it wasn't **the** Lake Geneva that was being referred to and I never really got the geography of the Great Lakes until I had the opportunity to visit and was able to get a sense of how big they really are.

It is reassuring that the Horticultural Hall has very nice flowerbeds but overall I'm struck from the photos as to how generic everything looks. If you had told me these were pictures of New Jersey or Philadelphia I would have believed you.

It is a bit hard to reconcile the creative workshop with the mundanity of the surroundings. Or maybe that's exactly what you need to spur you to take your imagination somewhere else.

Ignorable Theme for E&A Issue #8

GMing tricks you've either "borrowed" from other GMs or figured out yourself.

For *D&D*, rather than write down everyone's initiative, I arrange character signs on the GM screen to show the relative order (left to right from my perspective) because the numbers themselves don't matter. The trick is to arrange them as they announce the numbers without having to write anything down. Not only does this speed up the start of combat, but also displaying the initiative this way makes it easier for the players to see who's up next and they can correct me when I accidentally skip someone (as sometimes happens, especially if Reaction Actions are in play).

I used to have dry-erase cards that the players could use to write down their number (mimicking the card draw from *Savage Worlds*), but that proved to be too unwieldy. Given the crowded table, passing out pre-printed initiative cards isn't ideal.

The single "trick" that I wish every GM would do is to be mindful and ask each player around the table (or whatever your gaming space is) what they are doing. In combat, you can just follow initiative order, but outside of combat, the GM has to ensure that every player has an equal opportunity to participate. Don't just bounce around the table and go without whomever speaks first or loudest. *Be deliberate and welcoming.* I usually go clockwise around the table, but I do try to mix it up based on the structure of the scene. Ultimately, this is the responsibility of everyone at the table, but as the chief table marshal and game moderator, the GM sets the tone and rhythm of the table dynamics.

In convention games, I die a little inside when the GM does not provide name cards for the PCs, especially when using pre-generated characters. I usually compensate by pulling out index cards that I keep in my dice kit. Pro tip: write your character name on both sides of the tent card so that it's easier for the players next to you to read it (and that you don't forget your PC's name).

The Adventurers Guild

Session for December 20th, 2025

Following my rant last issue, I did what any mature GM would do and expressed my concerns to my players and asked for their input. They acknowledged the issue and suggested that the PCs join a caravan of some sort that could be used as their moving base of operations. This would make it easier to add or remove PCs. The system is imperfect—we would still have to deal with last-minute unexpected absences (like when Vrax's player and their family coming down with COVID and missing the session we discussed this)—but it would help.

Importantly, the concept immediately started turning gears in my brain and I immediately came up with something that would blend right into the story so far. And no, it wasn't the travelling circus that Eridan's player suggested (that no one else liked, either).

Beyond clearing this up, I went into the session planning to pull a few threads, sew a few plot seeds, and see where we ended up.

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)
- **Eridan:** Level 5 Wood Elf Fighter (Eldritch Knight)

Skyla

I created a group of NPCs to act as the PCs' competitive foils within the Adventurers Guild. Their species and classes would either parallel or contrast those of the PCs. They called themselves the Crimson Crows.

Skyla, a wood elf ranger, was originally designed as a parallel to Entan, the party's druid. Whereas Entan left his family and fled to the city, Skyla has no family and detests the city. As a child, she was either abandoned or lost in the forest and grew feral. She grew up a hermit and only joined civilization when she was taken in by The Crimson Crows when they encountered her in the wilderness.

Skyla has greasy dark hair, cropped unevenly, stormy brown eyes, and a misshapen upper lip that reveals a

protruding canine. She has an unpleasant musky odor and her breath smells like blackened garlic. She speaks little, preferring grunts, growls, and gestures to make her thoughts known. Her means of reading people is to get close and sniff them.

She's not friendly, but she doesn't understand the concept of personal space when it comes to those she likes. And she liked Entan. But he frustrated her because he was a terrible druid who preferred the city and wasn't really connected to nature. One time in the guildhouse, she came up behind him, sniffed the back of his neck and grunted that he smelled of the city. She then led him out of town and showed him an open rift—the same one that led to the desert world from last issue—and told him to “Fix it!”

This had a meta goal of getting Entan, whose player had missed a session, headed in the direction where the party went and had passed the portal on their journey. Plus, I was setting up the notion that Entan was destined to “heal the world” even though he eschewed his family's goals for him to be a healer of people. When the party returned from the desert world and pulled the anchor, I described the closing of the rift in such a way that Anan's player even said, “Like closing a wound.”

After Entan's player left the group, I didn't have a need for her, but then Eridan joined. According to his player, “Eridan was raised by a group of Tieflings who found him in the forest after he was lost and abandoned by his family.” My GM brain sparked like crazy.

I asked them, “Does he have interest in his biological family?” They answered, “He'll say no, but deeply secretly deep down he does.” That's about as green a light as I could hope for.

A Sense of Wrongness

The party was in the guildhouse when they heard a crash of trays and goblets followed by a howl and scratch. They looked and saw Skyla screaming, growing, and snatching while being held by Mago, The Crimson Crow's formidable black dragonborn fighter. The target of her rage was a burly, bearded human who had his longsword already drawn. The scattered and splashed remains of a wine service littered the floor and the table the Crows were seated at.

The PCs tried to ascertain what was going on and while the man protested that it was just an accident, that they had bumped into each other as they passed, Skyla just “went crazy.” Skyla screeched that the man was wrong

and “didn't belong.” She then bit Mago and lunched at the man who also fell victim to a bite from the enraged elf.

The PCs were able to break them up. Mago and Anan carried Skyla out back to the exercise yard and let her blow off steam. They asked, but she could not articulate what she meant.

Inside, the man returned to the table with his two male companions. The party engaged them with a light interrogation and verified that they were guild members, but were not from Islingford-upon-Orlin. The strangers were not looking for a fight and decided to leave.

The PCs were very suspicious of the newcomers, I presume assuming that Skyla would not have acted out if she didn't have good reasons. Eridan asked, “Should we follow them sneakily or stupidly?”

Eridan tried to follow them sneakily, but the dice would not have it. Growing weary of being followed, the three warriors took a break at a fountain in a market square and waited for their followers to catch up. Recognizing that he had been made out, Eridan decided to do some browsing in the market while his teammates caught up.

The conversation established that the man, Barnet Virion, and his companions, Doug & Bruce, had nothing to tell the PCs about their business in Islingford and held no ill-will toward Skyla or them. If the PCs wanted to get anything more out of these suspicious characters,¹ they would have to try another tact.

What the PCs didn't know was that Barnet and crew were werewolves who didn't want to do anything that might draw attention to their true nature or reasons for being in town. I don't even know what their business is. The point of the encounter was to introduce Eridan to Skyla and vice-versa. If this werewolf seed bears fruit in the future, all the better.

A Sorcerous Soiree

Earlier in the day, Millie was walking the hall of the Arcane Estate when she overheard Isadora Voss, Protector of the Arcane Estate and Millie's nemesis, get a message from her secretary that prompted her to exclaim, “How can he be sick? He's a paladin!” She complained that she would have to find another

¹ And really, they are only suspicious in the way that any NPC are suspicious, especially if they want nothing to do with the PCs.

bodyguard. She then offhandedly fired the secretary, whose name, Roderick, Millie overheard, and he walked off, sullen. I had wanted Vrax to overhear this exchange and to be recruited on the spot to be her bodyguard, but COVID denied me Vrax's presence.

Millie wondered if the paladin was truly sick or was just making an excuse.

Later, after the ordeal with Skyla had calmed down, our heroes sat down with The Crimson Crows' table for drinks. Tiffany—the nobleborn sorcerer whose younger brother they assisted in bagging a chimera—invited Millie to a soiree the next evening, the first day of Descending Summer. Millie never asked, but why would a noblewoman want to be with a lowly-born bookworm like Millie? Tiffany joined the Adventurers Guild as a means of avoiding her social obligations and she appreciates that Millie holds no reverence for the aristocrats and politicians that attend soirees.² Plus, she gets to dress up the former maid whose wardrobe seems to consist entirely of shades of brown.

The next day, we had the obligatory dress shopping and make-over montage.³ In addition to paying for Millie's flowing pink dress, manicured and painted nails, and hair weaves done in an up-do, Tiffany lent the wizard some of her jewelry.

The estate was on the river and spread across the manse, the grounds, and a luxury barge docked out back. While mingling, Millie was approached by Roland, Tiffany's brother, who asked her for a dance. Afterwards, they retired to a bench in the back garden. Before anything awkward could happen, there was an explosion from the main house and out strode a plated suit of armor the size of an ogre and was making a straight line to the yacht where many of the guests, including Isadora, were enjoying the band playing on the main deck.

Millie struck it with her most powerful magic missiles but it had no effect other than to make her a target. The armored figure shot bolts of fire out of its fingers, crashing through Millie's protective ward. It fired at the boat and fatally wounded Roderick. Wait, so he was still in Isadora's employ? Millie let loose more missiles and was only rewarded with more fire bolts.

² Rumors that I'm trying to ship the PCs with their Crow counterparts are not completely unfounded.

³ Anachronism be damned.

This is one of the times I decided to roll out in the open... and got a natural 20. I didn't even bother rolling for damage. We all knew Millie was done for. I then described how the armored figure walked on to the boat as Isadora and others gathered in a circle and teleported away. The figure picked up Roderick's body and continued to walk straight across the boat and plunged into the river.

It was then someone asked if Millie had been instantly killed based on how much excess damage she sustained. My reply was, "I didn't roll for damage, so she can't be dead." Instead, Millie awoke to a tiefling face smiling down on her, welcoming her back. She thanked him; he invited her to make a donation to the Temple of Set.

The Art of Tracking

The next day, the party came together and investigated what had happened. Little did they know that they were being shadowed (and I was rolling really well).

After tracing the path of the golem (for that was their best guess as to what the assailant was) through the house, garden, and boat, they walked out the front door to determine where it came from and instead found Skyla watching them from beyond the front gate (I rolled a 1).

She pointed to a huge hole in the gate on the upstream side of the front garden. They followed that lead and found the place along the bank where it had exited the river. They also checked the far bank and could find no sign of it entering or existing from that side. In conclusion, it seems to have walked in the river submerged and hidden from somewhere upstream and most likely returned following the same path.

At a dead end, they went back to the guildhouse while Millie did some research on Roderick at the Arcane Estate. She was only able to confirm that he was just the latest in a long string of secretaries with short tenures under Isadora. She had the idea that who she saw at the soiree wasn't actually Roderick and that Isadoras was up to something. She also asserted that Isadora wasn't skilled enough to cast a teleportation spell (though these are just assumptions by the player). It pleases me that Millie underestimates Isadora's magical prowess, assuming that she is simply riding the political coattails of her father (whom Millie had great respect for). It's a good quality to have in a nemesis.

That evening, Eridan returned home. He found Skyla waiting for him, sitting on the bottom step of the stairs that lead to his apartment. She gave him room to pass before standing up and following him a half-step behind. When he reached the top and fiddled with his keys, Skyla leaned even closer to Eridan⁴...

and whispered...

"Do you know who your parents were?"⁵

And that's where I ended the session. I also knew that Eridan's player would miss the next session, so I can let that cliffhanger stew for a bit.

Session for January 3rd, 2026

The next session was odd and mostly just filling time. Eridan and Anan were out, but Iggy (Level 6 Rock Gnome Bard (Glamour)) was in. Plus, it was Chayote's player's birthday so we had a bit of a lunch celebration. My wife made lasagna, Iggy's player brought donuts, and Millie's player brought gifts. So, we lacked focus and I lacked motivation.

Millie was really concerned about the fate of Roderick and puzzled about how Isadora managed to teleport away. She even thought it might have been a staged attack to make Isadora look good. In the player's mind, they wrote Isadora to not be that good at magic because she was focused on appearances and politics; however, I used the archmage statblock. I enjoy watching Millie underestimate Isadora's competence.

They decided that Iggy, with their superior charisma, should try to get answers out of Isadora, and that the two ladies would stay out of the meeting. They followed her to a restaurant where Iggy went up to her, gushed over seeing her there, and lured her away from her dinner guests to have a private conversation.

She was unaware of anyone dying at the soiree. This could have been due to the fact that she had teleported out but did not explain how she did not hear about (or acknowledge) Roderick's fate afterwards. It foreshadowed what the PCs were to discover later.

Millie also thought that Isadora, as the Protector of the Arcane Estate, should bring the culprit to justice since members of the Arcane Estate (Millie in particular) were attacked and injured. Along those lines, Isadora told Iggy that she would not follow up as it was a matter for

the host of the soiree, Councilman Karlan Stonemeir, to undertake. This at least gave them a direction for the investigation.

They managed a meeting with the councilman, a well tailored dwarf who apologized sincerely to Millie for the harm done to her and preemptively diffused any tension that might have been directed his way. When asked if he knew the person behind the attack, he bluntly admitted that he knew exactly who it was—a dwarven craftsman from Dansford named Arenta Ironhand. He had contracted her for some work, but it did not meet the quality requirements of the contract. Despite paying her "what she was owed," she insisted that she was owed more and had even gone so far as sending him threatening letters (which he claimed to have destroyed). This affair was on dwarven time scales, so this might have been referencing work done decades ago.

Dansford is a town that was a half-day upriver from Islingford. It is a well travelled route and they had no issues making the journey by the end of the day. They stopped at a tavern for dinner and received directions to Argenta's property along the river Orlin. Chayote convinced them to do some nighttime investigations.

Argenta's place was well away from the town center and consisted of three buildings: a smithy/workshop, a boathouse right on the river, and a cottage. Their explorations were cut short when a bronze dog-shaped construct with glowing eyes and tail came from around the workshop to greet them. Rather than have an encounter, they retreated and skirted through the surrounding woods to investigate, but ultimately decided to wait until morning.

They arrived the next day and saw someone dutifully working the bellows of the smithy. As they approached, this someone looked exactly like Roderick and sitting next to them was the "dog" they saw the night before. A tense conversation followed during which the someone identified themselves as Rodney. Eventually, Rodney gave a terse command to the dog and it raced off to the cottage and through a dog door. Argenta came out and approached. She walked with a limp and her left hand was sheathed in a large leather glove.

After a brief discussion about Roderick, she went into the enclosed workshop and brought out Roderick who was leaning on her shoulder. Half of his skull was missing, revealing spinning clockwork inside.

⁴ Chayote's player: "Kiss her!"

⁵ Chayote's player: "Oh, no. Don't kiss her!"

Throughout the conversation with Argenta, she was unfriendly and argumentative, but she did answer most of their questions. Her side of the story was not unlike the councilman's, except that she believed he was not compensated per the contract they had.

Both of the dwarves were being cagy and neither was forthcoming with the details of the contract. The reason is because I didn't know and my improv skills were failing me. It had to be something scandalous, but it wasn't an "automated sex toy" as suggested by Chayote. "I have those for sale; one-thousand gold," Argenta offered.

Deciding they had answered the Roderick question and having no desire to be in the middle of a he said, she said dispute, the group decided to drop the issue and returned to Islingford. They informed the councilman that they would not be pursuing this further. He replied by asking them if they would be interested in being hired to bring a "permanent resolution" to this issue. They correctly interpreted this as an offer to do murder for hire, and politely declined. [It should be noted that his suggestion was very out of order. The Thieves Guild has jurisdiction for those types of activities, not the Adventurers Guild. Both the councilman and our PCs would find themselves on the wrong side of the Thieves Guild had they accepted.]

Shifting Gears

Recognizing that he had only attended two sessions and could not be relied upon to attend consistently, Vrax's player dropped. I preemptively cancelled the next session (which would have had only 2 or 3 players) so that I could spend the time on "Phase 2" of the campaign. I posted the following to the group Discord server:

"On [January] 31st, we'll be kicking off a new phase of the campaign based on the valuable feedback and suggestions you gave back in December. Warning: it may be a bit railroady to get the group headed in the right direction but I'm hoping you'll work with me and bring your own suggestions about the details."

Here are a couple of the responses I got:

- Iggy: "i don't think i mind railroady"
- Chayote: "Choo choo let's gooooo"

An Unlikely Circumstance

I don't think I've ever written fiction in my zine, but it was a concept I had to write down to get out of my head. I thought I might as well share it.

Jun guided herself along the rail that surrounded the open-air garden, pulling herself with one hand while the other held her lunch box. The brief whirl of the water mister prompted a disgusted sigh. She had not noticed that particular noise before. Noise meant friction. Friction meant inefficiency and wear. The thought bounced around in her mind. Something to build a sim around, perhaps? Surely they would just recycle and print a replacement part. No path to ruination. Unless it promoted bacteria growth? She sighed again. Too many pathogen-based scenarios already. "Eh," she thought, it could fill her afternoon. Onboard a ship designed to function fully autonomously, to manage and even repair itself with minimal call for human intervention, she had become an expert at filling time.

When she refocused her attention on where she was going, Jun saw someone in her lunch spot. Yes, she realized it was not proper to call any spot "hers" on a ship of nearly ten-thousand, though the vast majority of them were in cryo, and anyone could have found their way to her favorite nook before she did. Even so, if anyone was to call dibs on a private corner of the ship, surely it would be her—and others like her when they eventually and inevitably appeared. She took a calming, resigned breath. This person did not know her situation and it was not fair to them for her to get worked up over it.

"You're new," she said after bringing herself to a stop on the rail across from the man in her spot. His skin was pale and his dirty blonde hair trimmed short. Jun's guess was that he had been revived in the past few days and had gone through the "spa treatment" that jumpstarted all the body systems and organs—including the skin—that had been in a suspended state for years. Over the next few weeks, his natural color would come back—unless this was his natural color, Jun smirked to herself.

"Yeah," he admitted. He smiled and Jun noticed it reached his blue eyes, so she concluded it was natural instead of practiced. Why was she skeptical of everything? Was it a hazard of her job or did she have

her job because of her skepticism? She told herself to stop over-analyzing—she was supposed to be having a conversation.

She pointed at where he was planted, though he did not know the trick of locking his legs around the frame of the rail so that he would not drift off, and said, “You’re in my spot.”

“Oh?” He reflexively jerked back and it threw him out of the balanced position and he started rotating. “I... I’m sorry,” he stuttered as he grabbed the rail and righted himself.

Jun giggled at his awkwardness. It always took a while for newborns, as she called them, to regain their full motor control without the orientating force of gravity. She reminded herself to put out her hand, “I’m Jun.”

“Tollak,” he said, taking her hand briefly so as not to appear to be using her to stabilize his motion. “How long have you been up?”

It was a natural question and she could not fault him for asking it, but it annoyed her. He must have seen something in her face because he immediately retracted it by asking another. “It is a nice spot. You come here to eat?” He then pointed at her lunch box in her other hand.

She smiled, appreciating the redirection. “Yeah, most days.” She looked around. They were not alone. The open-air garden was a popular destination, but her trick was to time her lunch when there were fewer people enjoying the atmosphere provided by the green plants. It was not the only garden accessible to the general public, but it was hers—again, if she could call anything onboard “hers.” It was the one with a recess in the outer rail that made room for a maintenance ladder where someone could nestle themselves out of the way of people circumnavigating the garden.

“So, what do you do, Jun?” Tollak asked.

“SQC,” she answered with a slight shrug. “Um, that’s System Quality Control,” she added to preempt the inevitable follow-up question.

“Interesting,” Tollak said. “Do you like it? I’m in Stellar. Or will be once I acclimate.”

“Yeah, but even then, there’s not much to do yet, is there?” Jun challenged him. She had intended to say it with a sympathetic tone, but it did not come out right

so she turned her attention to her lunch box and pulled back the lid.

Tollak thought for a moment. “Probably not. I’ll get caught up on the latest data. Do some practice runs. We’ll see.”

Jun finished chewing while covering her mouth. She swallowed and said, “Only so much you can get done in four months.” The duty cycle of the cryogenic units was programmed based on decades of research conducted as the ship was being built. They found that the test subjects did best when taken out of their comatose state for a few months of moving around, eating real food, and exercising the brain. While in cryo, aging effectively stopped and these intermissions fractionally reduced their overall lifespan, but it was a necessary tradeoff to minimize risk. After being revitalized, they would spend a week going through cryo prep all over again. Unless they got pregnant while they were out of cryo—there was a whole other procedure for that. Jun had a completely different problem.

“True,” Tollak admitted. The mission was still young enough that the telescope data was not much different than what they had before launch. “It will be several cycles before the real work begins.”

“Where are you from?” Jun planted the one question that usually got people talking so she did not have to. Instead, she continued eating, bringing each savory cube to her mouth, biting it in half, and pretending that it was an enjoyable experience. It gave her an excuse to put the onus on him to keep the conversation going and not ask questions that would interrupt her. Tollak was from Bergen, Norway. Youngest of three with two older sisters. Studied astrophysics from a university Jun had never heard of and was unlikely to remember. This was his third cycle.

Jun tried to remember if she had seen him during his last cycle, but could not. New faces were always cycling in and out so this was not unexpected. Every few days, someone would wake up and someone would go under and be placed in the same cryo chamber that was just vacated, after it was cleaned, inspected, and repaired if needed. Jun remembered with pride some of the failure scenarios she devised that would have caused the whole scheme to collapse catastrophically. As a result, the cryo folks updated the procedures and devised some failsafe mechanisms and workarounds in the event that reality was even worse than Jun’s imagination.

"Seoul," Jun said to finally hold up her side of the conversation. It was not exactly a lie—it was her last residence—but it was not in the spirit of the question. "I had a younger brother, but he died." That was true; hopefully Tollak would not pry. "I went to school for computer psychology."

"Oh! So you're an A.I. whisperer," Tollak said with a bit too much enthusiasm for Jun's taste.

"Yeah, something like that," she humored him. "I mostly run simulations and try to understand what they're doing and why they're doing it." Technically, nothing she did needed a human to do it. Systems—the term "AI" was banned from official nomenclature—could be used to monitor and manage other systems. Jun knew of at least one area which had a system depth of four, but it was deemed prudent to have a human double-checking things. Whether or not this was technically necessary, it made people feel better and sometimes that was the most important thing.

Each functional area was managed by at least three independent systems, each being fed the same data, and each coming up with their own recommendations. Most of the time, they agreed within a reasonable margin. When there was a deviation, majority rule was applied, but then someone in SQC would try to figure out the reason for the deviation. They would run simulations and sometimes the anomalous recommendation yielded better results. They then fed this information back into the system loop.

Jun had fallen into a specialization of running preemptive, speculative, and doomsday simulations to test how the system would manage it. It filled the time. "So," she asked Tollak, "what's the worst thing that could happen in the Stellar Survey Division?"

"You mean, besides the life support failing or having a micrometeorite puncture the hull?" He asked jokingly. He knew what she meant. "The telescopes going dark, obviously." Their ability to find and analyze potentially habitable planets was a critical component to mission success. Fortunately, those failures were on the lowest rung of the risk assessment scale due to their unlikelihood, ease of repair, and abundance of workarounds.

"And what would cause that?" Jun finished the last of her drink, placed it back into her lunch box, and closed the lid. She looked Tollak in the eyes and asked, "What small, undetectable failure could cascade into an entire

telescope failing? And what's the earliest sign that something was off?"

As he ummed and ahed through his thoughts, she cut him off. With a subtle kick against the rail, she started drifting away. "That's your homework assignment," she said as she gave a friendly wave of good-bye. She was not on a strict work schedule, but she liked sticking to the routine she had created for herself. This diversion with Tollak was a good way to fill her lunch time, but that was over now.

"I'm scheduled to start prep tomorrow," Tollak said with a touch of sadness. He had enjoyed spending these last months with Jun and did not want it to end. Not that it mattered since they would meet in the next cycle as if no time had passed—much like it did every daily sleep cycle. That thought sparked another. He suddenly came to a realization and was a little ashamed it had not come up in their countless conversations.

He stared at her intently while she finished chewing. Her hair. Dark. Straight. Past her shoulders. How could he have not noticed? His had gotten shaggy in the past months—they would shave it down for prep—but her hair was an anomaly on this ship.

"Wait, when is your cycle? Are you..." As Tollak worked through all the permutations of possibilities, Jun patiently waited.

"You're too old, I assume, to be ship-born." Births did take place on board. Humans are going to human, after all, even if only in four-month windows. The children were raised by the rotating village of people coming out of and into cryo until they were eighteen and could consent to the cryo process. Plus, the process had never been tested on children and they were not going to experiment on them now.

There was inevitable attrition of the ship population. Some from natural causes rooted in congenital defects that slipped passed the pre-mission health screening, very few from accidents, but most from simply not surviving the cryo process. All this had been simulated and calculated well before they left Earth. The cryo cycles were staggered so that the conscious ship population remained essentially constant. So long as the birth rate was at or below replacement rate and the protocols were followed, there was no impact on ship systems or resources.

"Rude!" she said, smacking his arm lightly while laughing. She calmed herself. "But correct."

"How many cycles have you done?"

Jun held up her index finger.

"One? So, you've been awake for...?" Tollak's eyes went wide. He tried to come up with a number, but she beat him to it.


"Almost fourteen years at this point," she confirmed. "First prep was fine. Second prep, not so much." Jun shrugged and spun her lunch box as punctuation. "I had a severe reaction and I couldn't go back to cryo." After the ordeal of being given drugs her body interpreted as poison, she did her research. During the test trials, the cases of an acquired allergy to the cryo protocol had occurred in two of the one-thousand, three-hundred, seventy-nine participants. Both of those were successfully counteracted with immunosuppressants and re-entered cryo. That protocol did not work for Jeon. "I'm a victim of Bayesian statistics," she chuckled to cover the melancholic acceptance that she came to years before.

Tollak did some quick math and confirmed what she had left unsaid. He mostly likely wouldn't see her again and she definitely would not see the end of the mission. "Oh, Jun, I'm so sorry," Tollak said sincerely. He reached out to touch and hold her hand, but she was too busy fidgeting with her lunchbox to notice.

She shrugged and then met his gaze. "Not your fault. Just an unlikely circumstance."

Comments on E&A Issue #7

Roger BW

I read "Codiest Time of Year" as -iest Time of Year. I do love good fish and chips. Is it blasphemous to put ketchup on the fish?

The tape scene in *Mission Impossible* could be well used in RPGs. The GM can clearly lay out the goals and major NPCs *without the PCs being able to ask questions*, thus keeping them on their toes and requiring that they get answers on their own.

RYCT Myles, the big big problem is how investment doesn't care about profit, but growth⁶ and making money off selling the stock (or using the stock as

⁶ Maths be damned!

collateral for loans) and not from the dividends stock ownership brings.

RYCT Lisa, the Resistance Table could also be replaced with roll d20, add your ability,⁷ and compare it against 10 plus the opposition's ability. Whenever I see a percentile system use tables with increments of 5%, I think, "This could have been a d20." The desire for the granularity of percentile systems are lost on me.

RYCT me, the default way to play *Wildcard Roleplaying System (WRS)* is for everyone to have their own deck, but the last time I ran it, I had a single deck for the whole table since I knew the scenario wouldn't involve many draws. Yes, there is a discard pile (one for each deck).

RYCT Josh, as much as I like crunching the numbers from a game design and analysis perspective, I can appreciate the fog of uncertainty that more opaque dice systems can bring.

Dylan Capel

One key difference between *Vaesen* and *Call of Cthulhu* is that the former is based on folklore so that if a PC expresses belief in it, they will not seem insane. A *Call of Cthulhu* PC could believe the exact same folklore (though such beliefs and knowledge will not help them), they may be perceived as backwards and superstitious, but not mad.

Myles Corcoran

Regarding conventions, I also find "joining in" stressful when it comes to open gaming or trying to crash games. I'm fine with a set schedule of games I've already signed up for.

Michael Cule

RYCT Myles, "This character has XXX as their central defining trait." Are you referring to pornography or moonshine? :)

Elf

RYCT Roger, 9am is quite an early start. If I suggested it to my players, they'd rebel. One of them commutes from Watsonville; another is consistently 5-15 minutes late. We usually go from noon to five o'clock. I'll sometimes call it early (as on Dec. 20th), when it reaches a good place to stop and/or my brain has run out of things for my mouth to say.

⁷ Back when they were on a 3-18-ish scale.

RYCT me being a local, yes, well, I do put my home city in the footer of the first page of each of my zines. :) I'm not on Bluesky and I didn't see an email address, so I couldn't reach out to you. My email is also in the footer of my first page, so please drop me a line.

For Kublacon, you can take BART to SFO and then use the free hotel shuttle. DunDraCon is much harder because Santa Clara County is an endless suburb poorly connected with public transit.⁸

RYCT Michael, I, for one, usually want to play my characters for 30+ sessions. I would guess that such long campaigns are uncommon outside of D&D and similar games and that most people prefer shorter campaigns. Many indie games are built around a particular story structure or character arc that shouldn't be dragged out for that many sessions. With D&D, there's (almost) always a new rung to ascend to.

I liked the faux papercraft appearance of your map.

Avram Grumer

Marvel superhero comics had at least 5 RPGs:

- ★ TSR's *Marvel Super Heroes Role-Playing Game* (FASERIP, 1984)
- ★ TSR's *Marvel Super Heroes Adventure Game* (SAGA system, 1998)
- ★ Marvel Comics' *The Marvel Universe Roleplaying Game* (the diceless one, 2003)
- ★ Margaret Weis Production's *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying* (the Cortex-ish one, 2012)
- ★ Marvel's *Marvel Multiverse Role-Playing Game* (d616, 2023)

Joshua Kronengold

RYCT Lisa, I wouldn't say that *D&D* has "medieval culture and attitudes" as much as it has the veneer of those things. The culture and attitudes in *D&D* are distinctly more modern than medieval and so modern-sized libraries seem not out of place. For a better (but still flawed) depiction of medieval culture and attitudes, I'd look to *Ars Magica*, *Harn*, or *Chivalry & Sorcery*.

RYCT me, I did tell the players in Session Zero that I would be incorporating their backgrounds and I had already done so with other PCs until I turned the spotlight to Iggy. I put theirs off because it was juicier and required a more dire threat that the PCs needed to level up for.

⁸ I like and use VTA Light Rail, but it objectively sucks.

After one of the guildmasters creates and posts the quests, some snarky vandal then writes notes on it. Who this person is a mystery the PCs have not bothered to ask and I haven't bothered to answer, but I suspect it is one of the other guildmasters.

Lisa Padol

Taking down the internet (as in *Necrobiotic*) is pretty straight forward. DNS, "the internet's phonebook," is fragile. The massive outage of AWS that took down a bunch of services in October 2025 was a DNS fault, for example. Breaking deep sea cables and satellites would be massively disruptive. DNS and physical attacks could be scaled up to take down the global internet, even if local networks could survive. None of this is permanent, though.

What do zombies consume for energy? If nothing, then there's a near-infinite energy glitch that could be used for electrical generation. Plus, losing power plants doesn't get rid of solar, wind, household generators, and all the other ways people generate electricity while being "off the grid."

And you are right about art. No more be said.

RYCT me, yes, it was a Todd Furler game. I don't know if I have played *Unknown Armies* run by anyone else.

In *WRS*, jokers don't count as successes, so that you can fail an action and still gain some benefit due to a drawing matching joker. How successes work for defense in combat is a big-ol' "it depends" that is explained (probably poorly) in the main rules and does not fit on the one-pager.

RYCT Avram, feeling "the battle lines forming" in *Monsterhearts* is why I think I don't want to play it, even though the elevator pitch interests me.

Brian Rogers

RYCT me about the Summer Festival. Oh, I definitely asked the players what they wanted to do, but they were still at a loss to come up with their own options that I could riff on.

Matt Stevens

RYCT Avram, interestingly, adding a single bonus die to a 2d6 roll (so, 3d6, sum the highest two) has a higher average result than rolling 2d6 twice and taking the better result (8.46 vs 8.37). Here's a table:

Result	2d6	3d6, take best 2	4d6, take best 2	2d6 twice, take best
2	2.78%	0.46%	0.08%	0.08%
3	5.56%	1.39%	0.31%	0.62%
4	8.33%	3.24%	1.16%	2.08%
5	11.11%	5.56%	2.47%	4.94%
6	13.89%	8.80%	5.02%	9.65%
7	16.67%	12.50%	8.33%	16.67%
8	13.89%	15.74%	13.19%	18.13%
9	11.11%	16.67%	17.28%	17.28%
10	8.33%	15.74%	20.14%	14.58%
11	5.56%	12.50%	18.83%	10.49%
12	2.78%	7.41%	13.19%	5.48%
Average	7	8.46	9.34	8.37

Adding bonus dice is a clean way to handle advantage and you can easily allow advantage to stack by adding more bonus dice. Even with a funky dice pool like Earthdawn, you can add a bonus die which could be a fixed dice (like a d8) or a duplicate of the highest die in the pool. I agree that percentile dice are harder to deal with. Those systems add a bonus tens die that you can roll along with the normal dice; this is faster than doing a re-roll, but a bit awkward to explain and get used to.

RYCT me, I just use Google Sheets. When dice curiosity hits me (like above), I either build upon a previously used spreadsheet or start a new one from scratch.

Jim Vassilakos

RYCT Lisa, "Granted, not everyone wants realism in their science fiction, just like not everyone who plays D&D wants to deal with encumbrance." This is close to a false dichotomy. You can care about realism in the sense that there should be a sensible limit on how much gear and treasure a character can carry and still not want to engage with encumbering encumbrance rules. Realism and detail exist on separate (though not necessarily orthogonal) axes. Everyone has a different preference for how much realism and how much detail to include.

For example, you can care about the realistic notion that things break on a starship, but be happy with simple mechanics down to rolling on a few tables that

tell you what is broken, how difficult the repair is, and maybe even how it needs to be fixed (reboot, print/purchase/steal a replacement part, rebuild the engines because you skimmed too many gas giants, etc.). This adds flavor and possible adventure creation without consuming hours of gameplay.

RYCT Roger, the way the Outer Planes were organized has long seemed silly to me. The original attempt seemed to be to shove every major term for an afterlife based on (mostly western) historical religions from Earth into a map and then align it with Good and Evil, Law and Chaos (the latter two concepts lifted from a specific fantasy setting). If you homebrew your setting, then you should also homebrew the planes of existence. Even if you don't have Good and Evil, Law and Chaos, you can still have good and evil, law and chaos in your world.

RYCT me, I don't have a good answer for you. I can't describe why I don't like certain people in the same way I can't describe what I find humorous. I could give examples, but I'd rather not.

RTCT Avram, my high school didn't have a homeroom, but it is possible that it has fewer students than a normal class. Plus, I can imagine that the 4x4 grid was actually 6x6 but that the intervening spaces were filled by students who were just background faces and didn't matter to the game.

Mixing portrait and landscape orientations within the same PDF can really mess up how some readers present it. I run into this problem with some PDFs of comics that mix single pages and double-page spreads. With a consistent page dimension and orientation, I can (mostly) maintain a consistent zoom based on page width.

Patrick Zoch

Good luck with the new Saltmarsh campaign. Why can't a pinata store be in a non-gunpowder era campaign? Do you have tea-like drinks? Given that it is a salt marsh, I'd expect that salt would more likely be harvested than mined. Ancient Rome had apartments, or insulae, for lower- and middle-class workers. You might say that the population was too low to need apartments, but I wouldn't call them anachronistic. Making them mixed use with residents above a commercial ground floor is not only historical but follows modern trends for affordable housing.

Ossuary Wraith & Grave Sovereign by Clark B. Timmins

Look! A squirrel! Players get distracted by many things. Some of them are even in the game. They might obsess over an NPC, place, or situation that I (as GM) consider insignificant. I usually try to take whatever thing they've suddenly found so captivating and blend it into the current narrative arc. That random shopkeeper that's accidentally so fascinating? He's receiving illicit goods provided by the villain.

Notes or it didn't happen. I had a GM who used a "thread tracker" – unsolved mysteries, unresolved plot points, and ongoing NPC motivations. Really just a list of things introduced in the campaign that might continue later. He'd sometimes remove an old item that the players ignored, but then sometimes he'd reintroduce something everybody else had forgotten about. It generated a feeling of narrative continuity. I've used GM notes for much of the same effect. His tracker, though, was very concise and therefore simpler to use.

Players always win. It might be controversial, but I think the GMs job is to ensure the players always win. There might be setbacks. There might be drastic setbacks. But there's always a way out. If you compare gaming to a novel, at the end of the campaign the protagonists (characters) achieve what they're aiming for. The GM needs to provide resistance along the way. But the resistance should always appear to be more formidable than it really is. I think this premise is part of the thought process encapsulated in the term-of-art "fail forward".

Tell me how you help. In a *Savage Worlds* game, the GM frequently gave us dramatic tasks (X successes in Y rounds = success). Everybody in the party could contribute – if the player could explain how their character was going to use one of their skills to benefit the success of the task. Escaping in a boat? Only one character drives the boat. But another character can use their superior powers of observation to look for upcoming navigation hazards. Another character can use their superior mechanical powers to ensure the boat is operating at peak performance. And another character can use their superior leadership to guide the whole team. This lets every character participate in the success (or failure) of the venture, instead of only the best qualified.

Another favorite phrase of this same GM is "tell me what that looks like" – whenever a character attempts something seemingly impossible, crazy, or just weird. If you give him an entertaining mind picture, you might succeed. Throw in an action movie reference or two and your odds improve markedly.

OSSUARY WRAITH

Medium undead, neutral evil

Armor Class 15 (Incorporeal Form), varies when possessing a corpse (usually 14-16)

Hit Points 135 (18d8 + 54)

Speed 40 ft., fly 40 ft. (hover)

Str	Dex	Con
6 (-2)	18 (+4)	16 (+3)
Int	Wis	Cha
14 (+2)	15 (+2)	18 (+4)

Saving Throws Wis +6, Cha +8

Skills Perception +6, Stealth +8

Resistances Cold, Fire, Lightning, Bludgeoning, Piercing, and Slashing from Nonmagical attacks

Immunities Necrotic, Poison; Charmed, Exhaustion, Grappled, Paralyzed, Poisoned, Prone, Restrained

Senses Darkvision 120 ft., Passive Perception 16

Languages Understands languages it knew in life, telepathy 60 ft.

Challenge 8 (XP 3,900)



TRAITS

Incorporeal Movement. Can move through creatures and objects as if they were difficult terrain.

Eternal Haunt. The wraith is bound to a location and cannot willingly leave a 1-mile radius.

Group Terror (Aura). If 3 or more Ossuary Wraiths are within 30 ft. of each other, living creatures in that area have disadvantage on Wisdom saving throws.

Image by PixelLabs from Pixabay

ACTIONS

Life Drain (Incorporeal Form). Melee Spell Attack +8 to hit, reach 5 ft., one creature. Hit: 21 (6d6) necrotic damage. Target must succeed on DC 16 Con save or its hit point maximum is reduced by the same amount.

Corpse Puppeteer (Recharge 5-6). The wraith targets a corpse within 30 ft. that has been dead for at least 3 days but less than 30 days. The corpse rises as a Possessed Husk under the wraith's control. The wraith merges with the body, gaining its physical stats and hit points but retaining its mental stats and abilities. If the husk drops to 0 HP, the wraith emerges unharmed.

LAIR ACTIONS

On initiative count 20 (losing ties), the Ossuary Wraith can take one lair action:

1. ***Grasping Dead.*** Skeletal hands erupt from the ground in a 20-ft. radius. Creatures must succeed on a DC 15 Str save or be Restrained until the next round.
2. ***Chill of the Grave.*** All non-undead creatures in the lair take 10 cold damage and must succeed on a DC 15 Con save or gain disadvantage on attack rolls until the next round.
3. ***Corpse Surge.*** Up to 2 unattended corpses within 30 ft. rise as zombies under the wraith's control until destroyed.

REGIONAL EFFECTS

The area within 1 mile of an Ossuary Wraith's lair is warped by its presence:

1. ***Corpse Preservation:*** Dead bodies decay much more slowly, creating an abundance of potential hosts.

POSSESSED HUSK QUICK REFERENCE



Medium undead, neutral evil

Armor Class 14-16 (depending on corpse's armor)

Hit Points 60-90 (average 75)

Speed 30 ft.

Str	Dex	Con
14 (+2)	12 (+1)	14 (+2)
Int	Wis	Cha
-	10 (+0)	-

Resistances Bludgeoning, Piercing, and Slashing from Nonmagical attacks

Immunities Poisoned

Senses Darkvision 60 ft., Passive Perception 10

TRAITS

Undead Fortitude. If damage reduces the husk to 0 HP, it makes a Con save (DC 5 + damage taken). On success, it drops to 1 HP instead.

Controlled by Wraith. The husk acts on the Ossuary Wraith's turn and uses its mental stats for saving throws.

ACTIONS

Slam. Melee Weapon Attack: +6 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. Hit: 11 (2d8 + 2) bludgeoning damage.

Weapon Attack. If the corpse had a weapon, it can use that instead (use +6 to hit).

NOTES

1. Destroying the husk does not harm the Ossuary Wraith.
2. The husk cannot speak or act independently.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Zombie_mob_participant.jpg
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6b/Zombie_mob_participant.jpg
Image by Grant Neufeld, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

GRAVE SOVEREIGN

Large undead, neutral evil

Armor Class 17 (Incorporeal Form)

Hit Points 225 (30d10 + 60)

Speed 40 ft., fly 60 ft. (hover)

Str	Dex	Con
10 (+0)	20 (+5)	14 (+2)
Int	Wis	Cha
18 (+4)	18 (+4)	22 (+6)

Saving Throws Wis +9, Cha +11

Skills Perception +9, Stealth +10

Resistances Cold, Fire,

Lightning, Psychic; Bludgeoning, Piercing, and Slashing from Nonmagical attacks

Immunities Necrotic, Poison; Charmed, Exhaustion, Grappled, Paralyzed, Poisoned, Prone, Restrained

Senses Darkvision 120 ft., Passive Perception 20

Languages Understands languages it knew in life, telepathy 120 ft.

Challenge 13 (XP 10,000)



TRAITS

Aura of Dominion (60 ft.). Undead allies within range gain advantage on attack rolls and saving throws.

Corpse Legion. Can puppeteer up to 5 corpses as husks at once.

Incorporeal Movement. Can move through creatures and objects as if they were difficult terrain.

Eternal Haunt. The wraith is bound to a location and cannot willingly leave a 1-mile radius.

Image by PixelLabs from Pixabay

ACTIONS

Soul Rend. Melee Spell Attack +11 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. Hit: 36 (8d8) necrotic damage. Target must succeed on DC 18 Con save or its hit point maximum is reduced by the same amount, and target loses a spell slot.

Command the Dead (Recharge 5-6). The sovereign targets up to 3 corpses within 60 ft. that have been dead for at least 2 days but less than 60 days, as husks without merging. The corpses rise as Possessed Husks under the sovereign's control.

Possession Surge. As a bonus action, the sovereign targets a husk or corpse within 60 ft. that has been dead for at least 3 days but less than 30 days. The sovereign merges with the target, gaining its physical stats and hit points but retaining its mental stats and abilities. If the husk drops to 0 HP, the sovereign emerges unharmed. The sovereign can swap husk hosts freely.

LEGENDARY ACTIONS

The sovereign can take 3 legendary actions per day, choosing from the options below:

1. ***Grasp of the Grave.*** Targets one creature within 30 ft.; DC 18 Str save or restrained by spectral chains.
2. ***Corpse Explosion.*** Detonates a husk within 60 ft., dealing 6d6 necrotic damage in a 20-ft. radius.
3. ***Shadow Step.*** Teleports up to 60 ft. to an unoccupied space.

LAIR ACTIONS

On initiative count 20 (losing ties), the Grave Sovereign can take one lair action:

1. ***Mass Grave Awakening.*** All corpses in the lair rise as zombies under the sovereign's control until destroyed.
2. ***Deathly Chill.*** All non-undead creatures in the lair take 15 cold damage and must succeed on a DC 18 Con save or be Slowed.
3. ***Spectral Storm.*** Flickering shadows lash out in a 30-ft. radius, dealing 4d10 necrotic damage.

REGIONAL EFFECTS

The area within 1 mile of a Grave Sovereign's lair is warped by its presence:

1. ***Corpse Fields.*** Dead bodies never decay and accumulate unnaturally.
2. ***Whispers of Sovereignty.*** Creatures sleeping have nightmares and gain one level of exhaustion.

Firedrake's Hoard

Number 6: by Roger BW

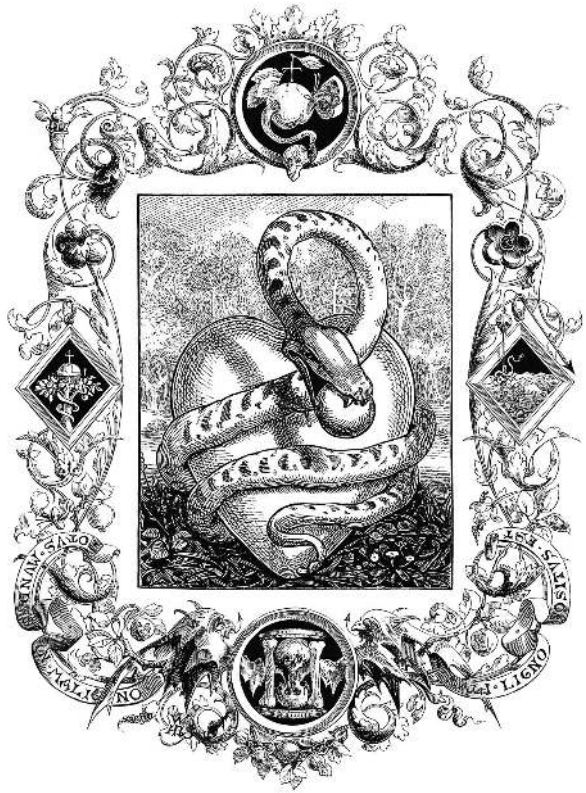
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Recent Games

The Day After Ragnarok: A researcher had visited Texas (in the Poisoned Lands), and brought back three large snakes to be studied at Taronga Zoo in Sydney. But they had been behaving oddly, and then they escaped. Two were easy enough to recapture, but one not only had mind-controlling venom, she shapeshifted into an adolescent human. Still, let's face it, when you're writing the list of people most likely to be freaked out by a thirty-foot snake turning into a young woman, Don Williams (my PC) is not on the first page. Sadly, she doesn't seem to have any human languages, and may even be pre-sapient, but we're trying to work out a way to communicate with her so that we can work out whether we should keep her as a captive, release her back in Texas or (Don's preference) recruit her to work with us.

Next we were sent to a Japanese base in the southern Moluccas, being evacuated because of newly-apparent tectonic instability. Our job was to go along aboard a submarine, observe the evacuation, then go in and grab anything they'd left behind. The volcano looked as though it might be erupting earlier than forecast ("Crikey, he's a bit stropy"). We went ashore on the other side of the (rather small) island, to spot one patrol who seemed to be heading from base to evacuation transport in a rather more



Charles Henry Bennett and William Harry Rogers, 1861

panicked way than we might have expected. On sneaking up to the base, it proved to be a small cluster of improvised buildings. The largest of these, with door left ajar, contained signs of a struggle (furniture hurled about the place) and four dead bodies, three in civilian clothes and one in uniform; they'd been killed more by blunt force than anything else. We spotted

something big up on a walkway, bipedal... ish. And something else was emerging from a large pool of water on the floor. We backed away, into the open, and several grey-skinned humanoids followed, wearing the remnants of Japanese uniforms, carrying rifles with fixed bayonets. Lt Deacon (our leader, a PC) opened fire with his Marconi gun, and we spread out and followed his example.

Amazing Adventures / The Mask of Yhtill: This is the game that I mentioned we'd done character generation for last time¹. It is very much basic *D&D* at heart, which I cannot bring myself to love having been glad to move to better systems the first time round; and the more I interact with this rulebook the more I want to rewrite it from scratch so that it turns into actual instructions for playing a game, rather than a cluster of phrases which can be turned into several different games depending on how you interpret the ambiguities and contradictions². Once we got into the actual play things seemed a bit better, though the system remains very crude (almost everything is at a standard chance for each stat, typically 15% or 45% plus up to 15% if it's the stat you're best at). Apparently playing a hard-boiled gumshoe leads me to come up with many bad quips.

Obviously as a Lovecraftian gamer old in wickedness I know what Yhtill is, but none of the characters does. So far my gumshoe/ace

¹A correction, not the same designer as *Victorious*, but the same core rules ("Siege Engine") and publisher (Troll Lord Games).

²Not to mention that there are multiple different versions and printings and editions of the rules, each with different page numbering, and only the vaguest of notes to indicate which version a particular document is supposed to be. Please, writers, at least put something on your credits page! I'm not demanding full-on [Semantic Versioning](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Software_versioning#Semantic_versioning) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Software_versioning#Semantic_versioning), but I'm also not saying it wouldn't be welcome.



Public domain image of New York skyline, plus modification

pilot, Kenneth Hobbes, is treating the missing husband as a divorce case in prospect³, while the victim's abandoned notes on a translation/deciphering job have that air of a document that would take you several weeks to read and then cost sanity points.

2300AD / Bayern: Group 1, Whartson Hall (at the moment playing this every two weeks), has reached the Pleiades and what in the original publication was both the high point and the end of the campaign... and I can't help feeling that it's a lot of "watch the film" and very little "what do you do". There is some scope for skill rolls but much of it is a gosh-wow special effects sequence that you can't influence much. (I was somewhat reminded of *2001: A Space Odyssey* or *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*.) So my main objective was to let the players *play their characters*, with a little bit of light problem-solving along the way. Now they've gone into the theorising and experimentation phase.

Group 2, who play monthly on Sundays, took a rather more technical approach before plunging in, and are now considering their next moves.

³I mean, the dame has gams up to *here*, obviously she's going to be a widow or a divorcée soon, even if I have to make it happen myself.

“The rat looks at you with the expression of a rat that has Seen Stuff.”

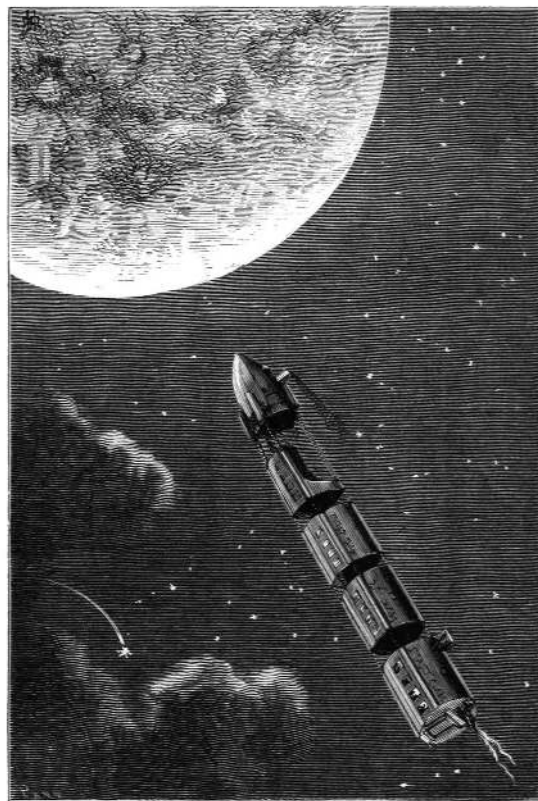
Outgunned / Project Medusa: This is an Italian system from 2023 which came up in a recent Bundle of Holding⁴ and which I wanted to try out. The emphasis is on fast cinematic action in a 1980s-1990s action film sensibility, and so far it seems to be delivering. It’s also a players-roll system, not a thing I’ve run before: in Action turns players roll to do things, and in the alternating Reaction turns they roll to avoid the bad stuff the villains are trying to do to them, so the GM never has to roll at all. My initial impression is very positive, with a couple of reservations: the process for a roll is a bit involved (assemble 2-6 d6, roll them looking for matches, maybe take a reroll, and surplus matches can be used for extra benefits), and the results seemed to get a bit samey. *Project Medusa* is the included adventure, and I think it may be deliberately calling for more rolls than I would in order to let new players see how the system works. Still, we were all able to fall quickly into the genre, and that’s no bad thing.

“There’s a Hercules on the runway. Actually it’s not a Hercules, it’s a C-160 Transall, because the producer knew a guy who’d rent him one cheap. But think of it as a Hercules.”

Stabcon: happened, which was mostly board games for me, but I did play a couple of RPG sessions. One was Michael Cule’s *Icebreaker*, which I’ll leave to him to write about; the other was a scenario for the official *Space: 1999*⁵

⁴Michael and I are on the Bundle’s comp list, thanks to *Improvised Radio Theatre with Dice*.

⁵Which, for the record, I quite enjoyed in its first run; yes, it was clear that nobody involved in the show had any conception of the distances and times involved in space travel, but I’ll stand up for the Eagle as the best fictional spaceship design (followed by the *Babylon 5* Starfury), and particularly in the first season they at least



Henri de Montant, pre 1889

game. Now, I’ll admit I rather wondered why anyone would bother to publish an official RPG, given how *very* much other SF shows and games have happily stolen from it over the years until there’s very little distinctive left.

But anyway, *this* game was basically a puzzle world with a twist ending. As a *Space: 1999* story it worked very well. As a scenario in a campaign it might have worked well too. But since these were pickup characters with no history together, and the resolution was essentially that you *must* at some point stop poking at things and give up (because there’s a diegetic time limit), at which point the twist is revealed, I felt it wasn’t ideal for a one-shot convention game, which to my mind really

tried to do serious science fiction plots rather than ripping off *Star Trek* or just doing zap-pow adventure.

needs to show off what the system does well, whether that's peril or problem-solving.

Neutral Currents: Well, we've made it out of Liberia, though in some haste: dealing with a resurgence of local magic might end up being our job, but not while we're got a Royal Duke in our charge.

Doctor Who Second Edition: a Rant

This was inspired by my experience playing Michael Cule's *Icebreaker* (see above under Stabcon), but for clarity I'm going to discuss the system here, not the scenario or the GM. I'm talking about *Doctor Who: Adventures in Time and Space*, written by David F. Chapman⁶ and published by Cubicle 7 in 2009, second edition in 2021.

I've run a few games with the first edition, and while it's a bit low resolution it provides a decent substrate for generating interesting narrative. The basic problem is that you have random people off the street and Time Lords on the same scale. Looking at my favoured era, the Fourth Doctor's highest stat plus skill is +12, with a whole raft of Traits which will give +2 in this or that situation. Meanwhile Sarah Jane Smith has a maximum +7. On a 2d6 roll, OK, that's not too bad. But sadly the system also has to cover the revived show in which the Doctor is weakly godlike: for example, 12's best stat plus skill is +15, while typical human Danny is still at +7, and with a range of ten points on the dice their outcomes only just overlap.

This means that you pretty much have to split the party to prevent the Doctor from solving everything. And be really really careful setting

difficulties, because the thing that will be automatic success for one character may be a once in a lifetime challenge for another. But what you can at least do is use the Doctor's negative Traits: Adversary plus Distinctive means old enemies will recognise and fixate on him, and while he's distracting them with his superpowers the mere mortals can scurry round fixing things while not being noticed. But it's not a perfect fix.⁷

What you do get is graded successes: pass by 0-2 and you get a "yes, but", 3-5 is "yes", 6+ is "yes. and", and similarly with degrees of failure. An alternative mechanic for gamers in a hurry is the Drama Die, which randomly selects from among the options.

So how do you solve the power level problem when bringing out a second edition? Apparently you remove Traits, which were a long list of what as a *GURPS* player I'm inclined to call "advantages" and "disadvantages", which would cost you some number of story points (or add to them, for the disadvantageous ones) but give you neat abilities. For the record, I will agree that having twenty or more Traits to keep track of is Too Many for a system that's trying to be simple. But now those neat abilities are Distinctions, which have a fixed cost—but there is no list, except what you find by looking through the small number of example characters. How can the novice GMs at whom this book is aimed hope to define traits fairly to their fixed price, a thing that is generally impossible even for experienced gamers? And there are no negative Distinctions at all; you're encouraged to think of ways in which your neat power might sometimes be a disadvantage.

⁶The same person who does RPG-a-Day each August, and wrote Conspiracy X 2.0 back in the day.

⁷Arguably, *DC Heroes* and *Torg*, which I'm inclined to group together as implementations of the metasystem in Greg Gorden's head, did this better by using logarithmic scales.

There are no longer graded successes. Instead, 6s cancel 1s, and any imbalance is especially good or especially bad. (So a failure with a 6 might be a no-but, while a success with a 6 might be a yes-and.) Double 6 or double 1 is an automatic best-possible success or failure. And you no longer get +2 from Traits that represent specialised expertise, because there aren't any.

Which means that no matter how easy or hard the task, 9 rolls in 36 will give at least one uncanceled 1, and 9 in 36 an uncanceled 6, so *a full half of the time*, no matter how easy or hard the roll, the GM is having to come up with an "and" or a "but" on the fly.

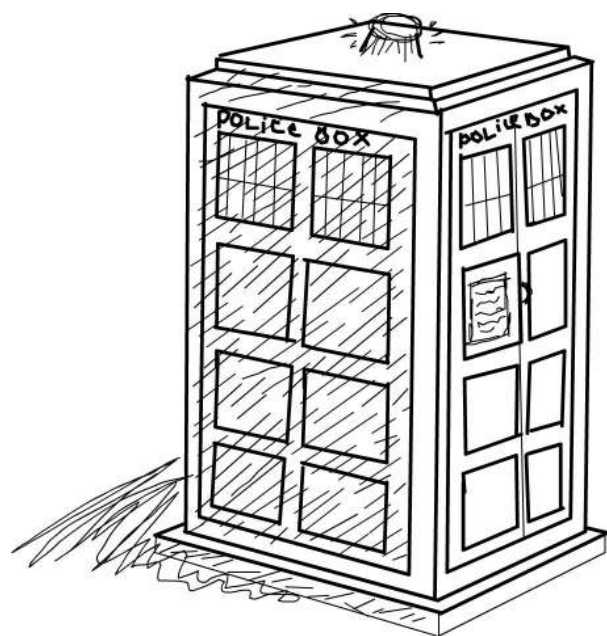
Second edition also brings in bonus/penalty dice, *combined with* positive and negative modifiers in the same way that has annoyed so many people in the latest Mongoose *Traveller*; see my probability table lastish which I won't repeat here. But I'll note that Story Points, the thing that's supposed to let normal people still be relevant in a game with immortals (because the immortals have fewer of them), have moved

from a reliable +3, i.e. one success level, to a mere bonus die, which is more like +2 on average and subject to the whims of dice⁸.

The second edition core book is the same 256 pages long that the last first edition core was (I'm looking at my PDF of the "Twelfth Doctor" edition). But somehow you only get four characters actually started up, as opposed to the 18 of first edition, and no adventure (that's only bundled if you buy the "starter pack"). I can't work out what has replaced it; the advice to the GM seems much the same, only at greater length.

I don't get it. The potential marketing muscle of the BBC makes this one of the few games other than *D&D* which may ever be seen by people who aren't already roleplayers. Shouldn't it be relatively easy to pick up and run? First edition largely was, with a few problems: all of these changes seem to make it actively more work for the novice without solving those original problems.

My own use of the system tends towards not having a time lord PC at all: either there isn't one with the party, or they're an NPC who does Impressive Stuff only when the plot allows it (like the old informal *Pendragon* magic system, "a wizard can do whatever he likes whenever he likes"). I'll probably stick with first edition: then I can run an investigative game in this pleasant light system, without having to worry about trying to reconcile things that work better when you have a scriptwriter saying "well he doesn't use the Solve Everything ability yet".



Sketchport user deedeelovesyoooh, CC-BY 2014

⁸Also this will muck about with the chances of especially good successes and failures. With a quick check on 2d6 with one advantage die, the chance of having to come up with *something* special drops slightly to 47%, but that's 41% at least one uncanceled 6 and 6% at least one uncanceled 1.

Note: while I was writing this, I noticed that Arthur had posted a piece at [Refereeing and Reflection](https://refereeingandreflection.wordpress.com/2026/01/06/is-the-doctor-who-rpg-fading-away-into-the-vortex/) (<https://refereeingandreflection.wordpress.com/2026/01/06/is-the-doctor-who-rpg-fading-away-into-the-vortex/>) making similar points. But I think it's worth including this anyway.

GMing tricks

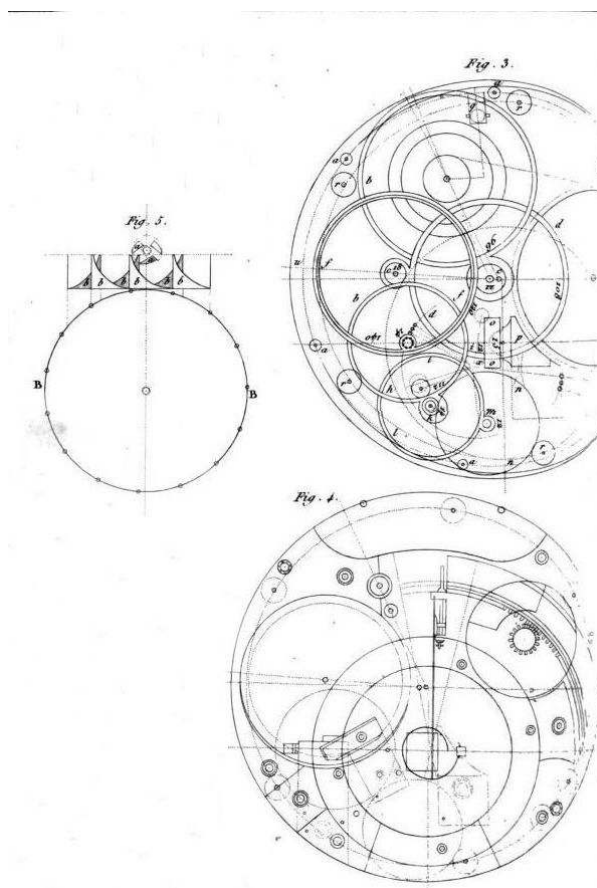
(that you've either "borrowed" from other GMs or figured out yourself)

John Dallman gave me this: to play someone cleverer than you, give yourself more time than they have to react to things. For a cunning NPC, this may well mean thinking about what they'll have to react to and coming up with a set of options for at least the more likely PC actions, so that they can immediately respond to the latest cunning plan. Sometimes it can just mean calling a tactical toilet break in the session (which as a general technique I got off Mike).

My core plan for most investigative scenarios starts with the villain: what are they trying to achieve, and what are the steps necessary in their plan leading towards this goal⁹? So there's a series of things the villain will be doing; now how can those come to the attention of the PCs?

For example: the Lovecraftian cult wants to summon Yog-Sothoth to turn England inside-out and leave them in charge; this will need multiple rituals done at precisely matched times. In the 1890s, they will need accurate clocks, in practice marine chronometers. So perhaps someone has had an unusual order for twelve exactly matched chronometers. Which

⁹I assume villains who are more or less rational; my favourites are the ones who are aiming for goals the PCs might even agree with, but doing it by means they won't find acceptable.



Ferdinand Berthoud, 1802

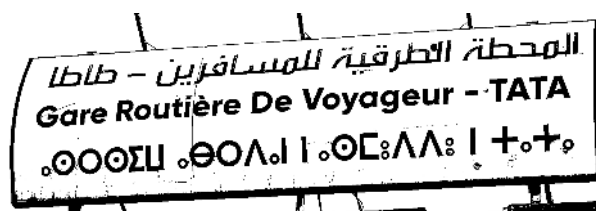
wouldn't be especially remarkable, but one of them failed and time and funds are short, so they broke in to the maker and stole another, carefully picking one from the same manufacturing batch. So there's a guard who's died of old age and starvation rather than just being hit on the head, and valuable items bypassed in order to steal *this particular thing*. And that's a start.

More an attitude than a trick: we're all in this together. I'm not interested in wiping out the party, or in their romping home without a challenge; I want to have fun as part of their heroic story.

Comments on E&A number 7

RYCT Myles Corcoran: I'm with you, I think. I see much of the underpinning of the OSR as explicitly nostalgic, in the sense of the things that one heard about Back in the Day from the Older Kids. So there's some "when I was young and the world was green", but most of the players don't seem to be reaching back to their *own* early play experiences, or asking the people who were there, but rather looking to an idealised model... which the people who *were* actually there were happy to move away from when something better came along. Not saying there's nothing of value there of course, but I feel no wish to play old-style *D&D* again any more than I want to play the current *D&D*.

I would expect to see some kind of profane calendar develop in addition to the divinely-



¹⁰Linguistic experts: yes, I realise it's much more complicated than that, I'm simplifying for the example.

ordained one, to answer questions like “how much food should I stock up for winter” and “how often do I have to pay rent on my shop”. Give us back our eleven days¹¹!

Patrick Riley: I had a similar revelation while playing *Arkham Horror* (the second, FFG, edition). You could play it purely mechanically, but it would just be procedural: do this, fight that, gather the tokens. Or you could put on a bad accent and have some fun with it, which everyone I played with fell into naturally.

I don’t want to be excessively negative, but I had a similar experience to you with respect to *Blades in the Dark*: it felt to me like role-playing with training wheels, don’t worry you can just make some snarky comments and the rules will handle everything else. (But as always I should say that lots of people love it, so I don’t want to put people off from trying it.)

Re scheduling and not being able to travel far from base: perhaps some sort of fast travel that they’d have to place themselves? E.g. take this stone with you, leave its mate in the city, and teleport between them; then you still have to travel to places once, but you can return quickly if you need to.

RYCT Michael Cule: heh, I remember having problems with *Torg* over this. OK, the Tech axiom is low, chemical batteries don’t work. How do humans work then? You might reasonably say that they effectively work on Magic or Spirit¹² instead, but the books never covered that.

¹¹While the rumoured riots over the change from Julian to Gregorian calendar in Great Britain did not actually happen, it was observed that income for most people was based on days worked, while rents and tax had to be paid per quarter. Some payees deferred receipt as the law required, but it wasn’t universal.

¹²Nobody ever seemed to know what the Social axiom was for.

In my magical WWII game *Irresponsible and Right*, the PCs discovered during the course of the game that magic interfered with nuclear decay processes, and vice versa. This was to some extent my answer to the *Torg* situation: here’s a very specific bit of “tech”, and the incompatibility works in particular ways. Working out just how that all fit together and how it could be used was one of the PCs’ goals during the rest of the campaign.

Myles Corcoran: “Horse stealing is a serious crime after all.” This is the point in a game at which I usually start to recite the opening text of the Theft Act 1968: “A person is guilty of theft if he dishonestly appropriates property belonging to another with the intention of permanently depriving the other of it; and ‘thief’ and ‘steal’ shall be construed accordingly.” Emphasis as appropriate based on what my character is up to at the time.

A Solo Traveller-adjacent Game: while one wouldn’t wish to over-complicate things, I wonder about having a success pushing the next difficulty up a bit, and a failure pushing it down.

RYCTM: I don’t know who at GDW or Mongoose came up with the term “drive relaxation”, but I think it is exactly right: the sort of innocent-sounding term that a physicist might reasonably use for a truly catastrophic event. Like “prompt criticality excursion”.

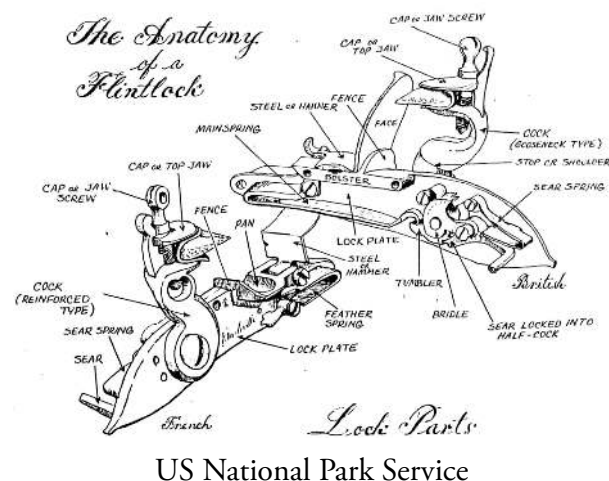
RYCT Brian Misiaszek: I don’t know any of the new-Chaosium people, but they fit a pattern I’ve also seen in tech: the original creative crew wanted people to enjoy their thing, and encouraged others to build on it, and went bankrupt¹³. The current crew are mostly not

¹³Not technically in this case, but only because a rescue and takeover deal was worked out in time

creative people, they were a commercial enterprise first, and very often such people's main priority is to squeeze as much value as they can out of the thing they've bought; they aren't curating it for the future, it's not really *their* thing and they don't have a feeling what would be a good addition to it, they just want to get the cash before the market gets bored and moves on to the next thing. Thus, I hypothesise, the bias towards endless re-releases of old adventures and rules updated for the new edition (an 1890s sourcebook... *for 7e*).

Patrick Zoch: It's interesting how gunpowder has crept into *D&D* (while of course there are still crossbows and plate armour and so on in the world). As a GM, it may feel like being a spoilsport to say "no, you can't have that", but the more options are available (especially if they're ones that haven't historically co-existed) the more risk there is of someone short-circuiting a perfectly good plot in a way that, if this stuff is out there, someone else should already have thought of.

Michael Cule: Where does the food of *Ægis* come from if you have steady biomass depletion like that? Imports?



RYCTM: yes, Jitsi used to have a local recording option (at the end of the call, each participant would be prompted to download a file, which would have their own track in it) but I never found it reliable and it was removed. Remote recording, i.e. on the server but still as individual tracks per speaker, doesn't seem to be a thing. The simplest approach I use now, if I'm not getting players to record individually, is to record on my client PC: one track for my microphone and another for all the noises the machine is making (i.e. everyone else all mixed together), and blend those automatically. It doesn't meet my standards for public release but it's OK for getting a transcription out of.

Dylan Capel: re *Speculative Whiteness*, bearing in mind when and where and by whom *Warhammer 40K* was originally written, it could not have been other than a parody of the xenophobic right¹⁴. But as with *Judge Dredd*, a slightly earlier product of that era and place, there are always people who just don't get it and assume that the biggest most violent man must be the hero. ObPolitics: what, is that political now?

Re your Meta, the problem is that ePub is a very poorly specified standard (for a start it's built on top of HTML), there are lots of readers with individual quirks, and there's much less tooling that can deal with it than is the case for PDF.

RYCTM, no, I haven't used a hex flower yet. I'm more inclined to a progressive encounter system, which I think I invented but I'm sure other people have too: say one entry on the encounter table is a rabid wolf. The first time that entry comes up you see some tracks, and tick the first box; the second time you see an

¹⁴And, when the authors could get away with it, of the unintentional homoeroticism of a lot of the "manly" culture of the day.

animal corpse; the third time you find a human survivor of an attack; the fourth time you find the wolf itself (or it finds you)—but that's just one table entry. You can roll on the table each time you want an encounter, and each one has this kind of progression, so you can have multiple mini-stories happening in parallel.

Lisa Padol: re *Last Sentinels*, I find myself frustrated by plots and tensions which could rapidly be unwound if only people would *talk* to each other. I can't say it's unrealistic, but for me it's not fun.

Re *Necrobiotic*: I have Feelings on the parallels between unintelligent undead and computers, but that's for a future article. And although I don't think it should be restrictive, I do think any game world should make clear at least one campaign premise that's ready to go, in the sense of "you are X who do Y".

Fascinating writeup of Metatopia. For my own adventures I generally get to run them up to three or four times with different groups, but what I've really valued is getting someone else to run from the draft and listening in without commenting. (Then I need to turn them from rough notes into something presentable, which is taking A While.)

RYCT Brian Rogers: we clearly have quite divergent gaming tastes but I'm absolutely with you here. Let the game support the premise. Sometimes the game won't feel the way the designer intended it to feel; hey, the designer is no more perfect than the rest of us.

RYCTM: this was UK Games Expo a few years ago. If you ran just one session in a day, you got something very minor, I can't now remember what. Two would get you a credit towards some food, though not enough for a full meal. Three would get you into the event, which you

wouldn't have any time to see the rest of. Also it was based on group size, so many players × so many games, so it encouraged large groups. And then half of them, even having paid for their tickets, wouldn't bother to turn up...

Regarding new *Masks* and Peru (which for us was in Bolivia, but no matter): we rather blundered into it, since our characters at that point weren't experienced occult investigators, and Larkin's pitch was so *obviously* dodgy that we immediately assumed he was running a scam on whoever was unlucky enough to answer the advertisement. We tried to free him from what we thought was probably Mendoza's influence, but his body wasn't really up to the purgative process we applied, and we had to leave in a hurry; so in the end we conducted the expedition without him or Mendoza, though of course the latter still came to the site to try to achieve his objectives. It didn't feel to me very much of a piece with the rest of *Masks*: less physical threat, more genuine horror.

RYCT Patrick Riley: I've had some success using [Dudle](https://dud-poll.inf.tu-dresden.de/) (<https://dud-poll.inf.tu-dresden.de/>) to get players to commit to dates, perhaps because it doesn't require them to say *why* they are or aren't available, just tick boxes. There's also the better known *Doodle*, but I've seen how much tracking they stuff into their web pages, and I'd rather use the free software alternative—even if, having looked at the source code, I have no intention of hosting it myself.

I don't mind the idea of a PC resource that lets you say "this roll is more important to me than normal", even in a bleak horror game, but for some reason the Luck system specifically just feels off, perhaps because it gets into the fiddly details of exactly how many points you're going to spend or save. May simply be a me problem.

Heh, I've had several out of character discussions about turning up mob-handed to a witness interview. No, you send two or at most three people, and I'm sorry if the other players have to wait for a bit for their moment, but ganging up on someone who's already a bit scared (because of the weird thing they saw which the regular police were inclined to dismiss) is not going to make things go better for you.

RYCT Jim Vassilakos: I've tried to encourage the Whartson Hall players to say at the end of a session I've run what their PCs plan to do next, and mostly this works.

Avram Grumer: welcome to the Typst Conspiracy (there is no Typst Conspiracy).

Achromatic Verdant? I see what you did there. (Clive James wrote a fine poem based on the original.)

"Violent idiots trying to do the right thing."
Well, if I needed a new zine title...

Re *Blades in the Dark*: I think the assumption of most early RPGs is that each different individual thing you do gets one roll, so that you can potentially be very sneaky and not very hitty, or vice versa. It's definitely a fiddly mental transition into lower-resolution games that might ask you for one roll to resolve a whole scene.

RYCTM: When I started gaming circa 1981, some groups used maps and figures and some didn't, and nobody seemed to feel that anyone else was wrong for playing differently. It's only when it came to about the *D&D 3.0* era that I started to meet people assuming that everyone *must* have a tactical map.

Brian Rogers: RYCT Gabriel Roark: because I'm that sort of person, in my larger boardgame

rulebook rewrite projects I've taken to finding out what font was used in the original rulebook's text (very easy if I have a PDF) and using that for my new version¹⁵. It's not crucial of course, but it does sometimes help to provide a sense of atmosphere and familiarity.

RYCTM: Thanks for the detail on the transition from D3 to Q1! By the time I met them, Q1 had been out for a while, and the general feeling among players I knew was that this was intended to be the grand finale of the campaign.

Doctor Hormone: well, that is certainly something. The thing said by some of the Third Doctor (Who) writers in the early earthbound era was that there were basically only two plots they could use: alien invasion, and mad scientist. Setting it in wartime can open that up a bit...

Brian Christopher Misiaszek: Absent dogs. [raises glass]

I speculate that, much as the craniometry which prefigured scientific racism tried to match bodily measurements to particular patterns of behaviour, there's someone in the fingerprint lab trying to correlate print features with specific forms of insanity. Not, I suspect, Castellanos himself, but perhaps an assistant or someone coming in from the medical side of the facility. One could easily waste an entire career on this.

For the record, my slight objection to the railroad feeling of the scenario last time is overcome by the way it's able to spread out a bit and offer some PC choice here.

Elf: re *Beneath Pirate Flags*: it's always good to have a nice simple and universally applicable

¹⁵Typst makes it easy to use a font for a single project directly from the files without having to have it installed system-wide.

action for a character to fall back on. (Not-Steve in *The Day After Ragnarok*: “I’ll wrestle it!”)

I’m afraid I’m the sort of person who starts with “oh, you say there are useful balloons”, and goes on from that to work out what other technology must exist¹⁶.

Joshua Kronengold: Some years ago I walked out of a job that was being very bad for me. I expected to have more free time, especially as I wasn’t commuting any more. But looking for a new one took up far more of both time and mental energy than I’d expected. Good luck!

RYCT Lisa Padol: of course, if there is a magical printing press, who has access to it, who controls what is printed, and so on...? I suspect a campaign could easily become *about* that.

RYCTM: my general policy when releasing Perl software is to use packages that are available in Debian stable (Linux), and comment when I’ve had to do something else. I have absolutely no idea how this stuff works on Windows or MacOS. I’d love to write it in Rust instead (where dependencies are more readily managed, among other things) but as far as I can tell there’s no library that supports this kind of PDF surgery yet, and I’d rather not try to write one.

Jitsi is a bit strange in that much of it is actually client-side JavaScript, and I haven’t got into customisation. I’d be happy to patch in something like a dice roller, but for the reasons I listed the groups I play with don’t really miss having one, and I have many other things I also want to do.

¹⁶For a start, *really* good weather forecasting; the balloon craze in the real world ended once every attempt to control direction had failed. See Richard Holmes’ *Falling Upwards* if this is of interest.

RYCT Dylan Capel: my earliest word processor was *View* on the BBC Micro, and the machine wasn’t capable enough for any WYSIWYG more than a bit of basic bold and underline (it even used printer fonts). Later in my computing life came DTP programs (write the file in the word processor, then bring it over into the DTP to lay it out into boxes), then non-professional DTP largely faded away because e.g. MS-Word could do it well enough for most purposes and the actual print shop could just take your Word files. And I at least have now gone full circle from LibreOffice back to relentlessly non-WYSIWYG markup formats like TeX and Typst.

Jim Vassilakos: RYCT Myles Corcoran: I think this is one of those things that varies between *Traveller* universes, because it wasn’t fully specified in the early days. I tend to assume that sub-parsec jumps with precise targeting are possible but fiddly, not the sort of thing you want to do as a regular endeavour; and that the “regular” star to star jump is relatively easy because the gravitational distortion of the star will drop you out of hyperspace in broadly the right area if you hit the area of the system even approximately.

RYCT Lisa Padol: “You leave Earth and anything you forget to bring with you will kill you. Anything you do bring with you which doesn’t work properly will kill you. When in doubt, just assume *everything* will kill you.” (*Star Cops* episode 1)

RYTCM: why should the deities and their home planes be aligned in terms of a 3×3 grid? Post-Reformation, Catholics and Protestants used (almost!) the same scriptures, but many lives were lost in the differences of detail and the mundane power struggles that used them as

an excuse, and I don't see why a fantasy world should be any more simplistic.

If you want a permanent set of sides, you can say “gods X and gods Y have incompatible views about what constitutes correct behaviour”; you don't (to my mind) need to say “because X is Good and Y is Evil”. Indeed, part of my objection to the whole concept of alignment is that in the real world nobody sane thinks of themselves as Evil. Now if you *want* a fantasy world in which “those guys over there” are reliably Evil and you can kill them without compunction, fair enough, but that's not to my taste—and even that doesn't need a detectable Evil flag, you can just look at the way they behave to each other and to their victims and make your own decision.

If you want a flexible set of sides, goodness, just read Greek myth (I grew up on that and Norse). We Ares-worshipping warriors can't get healed at the temple of Aphrodite this month because Hephaestus caught them together again and she's gone off in a snit.

RYCT Avram Grumer: I think it would be entirely reasonable to try saying “for issue X, rule Y is changed to Z”. Then if people like it that can be made a long-term change, and if they dislike it the experiment need not be repeated.

RYCT Michael Cule: with such a polytheistic setting, it's surely worth checking whether this is the deity of everyone having a great time without their clothes on, or the deity of disease and corruption.

RYCT Brian Misiaszek: I take your point, but perhaps I'm feeling contrary: the closest thing we have in the real world to people seeing sudden Lovecraftian horrors is probably close-up witnesses to injurious incidents (plane

crashes, terrorist bombs, road accidents, etc.)

Ask any copper who's had to deal with those and they'll tell you how quickly and how much the witness statements start to change as people rewrite their own horrific memories into something they can live with.

Timothy Collinson: RYCTM on visible attributes: there is that moment that seems to come up quite often when the party is in a situation, someone has to do a thing, and we have time to choose who should do it. Obviously that should be the PC with the best rating. But it feels immersion-breaking to say “I have a 13” “well, I have a 17”. The groups I play with have ended up with a sort of informal “I'm pretty good” “I'm OK” negotiation.

RYCT Patrick Zoch: My first exposure to *Traveller* was the *Starter Traveller* box, which famously missed out the rules for self-improvement completely¹⁷! (Also drugs.) I think there's a lot to be said for a group of characters who are reasonably competent to start with, who aren't doing the hero's journey thing; classic serial heroes like the Lone Ranger or Doc Savage, what Robin Laws would call “iconic” rather than “dramatic” characters.

¹⁷Of course classic *Traveller* random character generation can also spit you out at age 22 with one level of Ship's Boat and nothing else.

The PHOENIX NEST



FIFTY GLORIOUS YEARS!

You may have heard me mention this before but on January 1st 1976, at Dave Lmagford's place in Reading, probably still slightly hungover from the New Year's Eve party the night before, I was introduced to this strange new hobby. I was advised to play a fighter for my first character.

I have only a few memories of that first, baffling excursion into the underworld. The strongest of those memories was the Ghost Ice Breaker. There was a great ring corridor of ice on the first level. (Why? We did not worry about *why* in those days!) And sailing around it, a ghostly icebreaker, cracking the ice and trapping those unhappy souls who didn't duck into a side corridor in frozen doom forever!

(This didn't seem to happen in practice but it did lead to my first encounter with a Gelatinous Cube.)

So I wanted to do a celebratory one-off scenario and I wanted to have an ice-breaker in it.

**A zine for EVER & ANON 8 by
Michael Cule**

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**Hear me & Roger BW pontificate on
RPGs and other world shaking topics:**

<http://tekeli.li/podcast/>

Read my Blog why don't you?:

<https://room3b.blog/>

I did what we couldn't do in those far-off ancient days and I entered the word 'icebreaker' in a Google search. What it came back with was the fact that the Soviet Union had (and Russia still has if they're not exaggerating their current stability as a government) nuclear powered icebreakers. The first of which was called the LENIN. I got in touch with Roger (hi Roger and thanks!) who told me he couldn't find me a map of the ship but could find me a picture taken from a scale model kit for the ship. Big chunky looking thing from the 1950s. Helicopter on the rear deck. Currently a museum ship in Murmansk after a history of being too advanced for the time and inclined to catastrophic failure in the power plant area.

What a magnificent thing to appear mysteriously in the frozen ice off Canada during the current tense world situation! Especially if it seemed to be the Icebreaker LEON TROTSKY instead of the LENIN. Visitors from a parallel world, Check!

Who would be investigating this and what would they do with what they found? Well, I have a long running NPC in one of my game worlds, the god of Aegis the City called Uncle. He

recruits 'heroes' to go out into the multiverse and rescue people who are about to die and bring them to the City to fill it and expand it. He normally looks like Doc Cross (hi Doc!) an elderly American man in a bandana. During this adventure he also appeared as an elephant in purple pyjamas¹ and both the Leo G Carroll and Hugh Grant versions of Alexander Waverly. Uncle explain this as being due to 'instability in the neutron flow'



In the initial outline for the game all the characters had been recruited for Uncle's mission from various hideous deaths in various places. They included Dan Dare's father who had just sacrificed his life getting children evacuated from a failing space station. But eventually I decided this was overly complex and had just one ringer on the job, Frankenstein's monster (under the name Deucalion Brown) who had been recruited from the Arctic Ice after ensuring his creator was dead and finding it difficult to die himself.

(Herr Braun has featured in my other games, being the art teacher at the Watcher's Academy for Girls near Walmington On Sea.)

He was told he was going to go undercover with an identity and a less repulsive than normal

¹ See illustration. From the book UNCLE by J P Martin.

appearance provided by Uncle0. He was to rescue the people on board a ship that was falling between worlds and who would certainly die if someone couldn't get them away from the place they were currently headed to.

The mission he was smuggled into was UNIT investigating the appearance of the LEON TROTSKY in Canadian waters. The team included the canon Whovian characters Dr Martha Jones (still on the rebound after her painful divorce from Micky Smith) and Professor Malcolm Taylor (played by Lee Evans in PLANET OF THE DEAD). And there were two soldiers from the Canadian Defence Forces too.

When they got on board the ship they found all sorts of strange stuff going on due to the Trotskyite Soviet Union trying to replace nuclear power with a device to tap power 'from beyond the world' which made the ship slip first to UNIT's Earth, then to the frozen central circle of Dante's Hell and finally to the Antarctic Circle of GURPS TECHNOMANCER where they got to save the defenders of Russia's last base there from being overwhelmed by the Giant Killer Penguins with the rayguns and the Hive Mind.²

And after that Uncle took them to Aegis and made his usual vague reassurances about finding people a path home *eventually*.

A glorious mishmash of fan service to several realities and plagiarism unbound!

I ran it three times with both my tegular groups and at STABCON and it got a bit better each time. Drak had fun as Herr Braun swinging giant penguins at each other. Pum and Simon Burley both had fun as Professor Taylor. I think Roger didn't have as much fun as Herr Braun because he was the one person at the table who could have geeked out on the topic of nuclear Icebreakers and his character only had knowledge of History and Classical literature.

² *Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!*

I never wrote it all down and ran it out of the stuff in my head and a few references notes. Let this be its final appearance in any medium and let less happy gamers envy the lucky few who saw it.

THE WAY OF THE WORLD

I am now on the body-shrinking injections.

I may even be shrinking slightly.

No sign of the possible unpleasant complication.

More later.

CUNNING PLANS AND OVER-REACHING AMBITIONS

The Wednesday night group are well started in their game at the magical Institute of Aegis. They are discovering many things about the City and (I hope) a certain amount about themselves. I think I'm going to start writing those sessions up after I finish the Glamour campaign.

Montay nights are involving the LICTORS in cases of legitimacy of noble titles entangled with Dragons. There are Sinister Forces in the background one of which poisoned a monk at the Magistrate's table. There are pirates in Min and more dragons entangled in that.

They also discovered that all dragons are grey when immature and only gain a colour at maturity. "You don't choose your colour: your colour chooses you."

When that's not happening Chris, Jenny and Hartley are playing a group of Japanese pilgrims heading towards the Imperial Court in the reign of the Emperor Kameyama. Early days yet but things are already Weird.

GLAMOUR DAYS AND NIGHTS

Player Characters:

³ THE PLAIN PEOPLE OF E&A: Except he wasn't there this week. ME: Oh, yeah.

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

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

Drak as JARATHIR another YT initiate with a Big Sword.

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

Pum as KEANUS another heavy infantryman who worships Humakt just to prove the tolerance of the Red Goddess.³

Non Player Characters In this Episode

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

THE JANITRIX A retired military hero, now the manager of the Insula the squad is living with.

A gaggle of youths including a woggle-wearing twerp and GREGORY a furry hatted barbarian youth.

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

Suspicious Internal Affairs officers, various bureaucrats, bystanders mostly panicking.

FOLLOWING GREGORY'S NOSE ⁴

First, we brought Alan up to date on what his character had been doing while the others were investigating and heroically rescuing a trollkin.

⁴ 27 August 2025 Two weeks after the last game the GM having been poorly.

Eshan had spent the early part of the day at the Office of Detached Duty in a long, long queue with every other detached soldier in the capital who was trying to discover what they were supposed to do next.

When he got to the front of the line, the lady behind the desk (who looked as if she had aged five years in the past week) said that there were no plans to present anyone to the Emperor. At last notice, the Big Parade had been postponed for at least a week. "Come back in three days and we will give out further dole tickets for your stay then. If you want more information, the Palace of Glad Rejoicing would be the place to ask. Do not ask me again. It is not my plan. It is not my job. I am not going to tell you!" She was shouting slightly by the end of that sentence.

The Palace of Glad Rejoicing was the office concerned with large scale public events in the capital. Despite knowing there was going to be another long line, Eshan decided his duty lay in getting as much information as possible. The person at the desk had not yet lost his temper. In an oleaginous tone, "This may be an inopportune moment. Our plans are fluid. We have the best minds working on it." And then he actually focused on Eshan: "*Which* unit did you say you are with?" Being told it was the Second Furthest Foot, he left his desk and came back with two people wearing black armour and severe expressions.

"Come with us, please."

Eshan recognised them as a decurion and a centurion from the Internal Investigations branch. (*GRAHAM: They investigate your internals. DRAK: Probably called the Company of Interior Light*) Not the Grey Troops from the Cult of Danfive Xaron who patrolled the street and kept order. These were the military's own bunch of intimidating bastards.

They had no visible runes. Perhaps under their armour.

They took him down some stairs. Dark stairs with high treads so that he nearly stumbled on the way down. They took him to a room where

there was one small window high above. "Wait here," they said.

The table and the chairs were bolted down.

When they came back, they wanted to know why he was going around claiming to be from an extinct unit. "What right do you have to wear that uniform?"

They were using the old 'good cop' ("It will be better if you make a clean breast of it.") and bad cop ("You imposters and fantasists make me puke! Or are you trying to infiltrate the Imperial Presence? Eh? Eh?")

Eshan responded with Extreme Patience having seen that the two people were sincere in their belief that he was impersonating an officer in return for a bit of respect and some dole tickets.

DRAK: As much lentil soup as we can get away with.

He produced his authorisation and transit pass to bring the group to the capital.

He was asked if he had heard what has happened to the Second Furthest Foot. A slightly tricky question as he had been told but by a non-official source: the Janitrix who was passing on a message from Great Sister.

"I heard there was trouble... I saw a brown speck in the distance..."

"Have you been spreading rumours?"

He asked them to enlighten him and poured on the Charm. They looked abashed.

"There is an announcement being planned in the near future. I am instructing you in the name of the Emperor and of the High Command not to discuss this further until the announcement is made. It will not be good news for you and for your comrades from the legion."

"Can I tell my troops?"

"Only that there will be an important announcement which they should listen to."

They promised to inform the person at the Palace of Glad Rejoicing that they had not reported an actual imposter and that the remnant of the Legion should be incorporated into their future plans.

They let him go with further cautions about spreading alarm and despondency.

(As a reward for Alan's patience he was allowed to count the many, many hours Eshan had spent standing in line to count as a chance to gain a starting Bureaucracy skill at 1d6 + area bonus.)

When he got back it was after dark and Vishi was the only person there.

"I suggest you get some sleep, sir. The others have gone off to rescue a trollkin."

"There will be an announcement shortly, apparently. About the Second Furthest Foot. I'm not allowed to tell you more."

When dawn came it was Wildday, the Holy Day of the Red Goddess.

There was debate about whether it was in fact Wildday. Whether I had kept an accurate count of the days. Martin insisted that this was the second Wildday this week. Which was important in calculating when they could recharge their Rune Magic Pools.

DRAK: The Empire is tainted by Chaos. But not that much.

I tried to figure out where we actually were in the calendar. But there was a lot of confusion and not enough records with me.

Somebody asked if it mattered and I said it did to me. I promised to check all the records and report back.

When we returned to the actual story, most of the squad (with the exception of Sandene who doesn't sleep) awoke from a deep sleep to the

sound of someone loudly performing masonry in the vicinity.

This was a team who had come into the Insula to replace the toilet seat on the ground floor which had cracked and allowed nasty tentacle monsters to snatch infants from where they were doing their business. (See previous episodes.)

On being asked if they were also going to repair the hole between two floors caused by the escaping Undead Possession Monster (again see earlier) the workmen replied that they were stonemasons not carpenters. "Not my job, mate!"

(The GM took a moment to complain about the people renovating his bathroom and the discussion wandered into whether the Lunar Empire had guilds or unions or what. *GM: We Are All Us but only some of Us are Brothers.*)

Over the merry sound of hammer hitting chisel and chisel splitting stone, came the sound of an Official Proclamation. Leaning out of the window they heard criers "Hear ye, hear ye. Here is a special announcement from the Throne of Moonson. There will be a proclamation at Noon at the stations around the City. Those who have the honour to wear the Empire's uniform should attend to hear it as should all those who have no other duties. Be at the nearest Proclamation Station at Noon."

VOSTOR: They woke me up to tell me to be there at noon?

Vostor buried his head under all the pillows he could find. Then a bowl of rice soup (congee) was stuck next to his nose.

VISHI: Breakfast, sir?

VOSTOR: Vishi.... Not for another two hours.

VISHI: That will only give you an hour to shave, bathe and get your uniform decent sir.

VOSTOR: Two and a half hours.

VISHI: Yes sir. I'll get started on cleaning and polishing right now.

At noon, almost all of the inhabitants of the Insula found they had nothing urgent to keep

them away from the announcement. All the children were there including one earnest young person dressed in a Moonson Youth uniform (Complete with woggle).

GM: The woggle is desperately, desperately mythically significant.

The announcement was that A Dreadful Defeat had been imposed by the Cruel Trickery and Evil Magics of the Storm Barbarians (**VOSTOR**: Bastards!) and that at the Most Sacred Occasion of the Consecrating of The Temple Of The Reaching Moon They Summoned a Ferocious Great Dragon which consumed the better part of the gathered Priests, Magicians and Soldiers and that several Legions suffered Grievous Casualties and the Second Furthest Foot is believed to have been wiped out to the last man.

A wave of emotion passed through the squad. Indescribable emotions.

VOSTOR: Hang on. That makes you the commanding officer of the Second Furthest Foot.

JARATHIR No he's highest ranking officer.

VOSTOR: He's entirely in command of all that's left...

JARATHIR (*Fiercely*) You don't know that. Some other survivors may still be around.

Keanus began to sing a dirge. (By GM fiat since, as I said, Pum was away that week.)

The Official Announcement rolled on. Fresh Legions were being sent to reinforce the southern front. There would be a week of mourning for the loss. All should wear black as a token and avoid all public disorder. The theatres and the Red Light District were closed. On the day of the dark of the moon there would be a great public mourning ceremony and then in a week's time the Emperor's Military Display would take place as a symbol of the Empire's self renewal and the Condign Punishment that would be visited on the barbarians.

There were whispered queries about whether that meant them getting their medals was back on again.

The young gentleman in the woggle came up and expressed his condolences about the loss of their comrades.

JARATHIR Death comes to all.

There were tears rolling down not a few faces.

Somebody in a different uniform than them spat. He said that the parade would be a little less glorious than it would have been because the cavalry units from the the Eastern Front (the one facing the horse nomads) were being recalled urgently. "The Eastern Front wasn't in trouble a few days ago. They don't want to announce two lots of bad news at the same time. I'll bid you good day, gentles. I've got a horse to saddle."

JARATHIR Sir, how do we get transferred to one of those units going south? After the parade of course.

ESHAN: I was yesterday taken and interrogated about impersonating the Second Furthest Foot...

JARATHIR You can do that sir. Especially...

ESHAN: They were going to sort out the misinformation and the people organising the parade will sort out what's going to happen.

VOSTOR: We'll need to requisition a new Furthest Foot banner. I'll carry it!

JARATHIR I reckon they'll say: You lot, you're a new legion.

GM: None of you have ever been present at the founding of a new legion.

But those who were not Vostor had heard the rumours of what happened at the founding of a new Legion and how the legion banner gained its guardian spirit by the sacrifice of the champion recruit of the new Legion whose blood went to dye the banner Lunar Red.

DRAK: Which is how you know it's magic because otherwise we'd be marching behind a banner of Imperial Brown

Eshan went off to have a word with the Janitrix and the others became aware that a large number of the Insula's children (though not, oddly, the Moonson Youth woggle bearer) had gathered around them.

A YOUTH: Scuse me, I've heard...

VOSTOR: Go on, ask us! Ask us!

A YOUTH: I have heard that you are monster hunters.

JARATHIR No. We are Imperial Soldiers. We just happen to hunting monsters quite a lot recently.

A YOUTH: Wow. Thing is: it's his nose.

And here he pointed to the youngest, smallest and most barbarian of their company. Wearing the furry horned hat of a Char-Un barbarian. The squad had become aware that there was a family of Char-Un barbarians living in a yurt on the roof.

JARATHIR No matter what you may say about his nose, he's not a monster.

SANDENE Let's get the Humakti to check.

GM: The Humakti is nowhere to be seen.

JARATHIR He's probably got some private rituals to go through.

VOSTOR: Probably quite a few. So what is it about his nose?

FURRY-HAT YOUTH⁵: I smell bad things. *(Sniff)*

VOSTOR: All the time.

GREGORY: No, only when they're there. *(Sniff)*

VOSTOR: And what bad things have you smelled recently?

The Furry-Hatted Youth gave Vostor a Look, seemed to think about saying something and then decided against it. And then he said: "Well, there's this woman. She tells fortunes at the foot of the stairs. She smells very bad to me."

VOSTOR: What about the people who lived over there? *(He pointed towards the apartment that had held the reincarnating Chaos Possession Monster.)* Did they smell bad?

GREGORY: *(Goes into a paroxysm of sniffing and coughing)* I think it's the same smell. I got when I passed that room. I think it's the same bad smell. I thought I should tell somebody. But nobody wanted to listen. Because I'm a barbarian.

VOSTOR: So you think you can smell Undead?

JARATHIR No, monsters. Beast tribe people can smell chaos.

VOSTOR: So you want us to go and have a word with the fortune teller at the bottom of the stairs because she might be a monster.

GREGORY: Well, yeah.

SANDENE How long's the fortune teller been there?

The youths had a collective think about that and said she used to be in one of the booths in the market. But now she's doing her fortune telling at the stairs for the past two days.

Which fit what the squad were suspecting.

Meanwhile, Eshan was having a word with the Janitrix. She had no real idea what would happen next with the remnant of the legion.

"It depends, dear. I was never an officer. I was a centurion. I was in units that had some terrible losses. The bureaucrats and the burial registry people will get together and try to figure out what's happened. I imagine they will want the unit to continue. They'd want you to be part of it. It all depends if some bureaucrat somewhere or other has decided to do something different. You could find yourself sent off to other places. If you want to keep your people together I'd resist being split up. I would say the logical thing to do would be to use you as cadre for reforming the legion. You and anyone else who might have survived. Keep your paperwork. Make sure you're not an inconvenient truth."

Eshan said the people who tried to arrest him seemed more embarrassed than anything.

"Modest bureaucrats. A miracle."

⁵ His name was Gregory in point of fact.

When he told her they were Internal Investigations she looked ever so slightly impressed with him.

VOSTOR: Hang on. We haven't asked how much they're going to pay us.

JARATHIR For monster hunting? We don't even know it's a monster yet. I for one am not going to just go and stab a fortune teller on the say so of a snotty kid.

When the kids had told them that 'the stairs' referred to one of the stairs down to Red Square, the great parade ground in the centre of the city, they took themselves off to get their fortunes told.

The location's formal name was The Stairs of Distraction.

They let the Officer know what was going on. ("Sir, permission to investigate a potential problem raised by one of the kids.") When he heard what was going on, he decided to come along and help. (As they had feared he would.)

Jarathir was a little worried that the bureaucracy was assuming that there were no survivors from their unit.

They changed out of their best uniform into their "casual walking around armour".

There were lots of people at and around Red Square many of them selling black armbands, black scarves, almost any bit of black material which could be used to indicate mourning and Jarathir had a fun time haggling for something suitable. But his officer then came up and hit the suppliers with his status and got something nice for everyone. Jarathir moaned about how his pay and allowances didn't cover living in the capital: someone suggested he ask the Emperor for a loan.

The Stairs of Distraction were crowded (but not nearly as crowded as normal) with people doing street theatre: even they were wearing black arms bands. Dressed in a full set of black robes

was a lady dealing cards on a small table and telling people's fortunes.

The troopers took up position to keep the lady under observation while Vostor tried to get his fortune told.

He assessed her as best his relevant skills allowed. His Insight (Human) didn't work, his Game (to check if she was doing anything odd with the cards) succeeded and his Scan which succeeded very well (One percent short of a critical). He became fascinated by the way her hands flowed as she wove the cards into a dance reminiscent of the stars dancing in the skies...

He stood there listening to her voice, too quiet for the observers to catch and a short while later he stood, she stood, folded her card table and gave it to Vostor and took his hand to lead him off somewhere.

The others, naturally, followed as she led him up to the Hideous Zoo.

JARATHIR Vostor! Didn't expect to see you here!

Vostor did not react.

FORTUNE TELLER: Excuse me: this gentleman is with me.⁶

JARATHIR No. He's very much with me.

He punched her and the others started moving very fast.

Jarathir gave her his best swing but missed. Much more than he expected to miss: there was something in the air or perhaps she was not quite where his eyes were telling him.

DRAK: I'm as good at punching people as I am with my medium shield!

As he swung past her he suddenly saw her head as being a giant spider. The spider's maw opened and bit hard on the passing fist. But she only hurt her teeth on his armour.

⁶ What a very British sentence!

The approaching squaddies saw her head change shape but were too far away to take in the details. Eshan arrived with Sandene trailing behind.

Jarathir drew his sword and felt a wave of malignant magic wash over him. He swung at her and she dodged out of the way.

JARATHIR Witch!

And then Vostor snapped out her influence. With an 01 roll he got a full explanation of what the situation was, no confusion that Graham didn't bring to the table. Oh and Vostor seemed to be carrying her card table..

The soldiers struck at her and shortly chopped her legs out from under her at which point her head detached, leaving behind a legless rotting corpse.

They chased the Giant Spider/Head up the stairs scattering panicking civilians and causing fear and perhaps some awe. The monster seemed to be trying to get to the Hideous Zoo but was chopped in two before making her planned escape.

And then she called upon her god and Divine Intervention took her away. As she reassembled and teleported away she asked them "How do you manage with so few legs?"

Which was a Trickster Riddle based on the Dodge skill and increased Vostor, Jarathir and Eshan's Illumination rating by 1%.

THE LOCAL GUARD ARRIVING A BIT LATE: Hello, hello. What's all this then?

JARATHIR: Spider headed monster going around stealing people's bodies. Again.

VOSTOR: You probably want to have a word with what's his name...

JARATHIR: Chief Overseer Phranestes.

THE LOCAL GUARD: (*Rolling his eyes at the name dropping*) I'm going to have ask you lot to come along with me.

The forensic signs were complicated by all the bits of the spider going with her to elsewhere and the black blood on the blades of two of the soldiers being from a body that had clearly been dead for a while. The other's blades had ichor on them and so did some of their uniforms.

They spent most of the rest of the day explaining things to the authorities.

When he finally turned up Chief Overseer Phranestes sarcastically asked them if they had a licence to go around killing monsters.

Jarathir tried bringing up the sad news from the South about their legion but emotional blackmail washed off him like water off a duck's back.

Eshan hit him with a charm offensive but the Chief Overseer just pointed out that 'protecting the public from hideous monsters' was supposed to be his job not that of a bunch of layabout unassigned soldiers.

Despite this he issued them with a piece of paper.

"The bearers of this are consultants with the Grey Soldiers. If found in suspicious circumstances, do arrest them but send a note to me."

JARATHIR Sorry to have bothered you.

COP: It's all right. I was only sleeping.

VOSTOR: I don't understand what we did wrong!

COP: You instilled fear in the general public by swinging swords in the middle of a crowded street!

JARATHIR We didn't hit any civilians!

COP: They didn't know that!

VOSTOR: What would prefer us to have done?

COP: Reported to me.

VOSTOR: What would have happened to me if they'd gone off...

COP: I was suggesting you came to me...

VOSTOR: We didn't know it was a monster.

COP: Before going and finding out if it was a monster you consult the law enforcement authorities.

VOSTOR: If we reported everything people told us you'd probably be very annoyed.

COP: Probably true but please bear in mind you are amateurs.

VOSTOR: So because we're not paid to do it...

COP: You're not paid to do it because you're not competent to do it. Among other reasons.

JARATHIR We probably should have shouted something before cutting her down.

On the way back to the Insula they were stopped twice by the Watch and Vigiles of the Sister's Army. Jarathir thanked them for their service and vigilance as sincerely as he could manage. They were told to be on their way.

VOSTOR: Our problem is the Watch.

ESHAN: They're not a problem. They're on our side. They just don't know it.

As they bickered, they heard the tromp of feet and hooves crossing the street ahead of them. No drums, no fifes. Just torches and silent marching as the Auxiliary Legions returned to duty on the Eastern front.

When they got back Keanus still wasn't back. No one had seen him since noon. Vishi was worried. But they allowed for his mourning and not understanding his religious practices. And the likelihood that he was drowning his sorrows.

GRAHAM: He's saying to the barkeep, whose name is Dave, "Dave, they're all dead. They're all dead, Dave."

(By this point the players had outrun the GM's written plot. I had hoped I could at least get the spider thing into the Hideous Zoo to pick up an improved body from the monsters in there.)

The Char-Un child came down to them while they were settling down and asked them if they had found the monster (they had) and if it was destroyed. (No.)

VOSTOR: We may need you to find it tomorrow.

JARATHIR How do you feel about working with the cops? Just for future reference.

GREGORY Technically speaking we're not supposed to be living on the roof.

The next day, they went on a walking tour of the city with a sniffy child in tow. And his friends who were along for the candies they could cadge.

They picked up the trail near the Hideous Zoo. There was a lot of sniffing. They reached the park. Gbajii Park. The Park of Sevenfold Enlightenment.

GREGORY: It's been here a lot.

JARATHIR That's where we first fought it.

VOSTOR: Was this where it was heading?

GREGORY: I think that wherever that is, is where it comes in and out of.

He was pointing at the Temple at the top of a small hill. .There were people around it doing 'artistic things' (painting, dancing, reciting their poetry) and behind them a walled temple surrounded entirely by a grove of thorn trees.

And as Gregory took a close look at it he gave the most enormous sneeze.

GREGORY: There's a lot of it (Chaos) about the city. I'd be accusing a lot of people if I just went by what makes me sniff.

He did sneeze a bit when Vostor was speaking but did not outright mention the sensations his nose gave him around that soldier.

Asking around among the local people, they were told that the Temple was dedicated to the Spindle Hag⁷. "It's very ancient. It was here before the city was founded."

⁷ The Spindle Hag is a title of Jalakeel the Witch, one of the Seven Mothers of the Red Goddess. Also

known as The Mistress of Black Magic; The Keeper of Secrets,

And at that moment in time they heard a cry within the temple. It was Keanus or at least that's what their ears seemed to be telling them.

Jarathir turned to the most responsible of the youths that were traipsing along with them and told them to go and tell a Grey Watchman.

The others headed to the thorn barrier.

They fought through the hedge of thorns (which bristled at them in a manner that most plants wouldn't). Vostor went for a mad charge straight through, Eshan looked for a place where it was thinner and Sandene went for Disrupting the vines.

All of that worked to a degree but it was their armour and Dodge skills that saved them.

Jarathir used Cunning and went through the gaps caused by other people going first.

Inside was an ancient circular temple built around a pool. There was a statue of Jalakeel but it was more recent than the temple itself. Different stone, different style.

They each made a Scan roll, Jarathir fumbled and went off to investigate the statue. Vostor, having failed, followed him. The other two spotted where Keanus was tied to a pillar and something was crawling around his neck.

GRAHAM: I've got a thrown dagger range of 20.

GM: It is nestling right up against your comrade's neck.

DRAK: But he's a death cultist. He wouldn't mind.

Combat followed and at the end of it the Giant Chaos Spider was finally, finally permanently dead. Sandene struck it critically in the head to give it the final coup de grace. It detached from the neck of their comrade and fell into the sacred pool in two parts.

When Keanus came round he was woozy and reported that he had been drinking with this fella who said he'd been with one of the legions and singing songs about death and glory.

KEANUS: I was quite comfortable here. I'm going to feel worse when my circulation starts up again.

And then it was just a matter of explaining things to the Guard. Again.

DISTRACTIONS

DRAK: Making moonshine is a religious act amongst Lunar cultists.

GRAHAM: How many people were there in our legion. Because I reckon that about 10% would have DI'd.

IGGY'S THEME: GMs Everywhere Use This One Weird Trick

I have very few GM tricks.⁸

I do like taking the chance to make the players come up with background details. I offered them the chance to come up with societies at the Institute Fresher's Fair which added depth to the background while reducing the burden on me. This works best if they are setting up challenges for each other. Inter-player rivalry works better than pious stuff about co-creation.

I like to use whatever I have in the way of toys to add to the threats to characters. (When I'm not going all handwavy and Theatre of The Mind on them.) Gary Gygax created a lot of the early DnD monsters out of what he had collected or scavenged. The gelatinous cube came from... Actually does anyone know what Gygax used for the first GC? I remember having great success using the stuffed toy duck I picked up at a Convulsion as a giant chaos Duck that attacked the puny miniatures representing the player characters. (I wonder what happened to it?)

⁸ TPPoE&A: Do ye think yer players would say that?
ME: The important thing is I believe it.

And never forget that time taken to go to the loo is an ideal time to clear your thoughts and plot where you are going next.

COMMENTARIAT ON E&A 7

MATT STEVENS: RYCT Me: There is a fair amount of material about The City in various formats and I probably should go through them all and try to reconcile the things I came up with... But my number one unfinished Thing To Do is to get a map of the present day city done so I can start getting a sense of how big things are and how much I have still to fill. // “A giant map of my fantasy world courtesy of the New York State Senate” Oook! Envy! I do wish I could figure out how to print maps bigger than A4 at home. The recent Supreme Court decisions being the ones that cancelled out most of the Voting Rights Act?

PATRICK RILEY: Re Procedures:

“Role-playing is suspended once initiative has been rolled” Oh, I wish.... My combats would go so much more smoothly but nothing can stop them acting in character when they think it fun.

RYCT Me: I don't like the idea of magic being incompatible with electricity or nuclear radiation. I do think you can have fun with making the interaction of magic and some scientific theories complicated. I've played with varying the speed of light when the magic returns and I've seen settings where the people who brought the magic back set it up to wreck the technology that powers modern tech. (So much you can do by stopping steam engines working.) Roger has made radiation and magic interact to cancel each other in a couple of his campaigns. **RYCT PUM:** I feel that the GM distorting the player's perceptions has to be done carefully. It can look like directly taking away the player's agency which they justifiably hate.

ROGER BELL_WEST: Re MISSION

IMPOSSIBLE: I don't think you'd like them but the mechanics of **BLADES IN THE DARK** (which is essentially a criminal caper show with an extreme setting) or perhaps (though I've not read it and am going by what I've heard) the **LEVERAGE** game which allow for flashbacks

and retroactively deciding what the plan was all along would go well with MI games. They do tend to involve stepping outside of character and into the mindset of the Writers' Room that you have decried to me many a time and oft.

MYLES CORCORAN: I genuflect in shame at the lack of spellchecking in my references to you. // I've recently had to expend a lot of effort coming up with 'use names' for the new magicians at the Institute and a reason for wizards to keep their 'true names' secret. Also a semi-plausible explanation for what a 'true name' is. Perhaps I was just unconsciously protecting you from malicious mages? I wonder how many curses have failed to connect with me because people get my last name wrong? I wonder how many times the difference was made by the NHS having misspelled my middle name when they entered it on the data base.

PATRICK ZOCH: Seven players? Aiiieeee!

Great respect, y'know. But nonetheless Aiiiee! //

RYCT : JIM VASSILAKOS: So say we all.

JOHN REDDEN: I read E&A on my iPad Pro which gives me some of the sensation of reading a paper A&E. // Yes, **QUESTWORLDS** is a real game. When the name **HEROQUEST** went back to the publishers of the boardgame and they needed a new name for it **Chaosium** reused the name of a **RQ2** product for the updated version.

JIM ECKMAN: My incompetence at GMing **BUSHIDO** is legendary among my gaming groups. I tried twice and managed a Total Party Kill twice, having not understood how much deadlier one sixth level character was than six first levels. Both times it was trying to run **VALLEY OF THE MISTS**: if the introductory adventure is like that I don't want to try anything more advanced! The game system was entirely too arcane for me and I could not work out why anything was the way it was. I understood the Budo/On split (my players still cry 'He's stealing the Budo' when someone elbows in on the enemy they have softened up) but the basic description of a person and the indirect way of creating the stats you will actually use in game. I love the setting but not with that system.

DYLAN CAPEL: The idea of mental damage taking away mental capacity that's needed for something else could possibly work and the visual representation (perhaps a grid that gets filled up with ink you can't erase) would keep the state of the character's mind in front of the player. It reminds me of the encumbrance rules for MAUSRITTER where damage takes over encumbrance spaces. (That had problems with items and wound tokens skittering off the character sheet when we tried it.) // I remember the EdExcel from the last London Worldcon. All the SF fandom in the world was not enough to fill it.

LISA PADOL: Re NECROBIOTIC:

There's a reason people set SF beyond the immediate future. With enough stuff that has happened and then been forgotten you can make the most ridiculous stuff sound plausible.

PUM: I wonder if I should let some Evangelists for Brian appear in The City. They'll let anyone set up on Temple Street if they can afford the rental. But then they've already got the White Rat soaking up the desperate. // **RYCT Me:** My players' passion for Python worship is a problem for all my campaigns. (In the Monday night group it's usually Daniel's fondness for puns.)

AVRAM GRUMER: Re Prolix Game Naming. It's fashion, nothing more. I do wonder whether you could meaningfully find common factors among games that have one, two or three word titles. (What does TRAVELLER have in Common with NUMENERA? What does THE PETAL HACK have in common with LORDS OF CREATION) and what Games With Really Long Titles have in common? Other than pretentiousness? // **RYCT Me:** Given John has now told me he was planning the Word Of Communication at the time I'm more likely to go for mystical explanations. (Or at least use Jungian pseudo-science which is always good for that sort of thing.

BRIAN ROGERS: Once again the homeowners of the APA make me glad I'm a renter. Commiserations!

BRIAN C MISIASZEK: My sympathies for the loss of your companion. My congratulations for Lauren's academic flourishing. May it continue. // Thank you for pointing me to Challenger 'sequels'!

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: I'm glad to hear you are taking being 'at liberty' in your stride so far and seeing it as an opportunity. May it prove to be so. // **RYCT Me:** I have seen a number of games from the 90s that got second editions that somehow lost the fine careless rapture and the 'core thing the game is about' in late middle age rewrites. And on the other hand I've seen a few that trash all the progress game design has made to recapture memories of being young and excited. No names, no pack drill.

JIM VASSILAKOS: RYCT TO MILES

CORCORAN: If ever a mis-jump took place in one of my games I would not risk them jumping into the space between the stars but find a system within plausible misjump range and choose that, making sure it was both interesting to explore and possible to escape. **RYCT Me:** The diseases in Glorantha are a) caused by spirits and b) capable of being cured by the proper sort of magic. The Temple of Uleria in the capital would have nothing but the best to ensure health and hygiene. Except of course in the event of infiltration by unauthorised Chaos monsters....

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: RYCT Me: I bow before your greater experience.

It's getting late and Bruce is insisting I get to bed. So I will leave you with

MY LAST WORD FOR THIS ISSUE: Anosognosia

Which is the mental illness or incapacity to recognise one is ill.

BUGBEARS & BALLYHOO #46

January 20, 2026, for Ever & Anon #8

Gabriel Roark

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Hi, gang. This is going to be a short zine. It is tempting to hold this installment back but the XP Tally is starting to catch up with the campaign as it is being played.

In this Issue

- A Design Opportunity—Giant Realms
- XP Tally for the Temple of Elemental Evil Campaign
- Nextish

A DESIGN OPPORTUNITY—GIANT REALMS

I heard through the NorCal rumor mill that a mate of mine from high school/early college years has a project that will likely interest some E&A readers. Seth & I got in touch about it, and this is what he has to share about the opportunity:

Paid Game Designer wanted — GIANT REALMS is a Greek Mythos-inspired text RPG where using power attracts the attention of the Gods, and the Gods' attention leads to uncertainty and mayhem. I'm looking for a designer to codify the character creation rules (a clear, usable character design/creation section) and help align those rules with the game's core systems. This is for a text-based game currently in the design phase, in the spirit of Zork, Eamon, and MUD1, with procedurally generated content and LLM-supported actions. Targeting an initial deliverable in 2–3 weeks; notes and system-design materials available for review. Apply / inquire by Jan 31: seth@giantrealms.com.

XP TALLY FOR THE TOEE CAMPAIGN

An installment in a series that explicates the experience point (XP) earnings of PCs throughout my Temple of Elemental Evil (ToEE) campaign. For ToEE, we are running Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (AD&D), First Edition. The PCs call themselves the Frog Leg Gang. The XP tally for the Frog Leg Gang at the end of Session 19/start of Session 20:

- | | |
|---|--|
| • Jack Ironheart (human paladin 2) | • John Ironheart (human cleric 1) |
| ○ Total XP: 2,751 XP | ○ Total XP: 2,507 |
| ○ Level 3 requires 5,501 XP | ○ Level 2 requires 1,501 XP |
| | ○ <u>John can train to Level 2</u> |

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

SESSION 20 HARVESTER 3–4

The party began the session by opening the chest found behind the illusory basilisk. There were two garottes, two vials by themselves, & a leather case with six glass vials. Taz opened the glass vials & determined that they smelled poisonous. He then determined that one of the separate vials was acid. The other, when dabbed on his finger, briefly made a claw appear. A fear spell on the door forced Ekim to run back down the tunnel where he discovered a pack of ogres exploring the tunnel leading back to the ruined tower, the PCs' temporary base of operations. He wedged shut the secret door & the party waited for them to leave, which they did. The party made it back to the tower with the chest, loot, & a petrified New Moon. Having set New Moon's statue on the trap door, the party rested for the night. During the first watch the ravens that roosted on the tower's roof made a racket as a party of 12 brigands approached. Fern cast entangle as the brigands approached within 30 feet. Ttam & Ekim fired bows at them & Gobi casts an illusion of flowers releasing clouds of poisonous pollen. The brigands were all killed before the spells ended.

The PCs looted the bodies & dumped them down the hatch before sleeping the rest of the night.

SESSION 21 HARVESTER 5–24 (DECEMBER 28, 2024)

The party crossed the river with Taz's help & reached Hommlet (home base) on Harvester 6 without incident. The hamlet's authorities put the captured brigands in the cells beneath the Church of St. Cuthbert. The party brought New Moon to Burne, who successfully cast *dispel magic* on him, curing New Moon of his petrification. The PCs then told Rufus & Burne about the prisoners.

The Froggers sold their loot to the trader, Rannos Davl, for 1,065 gold pieces (gp); with the collected coinage, the amount is 3,027 gp for 275 gp per PC. In addition to the 275 XP for the gp-value obtained at the ToEE, the Froggers earned XP for defeating foes. Ekim, Sonja, Gobi, New Moon, Ttam, Taz, & Amelie contributed to the demise of the black pudding, which was worth 2,120 XP (302 XP each). Defeating the brigands earned the PCs 1,145 XP, or 104 XP to each PC in the party.

Ttam began training for Level 2 in both his classes, Fern trained his rats, & the other PCs kept themselves occupied for two weeks.

On Harvester 21, the Froggers returned to the ToEE, a three-day journey. The PCs decided that the brigand leader's secret tunnel had led them to a part of the temple for which they were ill-equipped & opted to enter from the ground floor instead. The main entrance to the ground floor consisted of two huge double doors bearing runes & a powerful ward that not all PCs could overcome. Therefore, they sought entry via a side entrance, the doors of which lacked arcane wards. The party lit a bonfire against the door until it was weakened enough to break down. The PCs noted that there were evil & lewd murals along the walls. A passageway led north, containing about 30 pillars. Natural light through stained glass windows dimly illumined the temple. The PCs found a marble altar in the shape of a human & covered in blood in the main room. Broken crystal containers surrounded the altar. Among the shards, Ekim spied a broken crystal dagger and filched it. Near the altar, a set of stairs led down. The party also found an empty well/hole that was about 80 feet deep. There was a dais behind the altar at one end of the temple with large colored squares around it. [We stopped the game here for time.]

End Sessions 20–21

As I pointed out lastish, the Froggers are in desperate need of cold, hard coin. Several of the PCs are eligible to train to their next level but funds have prevented it for John, Sonya, Moira, New Moon, Fern, & Omar. This could be the consequence of having so many PCs. The PCs are also butting up against the AD&D convention of not being able to earn additional XP after reaching or exceeding the amount needed to level & then returning to a haven. AD&D's experience rules do allow one to accumulate XP up to 1 XP before gaining a second level (that is, just shy of gaining two levels at once), but there are contraindications in the text that suggest the method that I use. Acknowledging that this might be a bug—rather than a deliberate design feature—ensuing from Gygax's famously abstruse & contradictory writing, I will reread the XP section of the DMG &

reconsider this ruling in the future. As it stands now, I'm inclined to allow PCs to keep earning experience up to 1 XP from a second experience level, even if they return to a safe locale. I also see that I lost some XP records for Ttam Gnimelf somewhere along the way. Both my notes & Tim's have Ttam training up to Level 2 in both of his classes, yet the tally below shows Ttam as around 400 XP short of advancement in each class.

- **Jack Ironheart** (human paladin 2)
 - Total XP: 3,130 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: 2,848
 - Level 3 requires 2,501 XP
 - Ekim can train to Level 3
- **Ttam Gnimelf** (wood elf ranger 2/magic-user 2)
 - 1,868/1,868 XP
 - Level 3 requires 2,251/2,501 XP
- **Dame Sonya Ravenclaw** (human cavalier 1)
 - Total XP: 2,582
 - Level 2 requires 2,501 XP
 - Sonya can train to Level 2
- **Lady Moira Ravenclaw** (human magic-user 1)
 - High Int: +10% to XP
 - Total XP: 2,549
 - Level 2 requires 2,501 XP
- Moira can train to Level 2
- **New Moon** (elven bard 1)
 - Total XP: 2,534
 - Level 2 requires 2,001 XP
 - New Moon can train to Level 2
- **Fern** (human druid 1)
 - Total XP: 2,388
 - Level 2 requires 2,001 XP
 - Fern can train to Level 2
- **Amelie Atugar** (half-orc cleric 2)
 - Total XP: 2,463
 - 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: 2,552/2,495
 - I 2/T 3 requires 2,251/2,501 XP
 - Gobi can train to I 2
- **Ko To Taz** (spirit folk monk 1)
 - Total XP: 681
 - Level 2 requires 2,251 XP

Nextish

- Comments on E&A #8 (maybe catch-up on #7, too)
- ToEE Play Reports & XP Tally! hope life is treating y'all well. See you next month.

A zine for Ever & Anon.
Unless otherwise noted
all writing & art is by
Avram Grumer of Brooklyn, NY.
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20 Jan 2026

GOING TO BE *Ad-Libbed*

#6

Email: avram@grumer.org
See <http://grumer.org/>
for social media links.
Software: Typst w/ meander
Fonts: UNAL Ancízar Serif & Sans
Logo: Jost, Lobster



Happy Gregorian New Year, everybody! We'd been hoping that [the failure of the Boulder, Colorado atomic clock in December](#) might have marked a bounce back out of the Darkest Timeline that we seem to have entered when that [weasel got into the Large Hadron Collider back in 2016](#), but it doesn't look like it worked.

And hey, new year, new layout! All except the illos done in Typst. Even that logo up top is a series of Typst shape and place commands, wrapped up in a function for easy re-use.

ATTENTION CONSERVATION NOTICE

gender & roleplaying • immersion • narration • Design-At-Start vs Design-In-Play • “Simulationism” vs “Simulation” • noun-based vs verb-based RPG design • novels that are really strong • write-ups that go on too long • em- and en-dash type advice • using cards instead of dice • status-play ability • playing *Scum and Villainy* • copyfitting info • *Monsterhearts* & *Impro* • “We Didn't Start the Fire”

Reading, Recent & Otherwise

Some sci-fi & fantasy books that I've particularly enjoyed, plus a bit of non-fiction:

***Terra Ignota*, by Ada Palmer**

This four-book series (*Too Like the Lightning*, *Seven Surrenders*, *The Will to Battle*, and *Perhaps the Stars*) introduces us to a 25th century in which a world-spanning governing system, built upon the renunciation of the geographic nation-state, allows different cultures to live together peacefully. There hasn't been a war since the big Church Wars of the 21st century, but now the seams are starting to strain, and war seems inevitable.

This series features some of the best societal world-building I've ever seen, an interesting group of protagonists, some neat philosophical puzzles, and an unreliable narrator. Palmer's a professor of Renaissance history at U Chicago, and writes with a historian's eye for both detail and the grand sweep of events. She's also a fan of anime

and manga, with the expected affection for energetic action and compellingly weird characters.

***The Masquerade, aka The Baru Cormorant books*, by Seth Dickinson**

The Traitor Baru Cormorant, The Monster Baru Cormorant, The Tyrant Baru Cormorant, and a fourth book that hasn't been finished yet. Invented-world fantasy about a young woman, educated by a colonial empire and elevated to the position of colonial finance minister, seeks to gain enough power and knowledge to undermine and topple that empire from within. This series has it all: romance, politics, backstabbing, sex, wheels-within-wheels plotting, naval battles, land battles, sword duels, economics, and meditations upon the metaphysical implications of [Euler's identity](#).

Even though the first book has “Traitor” in the title, I was not emotionally prepared for the sheer level of betrayal it contains.

***Impro*, by Keith Johnstone**

I first heard about this in RPG circles two (or maybe three?) decades ago. I can't recall if it was in A&E or on some blog or other. After all that time, I finally got off my ass and got a copy, ordering a used one on eBay. It got delivered during the [Scum and Villainy](#) session described below! Some of the pages near the front were gently stuck together, which I am choosing to believe was light water damage, or possibly a spilled beverage.

Just reading through the first section, about status, already gives me ideas and has me noticing things (and not just tall pointy hats). Like, one move that Johnstone recommends for playing high status is not moving one's head. I had trouble picturing exactly what he meant by this, and looked around for videos about it, hoping for an actual example, to no avail, but then I thought back to the Dec 21st *Monsterhearts* game (recounted below), and the scene where Laeli demands that Steffan bark for her, like a dog. I'm pretty sure that NJ did exactly this – not moving her head, while she told me that my first attempt wasn't satisfactory – and it worked really well at conveying an authoritative I'm not-kidding-around attitude.

I haven't seen any statement by Avery Alder (designer of *Monsterhearts* and *Dream Apart*, as well as other games) citing Keith Johnstone, but it's obvious from her games that she's read him. The advice in [Going for Broke](#), her sitcom game – to concentrate on staying in character and setting up jokes for other players to deliver, rather than trying to be clever and funny yourself – is nearly identical to some of Johnstone's advice in *Impro*.

The portions of the book that seem most relevant to RPG are the bits likely to help immersion, and players who want to develop characters. I wonder if there's an equally helpful book out there for people who like developing and envisioning a consistent setting – perhaps something developed from [Cicero's method of loci](#) (also known as the memory palace).

Uncategorized Brain Output

Buddy Holly, Ben Hur, Werewolf & Mafia

How about a social deduction game in which everyone plays a named character from [Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire"](#), trying to avoid blame for starting the fire?

Gender & Roleplaying

There was a moment in our recent *Scum and Villainy* game when the PCs split up, Harmony and Varilas doing one thing, Von and Valsi another, and Josh, thinking Valsi was male, commented that we'd split the group along gender lines, which confused Gareth and me, who had believed Valsi to be female. Lisa said (possibly just realized at that moment) that she had never established Valsi's gender, and didn't seem to care, so we decided Valsi is non-binary.

But Josh pointed out that Lisa usually plays male PCs, which I hadn't noticed before, since I usually see her GMing, but yeah, she does. Cross-gender play is pretty common in our group, but this reminded me of [a Reddit thread I saw a few days back](#), from a woman who usually plays male, but finds herself in a group whose GM prohibits cross-gender play. (He's apparently a very good GM in every other respect.)

Now, maybe this is someone who's transgender and hasn't figured it out yet. That's a common enough story that we should acknowledge the possibility. But also, maybe not! The Redditor adds that her PCs are usually different from her not just in gender, but in other respects: profession, faith, etc.

And thinking over my own recent experiences, I notice that it's easier for me to develop a distinct personality for a PC if they're a woman. The more a character has in common with me, the stronger the gravitational force of just-like-me-ness. Cross-gender play weakens that pull a little.

Powered by a Pack of Cards

I had an odd idea float into my head while I was writing about fortune positioning in a comment down below.

What about a [Powered by the Apocalypse](#) game that used cards instead of dice?

Picture [Monsterhearts](#), or any other adversarial PbtA game, but instead of dice, each player starts the session with a set of six cards, numbered 1 through 6. There's also a deck of 12 cards in the middle of table. When you trigger a dice move, instead of rolling dice, you play one card from your hand. The other card comes from either the player whose character you're affecting, or from the table deck if you're not affecting another PC. Add them together, and treat the result like a dice result.

When you've played a card, you set it aside face-up. Once you've used up all six cards in your hand, you get to pick up the set-aside cards again for a new hand. The table deck should get reshuffled after six cards are played from it, to keep it unpredictable.

While high cards are useful offensively, low cards are useful defensively – when someone attacks you, you want to be able to give them a 1. If you keep track of who's played what, and notice that somebody's spent all of their low cards, that makes them vulnerable. On the other hand, this is a level of meta-gaming that might knock some people out of their roleplaying zone.

Vincent Baker on Immersion

I just stumbled across an old (like 2005) [post by Vincent Baker on the subject of immersion](#). (You'll need to scroll down to see it. Search for "6-2-05".) It's attempting to argue with the common idea that meta-gaming mechanics and [stances](#) other than Actor Stance are *inherently* destructive of immersion. He proposes that immersion occurs when three things coincide:

The affirmed rightness of your vision

This is social. Your fellow players share ownership of your character, remember; you want and need for them to affirm that your vision of your character is right. They trust you with your character. They won't step in and contradict, override, undercut.

Permission to act with passion

Furthermore, whatever you have your character do, [the other players] won't react defensively. If your character threatens something they value, they'll deal with the threat passionately in response, but without ever carrying the struggle up into the social level.

You aren't constrained by the fear that having your character act might step on someone else's toes.

Faith in the robustness of the game's fiction

And you have to trust that the game has room for your character in it. You can't be worrying whether this decision that your character's making might break the game. You have to know, securely enough that it's unconscious, that even if your character transforms the game entirely, the game'll survive.

Sadly, the comment link under that entry doesn't work. There were 75 comments, lost to history, and I'd bet there was some good discussion in there. Possibly that's where the ideas were formulated that led to the development of [Apocalypse World](#). Anyway, this is some stuff I'm gonna try to keep in my brain during further *Monsterhearts* sessions.

And speaking of *Monsterhearts* sessions...

Recent Gaming

Monsterhearts: Vermilion Cove, Session 3

Monsterhearts isn't about rallying together as a party. It's about exploring relationships and internal strife. It's not exactly player-versus-player, but it is certainly a game where characters hurt one another, make mistakes, and navigate social fallout.

— Avery Alder, *Monsterhearts*, 2nd ed (2017)

This *very intense* session took place on Dec 21st, but I had already sent in my zine for last month on the evening of the 20th. It was the most exhilarating RPG experience I've had in years!

- ♦ **MC:** Briar (she), who also hosted
- ♦ **Blue** (??), the **Hollow** (Johnni, they/she)
- ♦ **Drake Kennedy** (he), the **Queen** (Mike, he)
- ♦ **Laeli Vahad** (she), the **Mortal** (NJ, she)
- ♦ **Logan Caldwell-Collins** (he), the **Infernal** (Erica, she)
- ♦ **Steffan Mactire** (he), the **Werewolf** (me, he)

Opening scene: Briar's gotten one of those Bluetooth speakers since our last game, so when she puts on our theme music, [Ok Cowgirl's "Larry David"](#), we're all a bit startled to hear the music coming from an unexpected direction. Also, the device chimes its startup sound first, which gives us a chuckle. She narrates an overhead view of the town, as if from a drone camera. (Briar's directorial eye in her opening scenes is giving me some ideas for my own GMing, if I ever get around to doing any.)

(Though I'm now, as I write this recap, wondering if that was a [diegetic](#) or non-diegetic drone, and the same question about the openings of the previous sessions, because hey, maybe that's a clue. I'd ask on the Discord, but if it is a clue, I'll get more information if I'm looking her in the eye and seeing her face when she answers.)

There aren't a lot of people visible. The viewpoint zooms in on the school. It's still Wednesday, the second day of classes this year. Everyone is in homeroom except for CJ (an NPC who's been expelled for bringing a gun to school) and Steffan (avoiding the room because of the weird noise that triggers his werewolf transformation).

Mr Singer comes in and tells the students that they're being blamed for OpenAI pulling out of the development of the new data center that's supposed to revitalize the town's economy. But there's a new partner coming in:

the Eliza mental health AI. The class is being assigned to break into groups to use Eliza and write essays about it. The four remaining PCs get assigned to the same group, along with Agatha (an NPC student).

(I'm pretty sure this isn't literally supposed to be [Joseph Weizenbaum's original Eliza program from the 1960s](#). Briar's just using that name as a computing in-joke. Probably. We'll find out, I guess.)

Blue starts teasing Logan: "It's really cool that you're a school shooter." The other students join in. Briar tells Erica that this is triggering Logan's Darkest Self.

Steffan, wandering the halls to figure out if the noise is coming from someplace in particular, encounters Principal Hudson, gazing nostalgically at the trophies from a past basketball championship victory. They have a brief discussion, Mr Hudson emphasizing how much the school needs him to be on good behavior, Steffan emphasizing the importance of the basketball team, hoping that this will make Hudson reluctant to punish him. This done, Steffan walks towards the homeroom, but the noise is still there, so he continues on out of the school through a side door. He sees cop cars patrolling as he goes.

NJ has Laeli start to text Steffan, to ask him to come back to class, but Briar says she's also in Darkest Self, so NJ rephrases the text to be much more demanding, threatening Steffan with a social media block if he doesn't comply. He texts back, calling her crazy. She excuses herself to go to the bathroom, beats herself up, then comes back and tells everyone that Steffan had beaten her. The group believes her; Agatha (the NPC) has a history as a victim of domestic violence.

(We have [X-cards](#) on the table. I made them myself! Nobody uses them; we're all OK with exploring this plotline.)

Blue texts Steffan: "Heel." Steffan walks around the school and makes a sort of *what do you want* gesture to Blue through the window. Blue arranges for them to meet in an old boathouse near the school after class. When class ends, the PCs — Blue, Drake, Laeli, and Logan, the last three all in Darkest Self — try to head out together, but they run into the principal. Mike flubs Drake's roll (not sure if this is Keep Your Cool or an improvised roll-with-Cool move), so only he and Blue get to leave; Laeli and Logan have to stay. Laeli goes to the bathroom (this is becoming her signature move) and sneaks out the window. (Small town, single-story school building, windows are an obvious point of egress.) She fails to avoid being noticed by the



mob of reporters outside, asking about the previous day's events. She uses them as an opportunity to promote her social media presence and trash Steffan. Logan goes to the library, tries to go out that window, but the librarian grabs his foot. Logan kicks back (Run Away move), gets loose, but leaves his boot behind. (Logan always causes problems when he kicks something.)

The four students unite outside, and confront Steffan (who is expecting only Blue, and maybe Laeli) at the boathouse. All the PCs are in one place, for the first time since the cafeteria riot! Logan has grabbed a length of rope on the way in. Laeli is livestreaming the encounter with her phone.

There's a moment, once things get going, when Drake realizes they're broadcasting themselves doing something illegal, and tries to stop Laeli from streaming—NJ is actually holding her real-world phone up, and Mike shoves her hand down, but it doesn't stay down. This is a moment when Mike could turn to the mechanics to get his way, maybe Lash Out Physically to knock the phone away, or Pulling Strings to get her to agree, but he doesn't.



When Steffan admits to having hit Laeli (that one time! by accident!) the group attacks him. (There's some out-of-character checking in to see if we're all OK with this scene.) Logan throws the rope, entangling Steffan. (Briar calls for Erica to make a Lash

Out Physically roll, and one die spins on its corner for an astonishingly long time before landing on a result, like even the dice want to contribute to the tension!) Steffan tries to pull Logan off-balance, fails (I flub so many rolls this session that I fill my experience track, and have enough marks left over to nearly fill it again), and falls over, bloodying his nose and taking 1 Harm. The rest of the group is talking over what to do next—they want to drive somewhere, Laeli wants to put Steffan in the trunk of Drake's car to humiliate him some more, Drake doesn't want blood there—when they hear sirens approach. (Ernie failed to warn them!) At Drake's insistence, Blue shoves Steffan into the water, and they all flee in the car. Again, the perfidy of youth!

(I'm aware those X-cards are there, and still haven't reached for them.)

There's a move in the game for avoiding actually dying if you don't want your PC to actually die, so I'm not worried about that. (Notice that this same thing happened in the *Dream Askew* game—my PC was threatened with death, and I was OK with it because the rules gave me an out. Consider how this interacts with the immersion principles Vincent Baker listed, how my ability to deal with



the threat means the other players are free to act with passion.) Briar has me roll with Cool to wriggle out of the rope, at the cost of 1 Harm for each failure, and I just fail once. (Note that this is an improvised custom move—it looks like Keep Your Cool, but isn't.) The second roll is a partial success, so Steffan gets free, gets out of the water, but loses his phone. (This was Johnni's suggestion, which I accepted. "At the bottom of the water?" asks Briar. "Nah," I say, "I'm bent over coughing up water, so I don't notice it falling out of my pocket." More fun if someone else can find it later. Which someone does!)

Steffan, soaked, sullen, squelches schoolward, when a cop car comes calling. "They tried to kill me!" Yeah, the cops saw the livestream. They tell Steffan to get to the police station, but he goes to the school locker room instead, to get dry clothes.

Drake's mom calls him to tell him that the video is attracting attention, and she's sending a lawyer. Laeli thinks Drake's mom is hot.

Steffan runs into Pete in the locker room, and tells him what happened. Pete agrees that something needs to be done, but wants to make excuses for Logan. (You might recall that Pete was miraculously healed last session by Logan's Dark Patron. Steffan knows nothing of this.) Kenny comes up, his phone playing the video of the boathouse encounter. The three of them head off to see the principal.

(As a Werewolf, I'm supposed to be a cruel bully, but that doesn't come easily to me. Having my PC, who's the most monster-like of the PCs, be the one who *behaves* least monstrously, appeals to my sense of dramatic irony, and I may start playing into that deliberately.)

The other four are at (I think) Drake's place, figuring out what to do. Logan's Dark Patron wants Logan to blame the others for the attack. Laeli wants to upload and promote the video she has of Steffan wolfing out (from the first session). They agree it's a good idea—if it's accepted as real, that helps them avoid blame for attacking Steffan (and maybe killing him; they don't know that he's survived), and if it's dismissed as a fake, that helps advertise the AI that Drake's family wants to promote. The cops show up (and Blue hides in a closet), and Drake talks with them. He shows them Laeli's video, and manages to convince them that Steffan is really a werewolf, but the cops convince him not to upload it; instead, they'll talk to the sheriff.

I think it's around this time that Johnni says she figures Steffan's "Blue holds my leash" Condition is gone, so I erase that from my playbook.

Blue, hiding from the cops, alone in the closet, Gazes Into the Abyss, and (rolling really well) gains some clarity: If the city starts looking for monsters, Blue could be next on the list. Also, the other PCs are all monstrous in some way. Even Drake and Laeli, with nothing supernatural

about them, are clearly broken.

Drake: So, are there other monsters?

Blue: Yeah, all of you.

Logan: My monster is pretty helpful.

Drake: Wait—rewind.

Everyone starts to figure out every else's weird stuff: Logan accuses Blue of being some kind of ghost. Drake figures out that Logan's Patron healed Pete. Laeli wants the Patron to get an invite to Saturday's party. Laeli's interested in meeting the Patron, but there's some discussion of using Ernie as a guinea pig first.

(Ernie is part of Drake's gang, but every time Drake tries a move using Ernie, he rolls badly. We figure Ernie's just incompetent. He's the principal's son, so there might be a kind of Ralph Wiggum thing going on. Or maybe he's still in shock from how hard Logan roasted him in the first session.)

At school, Steffan, Pete, and Kenny are meeting with Principal Hudson. (Mike & Johnni play the parts of Pete & Kenny.) Partway through the meeting, the principal gets a call from the sheriff. It's clear to the players that this is about the werewolf thing, but it takes us a bit to get the principal to admit that. He thinks it's ridiculous, and is willing to back us up, since we're the basketball team—Go Rockfish!—but tells us to go to the gym and wait. If he makes an announcement about pulling the team out of the championship, that means he was unable to convince the cops to lay off.

Drake, Laeli, Logan, and Blue return to school, trying to figure out how to get Steffan alone. (Blue figures that if he's backed up by the team, he can kick their asses, but they can handle him if he's alone.) The school is beset by a mob of MAGA-types, upset that CJ was expelled, and calling for students to be allowed to carry guns to defend themselves.

Steffan, in the gym, starts hearing the triggering noise again. He tells Pete and Kenny that he needs to get out, to get some air, after nearly drowning. Pete comes along, but Kenny stays behind to listen for the announcement. Steffan and Pete head to the boathouse, to look for Steffan's phone. Blue sees them, and follows.

Steffan fails to find his phone. Blue comes in, alone. (Drake, Laeli, Logan, and Ernie are waiting in Drake's car.) Blue apologizes to Steffan, and tries to broker a peace, pointing out (elliptically, since Pete's also there) that they both have something to lose if the cops take the werewolf thing seriously. There's some back-and-forth, but eventually Steffan agrees. The others come in, leaving Ernie as a lookout. (Bad move!)

I think at some point Kenny also comes in, telling us that the announcement has been made. No basketball championship, and also the cops aren't backing down.

Steffan apologizes to Laeli for hitting her (that one time! by accident!) (it occurs to me later that "on accident" would have been more in-character), but Laeli wants something more: she wants Steffan to get down on his knees and bark like a dog, and she'll take video of it, to use to humiliate him if he doesn't behave. (Laeli, the least monster-like of the PCs, is the most monstrous in behavior.) This seems like a Shut Someone Down move, and NJ rolls boxcars! If Steffan doesn't give in, she'll assign him the Condition "Abuser." Steffan drops to his knees, looks Laeli in the eyes, and intones "Woof fucking woof," but she says that's not good enough. So he howls like a wolf, and she's satisfied.

(Looking back at this, with the rules in front of me, it seems more like a threat to use Pulling Strings than a use of Shut Someone Down. I don't recall whether Steffan lost a String on Laeli, which is an alternative outcome to Shut Someone Down. I do see that he did, at some point, lose or spend a String on her, but I'm not sure if this was it. We were paying more attention to the fiction than to the rules.)

Drake makes some kind of comment about how cold-blooded Laeli is, and I think this is a Shut Someone Down move, attempting to put a Condition on her, but I don't remember if it works.

So peace is brokered, more or less. It's in everyone's interests to make sure there's no investigation, so we agree to tell the authorities that we were doing this as part of a school project, developing a hoax to see if Eliza could tell fact from fiction. A brief moment of rallying together as a party; we'll see how long it lasts.

The cops show up (Ernie's useless as a lookout), and Blue jumps into the water to hide. It's the town's entire police department—all three of them! They believe our story, but man, the sheriff is pissed. He basically puts us on double secret probation.

We solemnly file out of the boathouse, except for Blue (still hiding), who hears the cops find Steffan's phone.

At session's end, I've filled my experience track, so I take an advance. I check the Unstable move, which lets me mark experience every time Steffan's in his Darkest Self. I figure I can speed-run my advancement with this.

Also, between the third and fourth sessions, I wrote an 84-line summary of the first session in rhyming trochaic tetrameter and posted it to the group's Discord, but this zine is gonna be long enough as it is.

Monsterhearts: Vermilion Cove, Session 4 Special Flashback Episode!

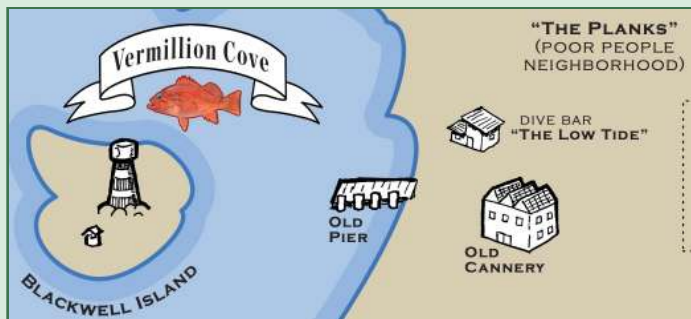
We had a regular session scheduled for 18 Jan 2026, but Mike and NJ were both sick, Mike too much so to participate even over Zoom. (I miss the message on Discord, wind up walking to Briar's, and having to walk back. Just a

few blocks. People are still working out their various tech problems when I log in.) We had established, back in our Session 0, that Talia (an NPC, formerly very popular and high-status) had thrown a big party early in the summer that had turned into a riot, and Drake was still living in Tenleytown then, so the natural solution was a flashback session, giving us a chance to establish exactly what happened, and maybe set up some of the stuff that came later. It went really well!

Before we start, I ask Briar about the opening scenes, and whether the cameras were diegetic. She says it's an interesting idea, but she hadn't been thinking along those lines. (But she might be now!)

At this point, Blue has just incorporated, and isn't really used to their body. Logan and Pete are still friends, and Logan hasn't sold his soul yet. Laeli is out of the hospital, where she'd been after a messy breakup with her previous boyfriend. (Byron, the rich kid whose family employs Steffan's parents, paid for Laeli's hospital stay, and is going to demand she submit to him as payment.) Talia's affair with the gym teacher last year has become known, but Talia doesn't know it was Logan who discovered and reported it. This party is probably her attempt to regain some of her old status.)

There's a brief discussion of what people are wearing: Steffan, a bad-boy look with a light leather jacket. Laeli, miniskirt, but also changes her look a few times before deciding, I didn't note the details. Logan, off-brand Doc Martens, dingy t-shirt, hoodie.



Blue has just manifested on Blackwell Island, the island in Vermillion Cove with a lighthouse and a well. We had established that CJ (an NPC) had hurt herself there over the summer, but no details. Blue is in a physical body, in the well, dangling by their fingertips off the inner lip of the opening. (Blue is a poltergeist, who usually is called into existence, kills whoever did the calling, and stops existing for a while before it happens again. This time, they have no idea who created them.) Blue manages to pull themselves up out of the well. Briar calls for a roll for this, and I can't help but wonder what failure would have meant, but Johnni rolls a partial success, so Blue is out, but feels like they've left something—memories, a sense of self—behind. They feel something drawing him back

to the well, but also something drawing them towards the city. They decide to go for the latter. They turn misty, and cross the water, but this takes a lot out of them, and they have to rest.

(Note that Blue, while a ghost, is built around the Hollow skin. Just like *Masks*, *Monsterhearts* cares much less about your character's abilities than about their motives, goals, personality, and general archetype.)

Logan catches a ride with the basketball crew—Pete, Troy, and Kenny—in Pete's car (a 20-year-old car the coach gave him). They meet Steffan at the dive bar, the Low Tide. The basketball team are local heroes, so they get free drinks. Logan's really excited about the prospect that he and Pete could go to college together. Kenny's really hyped for the party, and wants Troy and Steffan to kick in \$100 each to buy drugs from Scottie so the party will be a big success and generate lots of positive energy that they can carry into the new school year and win a lot of games and go to the nationals and did I mention that Kenny drinks a lot of energy drinks? (They do kick in the money. I have to remind myself that this would have been about \$30 in my highschool senior year.)

Laeli gets a ride with CJ, and they see Blue on the side of the road. Laeli's like "Hey, let's pick up that cute boy," and is thinking it might be useful to her if Byron thinks she's got a guy with her. Johnni plays Blue like they're an alien, unfamiliar with cars, not sure how human beings work, just answering "Yes" to every question. When asked their name they, seeing their blue hair and clothing in the mirror, say "Blue. I am Blue." When CJ asks if Blue thinks Laeli is cute, they say "All girls are cute," which turns CJ on.

Everyone gets to the party. Logan is avoid Talia. Byron is really creepy and possessive towards Laeli: "Laeli, you did exactly what I said! What a good girl! Sit right over here, and I'll come back for you," then wanders off with Agatha (his current girlfriend, whom he abuses). Briar does this really smarmy, oily voice for Byron, and we all hate him immediately. Laeli does not stay sitting where Byron put her.

The party gets going in the house's back yard. Pete wants Logan to do a keg stand, but Logan demurs, suggesting Blue (randomly picked out of the crowd) instead. Blue is happy to oblige, and flips their legs into the air. Steffan, grabbing Blue's ankles, notices that something seems weird about them, like their legs aren't really solid, or are held together weirdly. Blue drinks a lot of beer, like *unnaturally* a lot, without having to pause for breath. (This sets up Steffan's background, which establishes that he'd pegged Blue as unusual, and been following them for weeks.)

Troy tells Logan about Pete getting a full-ride b-ball scholarship to Stanford. Logan wanders off to the kitchen in search of Everclear, runs into Talia. Talia's been hoping that the cool, high-status kids she used to hang out with

would show up at the party, but they haven't. She muses that it's like someone's trying to sabotage her life. (Logan: "Bad things happen to somewhat OK people, I guess.") Logan drinks more, till Talia eventually takes the booze away from him.

Steffan tries to make Blue burp, figuring it'd be an epic *huge* burp after all that beer, but it doesn't work. They both slap each other on the back a few times, then Blue abruptly walks off into the crowd, and meets Scottie, who's brought a bag of drugs. He gives Blue some cocaine, which Blue snorts, but things are off – Blue's body is starting to feel too real. Laeli approaches Scottie and asks for something that could make a grown man pass out. She tells him having a good time isn't a priority. She flirts a bit, and he sells her like ten Xanax. Blue picks up that Laeli's trying to hurt someone, and asks Laeli about it. Laeli admits that it's Byron, and Blue asks if she's tried other tactics: "Have you threatened his family? Appeared in his dreams? Looked into his soul, found his deepest fear, and repeated it back to him?" Laeli asks if Blue can do these things, and Blue says only to someone who's hurt them.

Steffan hears a woman scream upstairs. Going up to check it out, it turns out to be Agatha shouting at Byron. He waits outside the door, hoping to hear something juicy to use against Byron, but hears nothing specific, just Agatha calling Byron an asshole. As he hears them step towards the door, he opens it, asking what's going on. Agatha brushes past; Byron tries to play it off with "Women, am I right?" and offers Steffan some cocaine. Steffan turns it down, not really wanting a bonding experience with this creep. Steffan instead heads downstairs, gets a couple of random pills from Scottie, and downs them with some beer. Scottie says they're Ecstasy. (Brair: "What's a werewolf like on Ecstasy?" Someone Else: "A golden retriever." Sadly, it'll take half an hour for the E to kick in, and the party doesn't last that much longer.)

The DJ starts playing techno music, and the dance floor fills up.

Logan finds Pete, and drunkenly confronts him about Stanford. "Great opportunity for Fancy-Pants McGee and his little bouncy-ball sport." Logan tries to dance, kicks CJ, bumps Pete, knocks Talia over. Then he finds Steffan (dancing on a table), and extracts a promise to keep an eye on Pete. He also lets slip that he's seen Steffan running around in the woods. Logan then barfs in the bathroom, and leaves the party.

Blue tries to Gaze Into the Abyss to figure out the source of their tethered feeling, and the roll fails, leaving them to think it's coming from their own body. Like maybe they're supposed to haunt... themselves?

Laeli and Blue come up with a plan: Blue will hide in Talia's parents' room, while Laeli drugs two cups of beer. (Both cups, in case Byron does something tricky like swap the cups.) Then she'll lure Byron upstairs, and hopefully drug him, and if things go badly, she can call on Blue for

help. She finds Byron on the dance floor, noticeably sober. She Gazes Into the Abyss to see if her plan is a good idea, and the roll fails, so obviously it's a great idea! Laeli tries to lure Byron upstairs, but he takes control of the situation, telling her that she's been naughty, and there's gonna be some punishment.

Once they're upstairs, Byron refuses the drugged beer – he says he doesn't drink. He demands that Laeli kneel before him (foreshadowing how Laeli will later treat Steffan). Laeli calls for Blue, who jumps out of the closet and body-slams Byron into the doorframe. Byron leaves, and Blue tries to tackle him, failing the roll this time, so Byron grabs them, slams them to the floor, put a hand on their neck, saying "Hi, new kid," monologues for a bit, then tells Laeli he won't forget this, and heads downstairs. Blue, not giving up, tries to tackle him again, and they tumble down the stairs.

(We haven't really had much interaction with Byron in the regular sessions. I'm guessing he'll become a focus for PC aggression as things progress, which could drive a wedge between Drake and the rest of the PCs.)

Steffan heads over with Troy, and they pry Blue and Byron apart. (I'm still angling for a way to beat up or threaten Byron, to explain Laeli's crush on Steffan.) While Steffan's holding Byron, he starts to hear a strange sound that starts to trigger his werewolf transformation. (Usually Briar plays the sound on her phone, but she's got a new phone, and hasn't transferred the file over yet. We just have to imagine it.) Byron notices him getting hairier, and gains a String on him. Steffan drags Byron out of the house.

General fighting breaks out on the dance floor. Blue shakes off Troy's grip, and asks if fighting is something people like. Troy says yeah, so Blue heads for it. They plunge into the melee, enjoying the release, and notices that there's a rhythmic source to the chaotic influence. They look at the DJ, Anna, who locks eyes with them, smiles a self-satisfied smile, then looks away. (One of the players, I didn't note who, says something about a Siren. I later found a Siren Skin online, but it didn't seem to match what was going on. Could be another version out there, or something Briar homebrewed, or Anna is something else.)

Laeli, upset that she wasted \$150 on drugs that Byron didn't take, figures she can divide up those two beers into a whole bunch of shot glasses, and give everyone just a little Xanax, to calm them down.

Sirens wail. The cop kind of siren, it's the cops showing up, like they have in three out of four sessions so far. They bust up the party. I figure we'll get the sheriff angrier every session till he strokes out.

Outside, Steffan has still got Byron by the lapels. Byron threatens his family. "You're a good guy, but you need to leave me alone." Steffan holds on for another second or two, then lets him go. But as Byron walks off, Steffan (trying to save face) yells after him "You need to leave that girl alone!" Laeli hears this, and decides Steffan

is her soulmate, even though Steffan hadn't set eyes on Laeli the entire party, and was talking about Agatha.

Logan has wandered off, despondent, and wound up in the town's graveyard. There's he's spoken to by a voice out the darkness, who offers him power, his dearest dreams, and eternal friendship. Logan, still drunk, agrees to the deal. When the voice guides him to a sharp metal spike atop the graveyard fence, Logan slams his hand down onto it. Once the pact is complete, Logan asks to be sober, and immediately his head clears, and he realizes what he's done.

We narrate closing scenes: Steffan's running through the woods when the Ecstasy kicks in. Laeli is only slightly hungover, thinking about her new social relationships. Blue has a friendship with CJ, which will become troubled later in the summer when they return to Blackwell Island, have a tussle, and CJ falls and hits her head.

Conclusion: This was tremendous fun! There's always something so *satisfying* about what Johnstone calls *rein-corporation* — bringing back in material that has been established earlier — and this *preincorporation*, setting up the stuff we know is going to happen because it already has, is even more fun because it feels so clever, like when you see a prophecy play out in an unexpected way.

Everyone's acting was really great! Erica, Johnni, and NJ all were amazing bringing out these earlier versions of their characters. I think I even managed to portray Steffan with more confidence than he has later on. I've already mentioned Briar's portrayal of Byron.

Decades ago, I had an idea for a two-part game (I think Lisa may have run this as a LARP) where the first part is "Return of the Time Commandos," a sequel to an adventure movie, and the second part is "The Time Commandos," the original movie, and players would make reference in the first part to stuff that "happened" in the second part, and then deliver on those setups in the second part, and this is basically how I'd have expected it to work out.

I noticed that both Logan and Byron called Steffan a good or decent guy, and I felt a bit like I was playing *Masks*, and people were trying to shift my Savior Label up. Also, this seems like support for my casting-against-type portrayal of Steffan.

There's also *definitely* something worth investigating in that well.

Scum and Villainy, Session 5

27 Dec 2025. We'd originally planned an in-person game, but heavy snows made us change over to Zoom. There was a bit of tech trouble — my video kept dropping out, and then my audio, but that stopped happening when I unplugged my cheap desktop microphone (which I think I recall dropping a few weeks ago) and went with the built-

in mic on my camera. Towards the end of the session Gaylord's connection kept dropping, and he had to reboot to fix it. We didn't have these problems back in the 1980s! Anyway, we had a two-mission session this time:

- ♦ **The GM** (Gaylord)
- ♦ **Harmony Qián**, a **Mechanic** (me)
- ♦ **Valsi**, a **Mystic** (Lisa)
- ♦ **Von Redwell**, **Muscle** (Gareth)
- ♦ **Bella Kor**, a **Scoundrel** (also Gareth)
- ♦ **Varilas**, aka **Vary**, a **xeno Speaker** (Josh)

First mission: We started off still in Holt system, at Jerrick's Junkyard. A human woman in a business suit shows up, carrying a large pink box and accompanied by a floating luggage bot. She wants us to deliver this birthday cake (cinnamon rhubarb!) to an ex-employee of hers, currently in Iota system, whom she believes to be a relative of Harmony's.

Josh: Does the cake explode?

Me: Only if it rolls the maximum number.

When Harmony comes in and finds out the cake's flavor, she knows immediately that it's for her brother, Kenn, whom we met in Session 3. The woman's name is Dorae, a common name, and she's cagey about her identity. The job seems easy, so we take it, even though Harmony's a bit worried about the fact that we're wanted in two systems, and going to be delivering to a member of the 51st Legion.

Valsi: Harmony, is it actually Kenn's birthday?

Harmony: I dunno. Which calendar?

Harmony arranges with Kenn to meet up at a bar on Amerath, in Iota system, but Kenn's bringing some people along "considering how things went last time." (I chose Amerath because it seemed like a nice place, a garden world, but also because it has Mendicants who can give you +1d6 on healing rolls. I figured we might need the help.) Vary learns that the 51st Legion is meeting with some scientists in Iota to research something related to Way artifacts. And Valsi learns that our client is Dorae White, CEO of the Starsmiths Guild. (Shouldn't Harmony, a former Guild acolyte, have recognized her? Nah, White keeps a low profile, not allowing herself to be photographed, and Dorae's a common name.)

The job turns out to be harder than it looks. We wind up with just 1d6 for our Engagement roll, and we roll a 2! That means we start out in a desperate situation. We pull up to the bar, and Kenn's there, with his wife, and there's a 51st Legion humvee and a bunch of armed Legionnaires. When his wife sees the cake box, she slaps Kenn. The Legionnaires pull their guns.

Valsi uses the Way to find out why the wife's upset: She used to be an assassin in the Ashen Knives (which explains why the Legionnaires were so tense), but gave that up to marry Kenn, and now he's cheating on her. Kenn's detector briefcase lights up and detects Valsi's use

of Way power. Von shouts at everyone to calm down, it's just a cake, and rolls well with Command, so it works. Harmony introduces herself to Kenn's wife, whose name is Oya, and invites her to join her at the bar and trade stories about how awful Kenn is. Vary invites herself along.

Josh: I'm trying to save their marriage.

Me: I'm trying to break up their marriage!

Oya tells us that the cinnamon rhubarb cake was a thing at their wedding, too, which implies that maybe Kenn has been cheating on her all along.

Von & Valsi have some cake and chat with Kenn. He wants Valsi to talk at a conference. He's not willing to take no for an answer, turning to a Legionnaire and saying "This one's coming with us." That's enough for Valsi, who uses their Way powers to cloud the Legionnaires' minds and make them forget ever meeting Valsi and Von.

Oya almost realizes that Vary is a Magpie, but Josh resists the Consequence. Oya gets up to talk to Kenn, "to wish him a happy birthday." Harmony encourages her, figuring this'll maybe mean Oya slapping him again. But then Oya recommends that we leave, giving us a five-minute warning. The PCs all go, but Von leaves a small spy camera behind, so we can see what happens. Oya kills Kenn's bodyguards, tells Kenn "See what you could have had!," says she wants a divorce, and leaves.

Mission's over! We don't get a lot of money, but we also don't generate a lot of Heat. Our Entanglement roll has the Concordant Knights asking us to let some local Mendicants, the Church of the Emerald Heart, examine the Aleph Key. We allow it. I'm wondering how they know we've got it, but then remember that someone hired us to deliver it originally. Maybe it was the Knights! Who knows? That's what I get for forgetting to take notes on that session.

This was a quick mission, so we take our Downtime actions, then have another. I have Harmony indulge her vice, but roll an over-indulgence, which clears her Stress track, but comes with a penalty. I choose to have her edit together a video of Oya killing Kenn's bodyguards and post it to social media, which gets us +2 Heat. I also Study the schematic for the Aleph Key-concealment device. Two more wedges.

Josh & Gareth also make vice-indulgence rolls, and while Josh hits his on the nose, Gareth rolls an over-indulgence for Von. Gareth decides to take the option of having Von drop out of the game for a bit. We take a short break while he makes up a new character: a Scoundrel named Bella Kor, an old friend of Harmony's. Von is joining the Mendicants for a while.

Second mission: One of Bella's bounty-hunter friends has a non-bounty job that he passes along: There's a governmental investigation into xenos, and some anonymous

person or group want this interfered with. They're willing to pay 10 Cred. We take the job. A servitor bot shows up to be an anonymous communications link.

The client, whoever it is, tells us that they've researched us, and think us well-suited to this job. There's a conference coming up, hosted at the Shipyards, which will present evidence which might get the government to lift the ban on doing research on xenos. The client doesn't want the ban lifted, so they want us to taint the data that a particular presenter will present, discrediting them.

Valsi manages to wrangle an invite to the conference (which would have been easier if they hadn't made Kenn forget having seen them on Amerath), which gives us a way in. Our Engagement roll is 5: Risky. There don't seem to be any xenos attending; if there are any other Magpies there, they're in disguise, like Vary. The fake ident info that we made for Valsi convinces security that they're cleared for the high-security presentations.

It turns out that there are two people making the presentation that we're interested in, and they each have a copy of the data, so we need to hack 'em both. One is Kenn, and the other is Rech, the Yaru scientist that Von & Vary encountered in Session 3. Valsi & Vary go after Rech, while Bella & Harmony go after Kenn.

I pitch an idea: Maybe Kenn's got his kids with him, since his marriage is breaking up, and that could give an excuse for Harmony getting access to his room? Gaylord, who's already got another idea, says nah, his kids aren't with him.

Bella & Harmony break into Kenn's enormous two-level suite. There's a noise from the upper level. Bella Skulks up to check it out – Kenn and Dorae are naked in bed together! And Kenn's laptop is on the nightstand next to them!

Valsi has scored a meeting with Rech, which he's recording. This is a distraction, so that Vary can break into Rech's room, for hacking purposes. Vary rolls a crit on her hacking roll. Gaylord declares that all of the Yaru clones use the same password! The data that we want to taint is there, but so is a list of Magpies that are being targeted by the government.

In Kenn's suite, Harmony tries to use her pocket drone to connect to Kenn's laptop without being noticed. I roll crappy, so the Consequence is that Dorae's high-end security (she runs the Starsmiths Guild, which runs the Iota Shipyards) targets Harmony's drone. I use Harmony's Hacker ability to resist the Consequence without having to mark Stress, so Harmony knew about the security system and routed around it, but that still leaves us with the failure: the drone can't connect directly to the laptop.

Rech offers Valsi a bribe, which they turn down. This inflames Rech's suspicions: "What kind of Way researcher

turns down a bribe!” He calls security.

Vary, trying to clean up her intrusion into the computer system, burns through her Stress track, and takes Trauma: Obsessed.

Bella successfully sneaks up underneath Kenn’s bed and gets to the laptop, allowing a direct connection which Harmony can use to Hack. Gaylord tells me that this will take two actions: one for the actual data tainting, and one to cover my tracks getting out of the system. I invoke my Fine Hacking Rig for +1 Effect, and ask if this means I can get both tasks done with one roll. Gaylord allows it. He also offers a Devil’s Bargain: Even if I succeed, Kenn will somehow know it was me. I take that, and succeed on the roll, but with a consequence, so Kenn somehow senses right at that moment that there’s something going on, and I’m somehow involved, so he gets up out of bed.

Bella, still under the bed, releases a bag of space cockroaches she had brought with her for just such a circumstance. This distraction serves as a justification for allowing a Skulk roll, and Gaylord offers another Devil’s Bargain: Bella has been bitten by the space cockroaches, which will later cause health issues. Gareth accepts, and rolls a critical success! We escape.

Security ejects Valsi, but doesn’t arrest them. Lisa fills Valsi’s Stress track trying to, I forget, keep from being arrested? Anyway, Valsi takes Trauma: Haunted, and also winds up with Harm that will keep them from being able to use Way abilities for a while, though Lisa gets most of the way through Valsi’s Recovery clock in Downtime.

I manage to avoid filling Harmony’s Stress track. We gain no additional Heat. We get 10 Cred for the job. Thanks to our Entanglement roll, the ship is now infested with space cockroaches. We get enough XP to advance the ship to Crew 1. (This is a terrible word choice; the game uses the term “Crew” to refer, not to the actual crew of the ship, but to the general quality of its equipment.)

Comments on E&A #7

Matt Stevens

RE the *Top Secret* plot diagram ⇒ OK, some of those shapes make sense: a car for The Getaway, a bullet for Attempted Execution, a briefcase for the Briefing, etc. But why does the box for Equipment Allotment and Sales look like a pair of underwear briefs?

YCT **me** RE rolling with advantage/disadvantage ⇒ In *Black Star*, there’s no need to keep track of which die is which. You just roll whatever number of d6, and the best/worst two are your Action Dice for that roll. It’s the bonus/penalty dice mechanic from *Over the Edge*, except the number of dice you count is always two, rather than being determined by a trait.

For percentile dice, well, *Mothership* has you roll both dice twice, which, yeah, inconvenient. *Call of Cthulhu* takes advantage of advanced 21st-century two-digit-tens-die technology to have you just roll an extra tens die, which is faster and easier.

Patrick Riley

YCT **me** RE where the roleplaying fits in “frame scenes and narrate your interactions” ⇒ It fits in the narration part. Scene-framing is that thing where the GM goes, like, “OK, it’s later in the evening, and you’ve all gathered at the camp site.” In some games, this gets farmed out to the players, like the GM asks “Bob, what’s your wizard Salazar up to?” and Bob says “Salazar’s at the magic market, haggling with a goblin merchant over the price of fairy toadstools,” and then maybe the GM plays the goblin merchant, or has something else happen to interrupt, or whatever.

Narration is, y’know, narration. It can be full-on in-character roleplaying, or just summarized description, depending on how interesting you think the material is. Usually it’ll swing back and forth from one end of that spectrum to the other. From a rules point of view, the amount of detail is usually less important than who gets to do it—the GM, the player whose PC is involved, some other player, maybe more than one person? There are some games where this is explicitly determined by the rules, like, a successful roll means you narrate the outcome, and a failed roll means the GM does, that kind of thing.

The typical mode for *Powered by the Apocalypse* games is to spend most of the time in narration, that mix of full-on roleplaying and summarized description, and every so often, someone will say “Hey, that sounds like a Such-and-Such move!” and the dice will hit the table (and maybe the floor, under the couch, etc). And sometimes they won’t. Session 1 of the *Vermilion Cove Monsterhearts* game had a lengthy in-character negotiation scene between two characters (Drake & Logan in the library) that didn’t touch the mechanics at all. The fight in the boathouse in Session 3, described above, was a complex stew of in-character roleplaying, out-of-character apologizing and reassurance, action description, and dice-rolling.

On the other hand, in the *Blades in the Dark* one-shot, described lastish, I did pretty much no in-character stuff, though some of the other players did. I think this was mostly because I was the one with the most practical system knowledge, so I was helping explain the mechanics. But also, it often takes me a while to get comfortable enough with a new PC to get into character, unless I’m in comedic mode and can think of a quick cartoon stereotype.

RE your more general question on the same theme ⇒ Think about the distinction between *task-based* and *goal-based* resolution systems. If you’re not familiar with this (and even if you are, some other reader might not be):

Task-based resolution is where you resolve each task

your PC attempts as it comes up. Like, you want to find the incriminating files in the crooked politician's office that you've broken into, so you want to open the safe, and you roll (probably a safe-cracking skill) to see if you get the safe open, but that doesn't guarantee that the files are in there – maybe they're actually in a secret compartment in the desk.

Goal-based resolution is where you tell the GM you want to find the incriminating files, and the GM asks what you're doing in a more general sense, and you say you're searching the office (without having to be specific about the details), and you roll (probably some general perception or investigation skill) to see if whatever you're doing gets you the files. Maybe the GM says they were in the desk, or maybe the GM asks you to come up with something cool, and you invent the secret compartment in the desk.

Do you find task-based resolution easier to fit your roleplaying into than goal-based? Think also about *fortune positioning*:

Fortune at the End: You say what you're trying to do (the method you're using, and possibly what your goal is). Dice get rolled (or cards drawn, or whatever), and that gives you the final result. (Example: D&D to-hit roll)

Fortune in the Middle: You say what you're trying to do (the method you're using, and probably what your goal is). Dice (or whatever) get rolled, and that gives you a preliminary result. Then you get to make some more decisions (possibly involving another dice roll, but possibly not), and that gives you the final result. (Example: *Fate Attack* roll, with Aspect invoked after roll)

Fortune at the Beginning: You say what your goal is, or possibly not even that. Dice (or whatever) get rolled. That influences what method you're using, and determines the result. (Example: *Call of Cthulhu* Sanity check)

YCT **me** RE quipu ⇒ Holy crap, that's brilliant! I can totally imagine an underground culture using knotted cords for mapping. (Perhaps made from the guts of killed surface-dwellers.) Imagine the players killing some goblins, finding nothing but knotted string in their pockets and some stale scraps of food, then later discovering that those strings are a useful map to some treasure, if they can figure out how to read them (and haven't just thrown them away)!

Roger Bell_West

RE Newton's Birthday ⇒ I thought Isaac Newton's birthday was celebrated on Jan 4th in the west, and on Dec 25th by the Eastern Orthodox. Or do I have it the wrong way around?

YCT **John Redden** RE *Traveller Map* ⇒ *Traveller* setting info was originally published as in-setting library data, wasn't it? This implies the existence of researchers travelling about to update the library, and surely someone has done

a *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*-inspired *Traveller* game at some point, right?

YCT **me** RE *Monsterhearts* ⇒ The group I'm playing with were strangers when we met in October! But it's possible I've been unusually lucky. I don't think this game would have gone as well with the group I played *Blades* with. It might have still been fun, but I'm pretty sure the tone would have been very different.

I'll also note, in case your friends are intimacy-averse, that three sessions in, there has not yet been any sex among the PCs in the *Monsterhearts* game.

John Redden

YCT **me** RE *deets* ⇒ Short for details.

Myles Corcoran

Thanks for [the link to Recluse](#); that looks like it could be broadly useful. Though since it's about answering questions and figuring stuff out, it should maybe have been called *Reclues*.

And also thanks for the pointer to *offworlders-workshop*. That, plus Google and Reddit, [got me to the Discord](#).

RE Jennell Jaquays's *Central Casting* books ⇒ Wow! I never owned any of these, but I remember people taking about the homophobic "dark side" traits, and the author (who's name I didn't take note of at the time) justifying them as properly Christian. I never connected this to Jennell Jaquays. I'm guessing she had a nasty upbringing to dig her way out from under, and I'm glad she made it.

Lisa Padol

YCT **Brian Rogers** RE *Big Eyes, Small Mouth* and skill cost ⇒ It's bad design to have just one important skill. What you want is to have a small-but-manageable number of important skills, and price them so that any PC can have the top rating in one, but no one PC can have high levels in all of them. Meanwhile, there's a whole list of unimportant skills that are basically chrome, so you don't want to charge a lot for those.

Probably the optimal way to handle this is to separate them mechanically. Your important skills get flagged as Key Abilities, and you get a *Fate*-like pyramid distribution, and the chrome skills are Hobbies or Interests, and you get some number of points for those. But that solution isn't a natural fit for the BESM build-everything-out-of-points design model.

YCT **Roger_BW** RE roleplaying in *Forged in the Dark* games ⇒ One thing I've noticed is that the [youts](#) in my *Monsterhearts* group all gave their PCs active goals right at the top of the opening scene: Laeli wanted to get with Steffan (inspired by the Background step of character-creation), Drake wanted to sit with his gang (inspired by the homeroom map), Blue wanted to cause trouble (inspired by, I dunno,

maybe Johnni's just mercurial that way). Logan wanted to find someone to feed to his Dark Patron, but also the fact that he was in the way of Drake's goal gave Erica something to immediately react to. This, plus the homeroom layout, provided instant fuel for roleplaying.

In our *Scum and Villainy* game, none of the PCs seem to have clear short-term goals to pursue at the start of any session; we're basically just sitting there until the GM hands us a job. The "free play" section of any session should be an opportunity for unrestrained roleplay, but there's not much in the game to inspire it if the players don't come up with it on their own. While there's an opportunity there to roleplay if an idea hits you, there's not much to spark an idea, and the structure of the rules emphasize the mission as the meat of the game. The faction rules could be used to set something up, but they don't have the raw drama-generating juice of the homeroom rules in *Monsterhearts*.

I notice, looking at the actual rulebook (*Scum and Villainy*, page 147), that PCs choosing their own missions is supposed to be an option. Maybe this would be more enticing if the setup were more, I dunno, something. Maybe this works better in *Blades*, where instead of being scattered across four star systems, the factions are all jammed into the same hothouse city, like moody teenagers in a classroom. The bit where you have to decide which faction helped you and which got screwed over has the feel of something that moves in this direction, but maybe it needs more. Like, maybe there should be a step where the players get to talk about relationships among the factions. Or a way of making the connections between the factions and the PCs emotionally juicier. Or maybe there needs to be a diagram for easy reference. (We've got the homeroom diagram taped up to the wall above the gaming table, though I don't think we've looked at it much since the first session.)

YCT **me** RE *Monsterhearts*, Volatile, and fighting ⇒ Interesting thing about this game: Most games, there's hit-the-other-guy and don't-get-hit-yourself. Maybe two (or more) separate skills, maybe two uses of the same skill. *Monsterhearts* just has hit-the-other-guy. There's no basic move for staying in the fight and blocking or parrying. You either run away, convince the other combatant to stop, take them down first, or take what they're dishing out. And their ability to Harm you is almost entirely based on their own stats and moves; your Volatile score doesn't enter into it, and there are very few defensive playbook moves. (At least, until you get to the Growing Up moves. Maturity in this game means learning how to keep from hurting other people.)

Which means that if you've got a good Volatile score, there's a mechanical incentive to strike first in a potentially violent situation.

This goes for the other attack-like moves, too. There isn't really any way to defend yourself from Turn Someone

On or Shut Someone Down. If you want to block or negate someone else's action, you have to do something that advances the fictional situation, not just rely on a high defensive score to keep you safe. This might be the most unusual feature of *Monsterhearts*.

YCT **me** RE *Monsterhearts* and "wander about" ⇒ If you're objecting to "modern," well, yeah, OK, Jim and Ginger were [talking in that thread](#) about Kickers in *Sorcerer*, and at this point, *Sorcerer* is 30 years old – eight years older than D&D was at the time *Sorcerer* was published.

And yeah, Jim and Ginger were talking about breaking routines (which came from a discussion of Keith Johnstone's *Impro*), and Ginger complained that some games (*Sorcerer* in particular) want her to assert a routine and then break it, while she finds that mere assertion isn't enough – she needs the routine to be *established in play* to feel real enough to be interesting when it's broken. And *Monsterhearts* does suggest that starting your first scene in the homeroom "establishes a sense of normalcy that you can later tilt and dismantle," so there's a bit of routine-establishment there.

But that's just the first scene, not the first session, and certainly not the first several sessions. And that comes after everyone's already picked their Skins (each of which comes with a set of issues), and probably done some relationship-establishing with their backstories. Note that, in [the earlier thread](#), Jim talks about an *Amber Diceless* game in which he "was running on Blackadder shtick for several weeks before [he] found [his character] under the buffoonery." That's not just one scene, that's a lengthy exploration process.

What I think Jim and Ginger were actually discussing is the difference between two different modes of character development: playing your character enough that you can figure out what they'd be interested in (DIP, or Develop In Play), versus committing up front to something for them to be interested in and working out their further development from that commitment (DAS, Develop At Start). That *Monsterhearts* advice is inviting the GM to present the players with a variety of stuff they can choose to commit to, right away, which is before they've had the chance to wear their characters for a while and figure them out, if they're the figuring-out sort of players. Now that I've read *Impro*, I can see where some of this is coming from: Johnstone is big on pushing people to act spontaneously, believing that this will cause figure-outers to develop commit-up-front skills. But recall Gabe and the anime cat-girl voice in our *Dream Askew* game (E&A #6) for an example of a mistake made by committing too quickly.

And that's on top of the stuff that comes packed in with your Skin, which is a DAS process you engage in during the game's booting-up process (what we might call a "DAS Boot").

But also: **premise**. I said to **Josh** a couple of zines back: "Modern games generally are very strongly about

their dramatic premise, while trad games tend to portray a setting.” This is the difference between [Masks](#), which is a superhero games about teenagers growing up, and [Villains & Vigilantes](#), which is about superheroes in general, and the GM can either assign a premise, or let the players figure one out.

Pum

YCT **Myles** RE em-dashes ⇒ Technically, it’s *em*-dashes (Unicode character U+2014) that are used to set off ideas or indicate strong pauses, while *en*-dashes (U+2013) are used in ranges, like in “[30–50 feral hogs](#).” I’ve set my document template up so that Typst automatically swaps in a narrow non-breaking space (U+202F) on each side of an em-dash. (I’m a little uncomfortable with how narrow the em-dash is in this font, but I’m becoming reconciled to it.)

Joshua Kronengold

RE Puerto Rico w/out slavery ⇒ Alea and Ravensburger released a new version in 2022, called [Puerto Rico 1897](#), set in a period when slavery had been banned and the island had been granted some autonomy by Spain, so the players now represent Puerto Rican farmers instead of Spanish colonial governors, and the “colonists” are now ordinary workers hired by a recruiter, rather than slaves brought in by a mayor.

RE shooting a big bad into space ⇒ My memory has it that Mike Rubin’s character killed Patricia (temporarily) by luring her into a building that we had rigged to explode – no space launch involved. Am I misremembering, or are you talking about something else?

YCT **Brian Rogers** RE *Smallville* ⇒ The fiddly bits in [Smallville](#) were called Distinctions, and the [Leverage RPG](#) had a much simpler Distinction mechanic: You can describe **a.** how your Distinction helps you, and add 1d8 to your pool; or **b.** how it hinders you, add 1d4 to your pool, and take a Plot Point. I think there might have been an option somewhere in *Smallville*, or maybe in the [Cortex Plus Hacker’s Guide](#), for swapping the simpler *Leverage* Distinction rules into *Smallville*/*Cortex Drama*.

YCT **Patrick Riley** RE “roleplaying system vs game” ⇒ Cam Banks describes *Cortex (Plus? Prime? Maybe both?)* as a [design language](#). This is a term from graphic and industrial design, and architecture, referring to the guidelines a designer develops within which further design decisions are made.

YCT **Mark Wilson** RE “*Brindlewood* is the same mechanical space as *World of Dungeons* [...] in that the moves aren’t what happens; they’re just a mechanical frame for whatever happens.” ⇒ This matches something I’d realized while thinking about [Offworlders](#) (a sci-fi game based off of

[World of Dungeons](#)), and was clarified by reading [this post of Vincent Baker’s](#) from a few years back.

Baker talks about how old RPGs focus on modeling objects (let’s call this *noun-based*), and present actions as comparisons between (or among) objects, while the *Apocalypse World* model is to focus on actions (*verb-based*), and treat objects as modifiers.

Without a spread of interesting moves to model the game actions, maybe *Offworlders* risks falling back towards the noun-based model. (Which is fine if you want a noun-based game, but it’s not what the *Powered by the Apocalypse* games are generally assumed to be for.)

Though on the other hand, *Offworlders* has that cool-medium incompleteness to it – you could define new moves on the fly as you figure out what sort of stuff your campaign is about (there’s *Develop In Play* again, operating this time on the mechanical level!), while [Brindlewood Bay](#) (which I haven’t actually seen yet) sounds like it’s more of an already-finished, hot-medium kind of game.

Jim Vassilakos

YCT **me** RE small homerooms ⇒ Yeah, we’ve established that the highschool in Vermilion Cove is pretty small. Just two homerooms (ours is the low-performing one), about 16 students each, a total senior class of 30 or so students, which works out about right for a town of around 3,000 people. (Though I think most real American towns that small group together into unified school districts.)

The rules do point out that a typical high school class has about twice this many students, but 15–16 students, minus 3–5 PCs, gives you 10–13 NPC students to keep track of and interact with, which is a pretty good number. Think of it as a TV show where the production company just doesn’t have the budget for a large cast, only in this case the budget is player and GM attention.

YCT **me** RE page dimensions ⇒ See, I think I’d find rotating the page to read it *more* irritating on my computer screen than when handling a slab of dead tree.

Some More Stuff

I was posting on Reddit the other day about how the word “Simulationism” is used in two different ways in discussions of RPG theory, and I thought about how the constant drift in the meanings of RPG theory terms has led me to use a lot of multi-word hyphenated phrases (you can see them scattered throughout my comments, above), and I realized: This is why German was the language of philosophy for so long.

Simulationnisme et Simulation

In the late 1990s, the posters on the Usenet newsgroup [rec.games.frp.advocacy](#) came up with something they called the Threefold Model (named by Mary Kuhner) to describe individual gamer preferences: **Drama** (prefers

a game that produces a good fictional narrative), **Game** (prefers a game that provides interesting challenges), and **Simulation** (prefers a game that maintains internal consistency and follows real-world logic, even when extrapolating from unrealistic premises; wants to explore what-would-really-happen-if).

A couple of years later, Ron Edwards developed his own version of this model, calling it “GNS Theory”: **Gamism** (prefers a game that provides interesting challenges), **Narrativism** (prefers a game that develops and examines fictional character by presenting decisions that challenge motives), and **Simulationism** (prefers a game that focuses attention on the fictional setting and recreates a genre or source).

You may have noticed that while Threefold’s *Game* and GNS *Gamism* are identical, there’s a mismatch in the other two categories. An RPG that sacrifices what-would-really-happen-if in favor of here’s-how-it-works-in-the-genre falls into the *Drama* branch of the Threefold Model, but the *Simulationism* branch of GNS Theory.

This leads to things like people looking at a largely Simulationist game that includes some genre-conformity rules or a meta-gaming currency or something like that, and announcing that it must be Narrativist, because they’re imposing the *definitions* from the Threefold Model onto the *terms* from GNS.

(My favorite model for how RPG gamer preferences interact is [Sandra Snan’s RISS](#), which stands for Gnusto, Nitfol, Blorb, and Frotz. But that’s less widely-known.)

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Notes on Copyfitting

In A&E #105 (May 1984), there was a note at the bottom of the table of contents asking that contributors keep their zines within the limits of 10” vertically (60 lines), 7” horizontally, and assumes that they’re using either 10-pitch or 12-pitch type (that’s a measure of characters to an inch, horizontally). Apparently [Dave Nalle](#) had gotten an IBM Selectric and gone a bit overboard. Looks like he was using [the Business Script ball](#).

That means that a typical A&E zine of the time could fit about 5,000 (12-pitch) or 4,200 (10-pitch) characters per page. Figure about 900 or 750 words, respectively, give or take about 15%. I think the maximum zine length was 14 pages, so that’s around 10,000–12,000 words.

I just checked one column of one page of this zine, in PDF form, and it came out around 2,300 characters, 520 words. So a full page, no illos, would be twice that: about 4,600 characters, or 1,000 words. Multiply that by our 16-page maximum, and it’s about 16,000 words, maybe half again as wordy as a maximal A&E zine of the 1980s.

The previous layout came out to 3,600 characters, or 800 words, per page. About the same as an A&E zine, which makes sense, since that’s the format I was emulating (though with smaller margins).

De Ludis Elficis Fictis

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

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January 2026

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Recently I have mostly been ...

... continuing with the early stages of 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. We are getting settled in and beginning the first term. I missed a couple of sessions due to ill health and transport problems.

Michael's Winterval game was also enjoyed between xmas and new year. It was quite a trippy Doctor Who game that took us from a Russian ice breaker ship in the frozen north of Canada to the 9th Circle of Hell and other fun places.

It being January, I went up to Stockport for Stabcon, and a good time was had, despite train problems. After having my brain a little overloaded by trying a new game to me, *Forestry*, on Friday evening I had to turn in early due to being rather fried after the not so great train journey. Saturday and Sunday brought *Scythe*, *Agricola*, *Magnate: The First City*, and *SETI*. A particularly fun part of playing *Magnate: The First City* was that I stumbled upon someone who had been an early playtester of the game and got to play with them; there was much comment of "oh, that bit's different!"

This will be a rushed and presumably brief submission, as I've had a stinky cold for the last 5 days which I'm still not fully over. By luck, the Wednesday evening game is not on this week anyway, due to our host being away on holiday.

Comments

As people have been mentioning it recently, I'll mention that I use the ReadEra app to read E&A and other PDFs on my Android tablet and find it very good.

#7 Clark Timmins: I particularly enjoyed your piece on the pre-history of Elaria, but no comment.

#7 Patrick Riley: RYCTM re US Debt Ceiling: 🤖

Good points on PC perception being controlled by the GM and using it to present different "realities" to different players.

#7 Roger BW: IIRC someone reported on a nice Mission Impossible style game they ran in A&E way back maybe 12 years ago. I think it might have been Brian Rogers.

RYCTM, nice initiative system idea to declare in ascending order and resolve in descending order to give faster characters an initiative advantage over slower (N)PCs, but, as you say, probably too involved for quick, smooth play. Ideas like this are always worth bearing in mind when rule musing. I wonder if a more adhoc implementation might work more smoothly: I would think that mostly (N)PCs don't want to change their choice of action based on what slower others do, but on the infrequent occasion when someone wishes to, allow them to informally change their previously declared action choice based on what a slower (N)PCs later declares. This might avoid the potential slowness of requiring players to declare in order, but allow quick characters to react to slower ones.

#7 Joshua Kronengold: sorry to hear about your employment woes, and best wishes on finding new employment.

Agree with your comment to Lisa that Fast Talk should be usable even if you're telling the truth – it just happens to be the method you've chosen to make your true point. Of course, like Fast Talk for untrue things, your target may only be convinced for a short while, and come to question their conviction later.

Re "make an XYZ roll", to me it can be read like GM: "Make a sanity roll", player: "Made it", meaning that they succeeded at it. Like someone might say "I *made* it just in time" to mean they successfully arrived. But yeah, could be worded more clearly.

#7 Jim Vassilakos: RYQTM the graphics/drawing tablet I got is a UGEE U1200¹ from Amazon. It is a 12 inch touch sensitive screen that connects to my Windows PC. It has a pressure sensitive stylus that does not require a battery. It cost just £98 and seems to work fine. I'm no artist, so I only tried it for jotting diagrams into the Roll20 tabletop, for which it worked fine. I could display and draw on the Roll20 tabletop on the tablet, or display the tabletop on my main screen and map drawing on the tablet to that, a bit like an old fashioned screenless drawing tablet. The only con for me was I would like a bigger screen and space for it.

Re FUCRCON: as one of my tee shirts of wisdom says, "Don't grow up, it's a trap!"

—===### Everyone else, RAEBNC ###===—

¹ <https://www.ugee.com/drawing-monitors/u1200>



THE DRAGON'S BEARD

FEBRUARY 2026

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GM TRICKS OF THE TRADE

For many years, I ran a D&D campaign for a multi-generation family group ranging from pre-teens to senior citizens. While each person in the group had his or her specific needs that I had to accommodate for in my game, shaping the way my game runs, looks, and feels. I do not think any of my solutions or tricks are unique or even universally applicable. However, one trick I employed dramatically changed the pace of our games and it can change yours, too.

During a scene, after the players all determined their initiative order, I would post the order for all the players to see, usually with initiative tents with each character's portrait hung in order over the top edge of my DM's screen. Despite the visual aid in turn order, the players still needed reminders on who was next. Sometimes the players got distracted from the game, or they were so engrossed in preparing for their next turn they did not know their turn was up, or they simply stepped away from the table for whatever reason during someone else's turn that they were not at the table when their turn came up.

I made a "Your Turn" marker out of a clothes pin to be absolutely clear whose turn it was. I would move the pin to the next character portrait, giving all the players a movement cue and a visual marker so the players all knew whose turn it was. While that made it clear whose turn it was, it did not necessarily speed up the game, especially if they were not paying attention.



My last gambit turned out to be the one that was most successful. I applied a carrot for players to be ready when their turn came up. For players who turn their turn immediately when I placed the turn marker on their character's portrait, I gave a +1 bonus to whatever roll they made that turn. While the bonus was small, it was one they did not want to forgoe by being unprepared. The technique sped our turns considerably, and increased everyone's awareness within the game.



A D&D 5th Edition 2024 campaign set in Greyhawk. Played over Fantasy Grounds Unity and Discord. Session reports by Kevin Santschi and Patrick Zoch.



Arael Vexwood (Kyra)
Wood Elf 1st level Sorcerer
Merchant



Bareas Wilhelm (Sarah)
Dwarf 1st level Rogue
Marine



BoB (Chris)
Dwarf 1st level Barbarian
Soldier



Cassian Dawnguard (Kevin)
Human 1st level Paladin
Soldier



Frocaryn Stonegather (Delia)
Halfling 1st level Cleric
Guide



Juan Quixote (Christie)
Halfling 1st level Fighter
Noble



Lux Cantata (Jackie)
Aasimar 1st level Bard
Artisan

Session 1: Welcome to Saltmarsh

- Scene 1 - The Adventure Begins

Our adventure begins in the ports of Gradsul, a major city of the Keoland kingdom. An unlikely crew of adventurers have banded together in temporary employment. Seeking passage southward to the smaller town of Saltmarsh, the unlikely group make their way through the docks, making note of the many crewmen and dock workers rushing about their many duties. One vessel, sitting some ways down the bustling port, seems to await additional company; as the



group approaches, a stern man, Captain Archer "Mad Eye", makes his way down the gangplank. Seeing such an odd assortment of companions, he calls out to them, offering passage in exchange for protection on the journey. He explains that his expected crew of marines suddenly refused to serve

aboard his vessel once they discovered who own the ship; none of the union marine would. Lux and Arael, sensing a great opportunity afoot, agree to the captain's conditions, and, for their varied intentions and purposes, the group sets forth upon this fine trading vessel: the *Samarang*.

The group coalesced around the goal of serving the good for the people of Keoland. Cassian, Juan, and BoB had served in the King's army in one capacity or another. Cassian had sworn to purge the kingdom of the influence of the Sea Pirates and felt traveling to Saltmarsh would bring him closer to his purpose. Juan's family maintained a manor outside of Saltmarsh, but the inheritance to Juan's older siblings leave Juan nothing of his family's estate unless he can gain fame and esteem to elevate his standing in the family or the nobility. Arael, originally from Silverstand, once resided in the Salt Mire outside Saltmarsh as a local merchant, so she was returning to a home of sorts.

- Scene 2 - A Treacherous Voyage

As they set out upon their journey, the first few days went by without much activity. BoB, seeking liberty from his boredom, struck up many a conversation, from the crew to the captain, and made himself quite acquainted with his new environs. Arael, in deciding to take her newfound duties a little more seriously, took to the watchpost, keeping an eye on the surroundings and waters alike. Lux, on the other hand, took it upon herself to keep the crew entertained; despite her best efforts at song, her new seabound existence on the rocking boat made for poor musical conditions, and the crew muttered quite a few disdainful words at her expense.

The second day passed by uneventfully, and the third arrived. Cassian, a former inquisitor and stern military man himself, questioned the captain about the ship's business in an attempt to draw out confessions of illegal activities. Captain Archer chuckled to himself and, even finding some respect for the authoritative paladin, told him of the ship and its owner: as a

regional trading vessel under the ownership of the Solmor family, the *Samarang* commits to many guild-based and commercial activities.

That night, during the normal watch rotations, BoB heard an eerie sound: a slithering, crawling sound emanating over the side of the ship. A fishman lurched over the edge, and directed his blade at the dwarf to no avail. BoB released a heavy blow against his attacker, and raised an alarm for the rest of the crew as more foes appeared over various sides of the ship. As the group slowly rose from their slumber, the captain and crew appeared on deck to aid in the fight. The band of mercenaries laid strike upon strike, physical and magical alike, upon their aquatic adversaries, and with one final thunderous smite from Cassian, the final foe was expelled, defeated, from the *Samarang*.



The next morning, the ship finally arrived at its destination in the ports of Saltmarsh. Anders Solmor, owner of the *Samarang*, came to the docks to receive the party, thanking them for their great service in defending his vessel and his crew.

- Scene 3 - Exploring the Town

Arael and Lux led the way as the group made plans to establish a base of operations within



Saltmarsh. At the recommendation from Anders himself, they headed towards the *Wicker Goat*, a fairly priced, comfortable inn gracing the northern edges of the town. As they walk through the town, the sights and sounds of a lively town fill their senses: an active school and temple of the goddess Lydia, a rustic winery, and pawn shop, the scent of fresh goods rising from an open bakery, a bank with alert guards patrolling the premises.

When they entered the *Wicker Goat*, BoB and Arael set about looking for a suitable table, and Cassian approached the bartender for some quick information. Asked about current events in Saltmarsh, the bartender mistakes Cassian for a new arrival from the Keolish military, having just been transferred to Saltmarsh to oversee a mining crew under a figure named Manistrad. Playing along, Cassian neither confirmed nor denied such details, instead asking for a warm meal and lodgings for himself and his companions. The bartender, despite a sense of camaraderie with Cassian, denied both him and Lux discounts.

Following their meal, the group once again took to the streets, exploring Saltmarsh in order to familiarize themselves with their surrounds. As they process around the town, the group sees

many other sections: a mercantile district, a temple to the god Procan, and a boarding house. As they continue into the eastern districts, they see a cemetery, an old guild house where dwarves were loading up carts, and a newer district brimming with tradesmen and merchants.

As they head back westward, approaching the city bridge, the party overhears some murmuring, some somber excitement. Arael, asking around some elven merchants on the bridge, learned that a body has washed up on shore beyond the eastern ports, near the crab trappers.

Upon returning to the *Wicker Goat*, the party is approached by a man, summoning them to speak to the town council at the behest of Anders Solmor. The party made their way through the town, curious as to the nature of this summons. Approaching a town hall, they entered to find a group of solemn figures, arguing in heated fashion as to a proper solution regarding the body that had washed up earlier that day. The group, comprised of Anders Solmor, Eda Oweland, Eliander Fireborn, Gellan Primewater, and Manistrad Copperlocks, could not come to an agreeable conclusion, and with tensions rising, Anders suggested that the party

be sent to investigate an old house a few miles out of town, where the problems seem to have arisen from. Rumors suggest that the house was home to an alchemist who could create gold from ordinary metals, the tales of which had drawn many a mischievous individual seeking fortune. The young lady who had washed up dead on the shore was one such individual, though the partner she had come with was nowhere to be found.

Lux and Arael, speaking for the party, convinced the council that they would be more than happy to help, and they whether the rumors were true or not, they could either help put them to rest, or put to rest the hazardous source. The party retired to the inn for the night with plans to investigate the house the next morning.

- Scene 4 - The Haunted House

The next morning, the party was followed by quite the curious crowd as they made their way out of town to the east. Lux indulged the parade of followers with music as they made their way towards the house. The crowd dwindled with every passing step. As the party finally approached the old house, sitting atop a hill overlooking the dark waters of the sea, they found themselves alone, with nothing to accompany them but the creaking of an old gate, and the whistling of the wind around them. Approaching the house with great caution, BoB slid through a crumbling opening in the stone wall surrounding the house, and Cassian and the others soon followed. Checking the windows for some clue as to what lay inside the house, and finding nothing of clear import, they approached the front door. Bareas checked the door, and, sensing nothing amiss, swung it open into a dimly lit, trashed interior.



The party slowly explored the ground floor, finding various items of interest scattered across a few rooms: a series of intriguing books regarding the magical properties of gemstones and herbs and flowers by the archmage Tensor and a book on the metaphysics of mathematics by the mage Nystul, a hidden compartment in a writing desk with a few dusty vials of healing potion. Entering the westernmost room of the ground floor, the party discovered a fairly empty living area with a door leading to a back patio. The BoB started towards the back door, a terrifying screeching sound, unlike any beast or monster they had ever encountered, greeted the party. Lux and Cassian, caught off guard, were thrown into throes of terror, while the rest of the crew quickly regained their composure. A booming voice pronounced "Welcomed to your deaths!" Upon investigation, Bareas discovered that the sound, now repeating itself, has been tied to some manner of triggering mechanism. The group step outside onto the back patio briefly to survey the back yard.

- End of Session -

From the Players:

"What was your favorite moment from your recent adventures?"

Lux: Thanks for asking! Definitely the parade! Ok, so it was more a hike to the house we were going to investigate, but I sang and the kids and people followed. Well, they followed for some of the way... till we got closer.

Juan: I enjoyed the walk through town. Alfonso prefers being out of doors too.

Frocaryn: I thoroughly enjoyed the walk through town and seeing everyone go about their business. I prefer to sit back and listen, so it brought me much content to hear the buzz of the town.

Cassian: Oho, there's the smell of adventure in the air... This house reeks of evil to be smote, and I will gladly do the smiting!

Arael: Getting to town was so exciting, and being able to walk around and see the sights was really fun! Not so sure about the huge confidence that's been placed in us, but I'm sure we will try our best, and everything will turn out right in the end!

"What was your least favorite moment?"

Lux: The worst parts... yeah, I have had lots more of those. The sea air did not agree with me, and my performances on the ship were some of my worst, but I did scare off a shark! And then the house started making sounds... really not my favorite.

Frocaryn: Worst part for me? The house and the sounds that came from it were by far my least favorite. While I enjoyed the comfort and steady rhythm of the town, those noises in the house were deeply unsettling, and the contrast makes me very uneasy.

Cassian: That screeching noise caught me a bit off guard. Must be going senile in my old age.



COMMENTS ON #7

Roger BW – RYTM, Re: Character Funnel. I totally understand the aversion to the concept. As a campaign gamer myself, a character funnel seems antithetical to character investment. In most role playing games I play, it takes a little of time to create a character, plus time to create a backstory. The death of a character does not invoke a sense of frustration over the time invested in creating a character. Instead, it invokes a sense of loss of potential of a character's life whose growth was cut short. The plus side to DCC's funnel is that character creation is done in seconds. Unfortunately, each character is so random, it is hard to see potential in any of them. And it is best not to get too attached to any of them. That is the hard part, creating characters destined for death. It seems senseless. But, there is something about the bond between survivors that create a more interesting background. However, some backgrounds create some contradictory or at least challenging starts to character classes later. Dungeon Crawl Classic is such a gonzo system that it is very enticing to want to play it as a campaign so that characters can experience those crazy swing of powers. Unfortunately, the lethality of the game is such that it is rare that characters survive more than a couple of levels. I think the game is best approached as a one shot to be enjoyed for the chaos inherent in the game. I enjoy the game in small doses; it is not one that I can play as continuously as I do my favorite game, D&D.

John Redden – Yes, I did get back pay from Furlough. Most was paid back in a within a week. The rest caught up in the next paycheck. Some employees are still seeing glitches associated with the automated processes in place during furlough.

Dylan Capel – Apologies for the heavy load of the zine. It may not be so much my background as much as it is all the illustrations. I try to simplify or flatten the graphics when I convert to pdf. I am sure I can shrink it further as I get better with the program. If it is any consolation, my pdf reader also occasionally has problems loading images – not only for my own images but also the images for the other zines.

Lisa Padol, Gabriel Roark, Joshua Kronengold, and Jim Vassilakos – Re:

Conflict of Gold and Experience. I agree in that I think the DM brought the pain upon himself. It was obviously a frustrating experience for the GM, too, so I wanted to understand the process better so I would not be the cause of frustration in the future. In fairness, it may have been a misapplication of the rules or a mistake in the moment of trying to manage a bunch of players doing a bunch of different things is haphazard order. Some of it was personality also, but none of those are really egregious faults. I concede all decisions to the GM, and I am less inclined to call a GM on it. When I think on my old days playing AD&D, I am sure I made similar mistakes, forgot rules, or simply ignored rules that I simply did not understand. But I've also played and enjoyed games that had significant rough spots, which I suspect the gold/experience rub is one of which OSR fans endure, even if it one that is self-inflicted. I decided to leave the game, but it gave me the opportunity to start up the Saltmarsh game with my old group.

Erica L Frank – I love your notion of gaining Experience through gold by investing! I wonder if any game rewards characters for investing money. I wonder what kind of game that would be? Mobster? Capitalist?

Patrick Riley – Scheduling. Yeah, I hate it too. My new Saltmarsh group has seven players, one on the other side of world, three with government schedules, one with night schedule, and two couples with young kids and kids schedules to work around. We settled on twice a month, but one player or another may missed from time to time. Only saving grace is that no one has drive time. Just log in online.

Michael Cule – *THE BOOK OF TEN THOUSAND STUPID QUESTIONS* - I think I've seen that book in my office.

Limli the Librarian – Love seeing a full adventure in the pages of E&A.

Pum – It is unfortunate to hear the *Orloj: The Prague Astronomical Clock* was a disappointment. It looks like a beautiful game on a interesting subject, but I've been mislead by fancy presentations before. The long teach/learn will probably be the deterrent. Igthene stories were great!

Avram Grumer – I appreciate the MonsterHearts session reports. I find the premise of the game fascinating, but also one that does not appear to be one I would enjoy. Your session reports do a good job illustrating how the game is played and how the scenes between the characters work. It is still not a game for me, but I still appreciate what the game does.

Brian Christopher Misiaszek – Congrats to Lauren!



LOCATION. LOCATION. LOCATION

I originally intended to title this segment: “Why did you come here? And why would you go there?” but these are two different questions for two different people in a game. I find location in a setting to be an important aspect of the campaign to establish character motivation in the adventure arc and maintain momentum for the characters throughout the game.

It is hard enough to get players to develop any sort of background for their characters in the first place. I have not quite given up on the endeavor. I simply find character backstories to be too useful a source to establish additional hooks and side quests for a campaign to ignore. I do not necessarily need anything elaborate, (sometimes the elaborate and detailed backstory creates more problems than opportunities), and I have resigned to accept the bare minimum and make do with what I get (which is often very little or less). However, the one question I do ask every players about their character is “Why did you come here?” I inform all the players ahead of time where the campaign will start and I provide them a players’ guide of sort to explain basic history, culture, environment of the starting location, including how the location fits into the concept for the campaign. While it is fine that a character can be from a far-away exotic land, it seems exceedingly out of place that they would be in a strange location so far from home without an explanation. Sure, their original occupation when not adventuring may have required extensive travels – smugglers, scholars, merchants, etc. A wookiee on Tantooine may be out of place until one considers his occupation and partner, who need to operate outside the reach of the law and need to travel to distant and dangerous places. A common ewok, unless in a similar circumstance, might have a harder time explaining their presence on Tantooine. As a GM, I consider how a NPC would look out of place and develop reasonable explanations for why the character is there because I KNOW the players would ask questions. If my NPC would look suspicious to the characters, so would a character look suspicious to an NPC unless the players, too, provide a reasonable explanation. I consider these reasons to be almost as important as why the group is together in the first place. Any player who grounds their character in the local area gets more information about the local region, history, persons of import, locales, etc. They could even be regulars at a local establishment (“Norm!”), or they could be loners. Even characters from a faraway land can find a home in the new place, even if reluctantly (“my parents moved here when I was a kid” type thing). As for outsiders and

foreigners, they will still be considered such but will need some purpose that connects them to where they are now. This purpose helps reduce place disassociation from the character and connects them in some way to the campaign. It also helps make any hooks for the game a little more relevant to the characters who are connected to the area in some way and should care about the elements of the hook (that are local anyway).

Which leads to the next question, “Why would you go there?” This question is for me as the GM when I think about the next location in a story arc. I ensure that my hooks for the next part of the story are reasonably accessible or have a compelling reason for the characters to go there. If I offer multiple hooks for the party, invariably any task that requires significant travel, and thus significant time and resources, are almost always immediately eliminated from consideration, especially in early levels when the character has few if any resources. Instead, they have almost always preferred the closest task first. If I REALLY need them to travel to a far distant location, I plan these events later in their careers when they have many more resources and influence to cover the travel cost, or I have a patron cover the costs for them, or I simple abduct them and deposit in the new location to continue the adventure arc. Once, I had the party trigger a teleport trap that took them to the new local. As a player, a DM once teleported our entire tower in a multiplane rift that placed us in a new parallel universe. I was once in a campaign with a group where the GM was using only published adventures set in Greyhawk. It was fine, but the published adventures were set all over Greyhawk and the GM expected us to make significant travels to get to the next adventure, often to the other side of the know world. At lower levels and with limited resources, this seemed unrealistic. The world was a dangerous place and there must have been plenty of hazards locally, or even within neighboring kingdoms where we could offer our services, grow our reputations, and enrich our coffers. At best, we might start the journey to a distant land but would always be on the lookout for the next job in every village and town we traveled through. The job that pays here now is far better than the job far away that would pay sometime in the future when we finally got there. The setting of adventures is so many different places in a setting is not intended as a plan to give players a tour of the world. It was to provide adventures in different regions of a diverse environment to build a campaign of your own. Besides, compelling a party to always be on the move disconnects them from any place they may be in, removing motive for investment and planting the seeds for murder hobo attitudes, leaving the locals to ask “Why did you come here?”

Ronin Engineer for Ever & Anon #8

by Jim Eckman,
Mountain View, CA
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IRL

Holidays and club activities, art and model railroading continued along with feeling burned out.
Finishes with Chinese/Lunar New Year.

IgTheme

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

Stealing and keeping heavily cursed swords in my gigantic Bushido shop game, several min-maxers were irate that they couldn't force their leadership on the group like they usually did because of their low social rank. So they went rebel and joined the Taira during the last major battle, and their characters were pretty gross, several ordinary player characters who cooperated could take them down. The Taira were driven into the sea and at the next gaming session the final battle was finished and shop game ended there.

Releases

Managed to sort thru all of **Wanderer** material in my possession, I had multiple paper versions along with digital fragments. I think it's as good as it gets without getting into the massive reformatting and intensive spell check that will be required. My friend Ben had a casual approach to spelling thanks to his dyslexia and the primary file is a really old odt. Jim Vassilakos will be putting up the files somewhere, where it goes from there depends on interest.

Reactions to Issue #7

Elaria History – Clark B. Timmins Wow, I love the additional history for the Old City, and that its not LOTR or some other Western based society.

Twisting the Rope #7 – Myles Corcoran I liked the conclusion of your solo Traveller game. Also agree at 185 400 pages, its tough to take a deep look at everything.

Reddened Stars #5 – John Redden RYCT RAH, AN ???/ ITL ? Robert Heinlein, Andre Norton, In the Labyrinth rpg.

An Unlooked For Zine #6 – Lisa Padol Re Worlds of Wonder The most important part of a location description is where and what. All the other info is just wasted until the players pay a visit. Yes, I want to look at more fantastical C-dramas (or the web novels or graphic novels they draw on). I might have seen some already, I subscribe to Viky. *Castles in the Air* would be a good argument for young starting characters.

Firedrake's Hoard #4 – Roger Bell West Re: Baden-Powell Your description is perfect, there would also be Ranger Stations for the park areas to watch for trespassers and render assistance.

The Phoenix Nest #7 – Michael Cule Re: Baden-Powell Yes it is. Anthem 'Be Prepared' sung by Tom Lehrer.

Traveller PBEM: Plankwell, Ch 52 – Vassilakos, Collinson, and Rader Re: Worlds – I know that feeling, you've got a ton of interesting adventures and then they go unused. Re: Heinlein There was a parallel worlds story that had the prime civilization taking IP from nearby worldlines. Alternate Heinlein!

Everyone else: RAEBNC

Next issue

Thoughts on World Creation and empires.

Next page Alien Ruins by Jim Eckman



The

Wahflestomper

Manifesto

The year 2026 shall be my year as a veryactive (vs. hyperactive or overactive) letterhack. If I succeed with this experiment, I shall be a superactive letterhack. Rather than publish apazines, a genzine, or a perzine, I shall write letters of comment to other fanzines, zines, magazines, comic books, authors, media producers, and people with whom I want to correspond—or to whom I have something to say.

“Dear sir or madam, It has recently come to my attention that...”

Each letter I send might be considered an issue of *Wahflestomper*. Letters I write but do not send definitely shall not be considered issues of *Wahflestomper*. Each issue of *Wahflestomper* shall be titled and numbered sequentially when sent. Letters that are not titled or numbered as an issue of *Wahflestomper* shall remain mere letters. *Wahflestomper* as a whole shall be considered a distributed correspondenzine.

A correspondenzine is not the same thing as a letterzine. A letterzine comprises a number of letters written by multiple people, each sent to a single recipient for collection and distribution (the collected whole consisting of parts sent inward). In contrast, a correspondenzine comprises a number of letters written by a single person, each sent to a single recipient for potential publication and distribution (the distributed whole consisting of parts sent outward). Some issues of *Wahflestomper* might take the form of open letters if sent to multiple recipients rather than a single recipient. I shall reserve that option for Truly Important Matters. Such matters shall be called Tim. Hello, Tim.

The *Wahflestomper* Manifesto shall serve as an example of Tim.

Hello, Tim.

A correspondenzine is also not necessarily a perzine, because there might be no resulting, collected whole—only the individual issues sent outward, regardless of whether they are eventually published elsewhere. That is the difference between a distributed correspondenzine and a collected correspondenzine. *Wahflestomper*, again, shall be a distributed correspondenzine.

If I at some point decide to publish *Wahflestomper* as a collected correspondenzine, the result shall no longer be considered *Wahflestomper*. The collected correspondenzine shall instead be titled *The Wart*, after WART, or We Also Rote To. WART is the counterpart to WAHF, or We Also Heard From. *The Wart*, as a collected correspondenzine, could be considered a genzine or a perzine depending on the contributors in any given issue. Each issue of *The Wart*, if published, shall collect issues of *Wahflestomper*.

If you, as a faned or other recipient, choose to publish an issue of *Wahflestomper* in your fanzine’s letter column or another forum—perhaps as a fanzine item or column—you shall have my infinite gratitude and appreciation. You are helping to bring *Wahflestomper* to the attention and awareness of others. You are

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To receive an issue of *Wahflestomper*, send the Usual.

helping *Wahflestomper* take its public form. If you choose to not publish an issue of *Wahflestomper* in your lettercol or as an item or column, that is, of course, your prerogative as a faned or other recipient; you are exercising your Roscoe-given rights. You are maintaining *Wahflestomper*'s private form. You are also, however, keeping *Wahflestomper* a secret. You are keeping the Good Stuff to yourself. I enthusiastically encourage you to publish *Wahflestomper* in your lettercol or as an item or column. In fact, I recommend it. But there shall be no grievances or grudges carried—at least by me—if you choose to not do so. This, I pledge.

As a faned, if you choose to not publish an issue of *Wahflestomper* in your fanzine's lettercol or as an item or column, you might choose to recognize its receipt by including or mentioning me as its sender—its publisher—in a We Also Heard From list. I suppose that's okeh. Again, you are exercising your Roscoe-given rights. If you choose to pursue that option, I am Blasted Heath Row.

Wahflestomper shall be published by Blasted Heath Row.

Other active—or currently inactive—letterhacks might inquire: Will *Wahflestomper* feature or include a lettercol of its own? Will one be able to send letters of comment to *Wahflestomper*? It shall not, but you may. Permission has been granted. Letters of comment sent to *Wahflestomper* shall be quoted in part or full in a subsequent issue of *Wahflestomper*. My response shall take form in that issue of *Wahflestomper*. Letterhacks shall only become aware of such responses if that issue of *Wahflestomper* is published in another fanzine's lettercol or as an item or column. (I reserve the right to amend this policy; it might be a good idea for me to send such issues of *Wahflestomper* to correspondents by way of carbon copy. Any policy amendments shall be announced in an issue of *Wahflestomper*. Such an issue shall be considered an open letter if it's Tim. Hello, Tim.)

The *Wahflestomper* Manifesto shall be distributed initially to publishers and distributors of fanzines and amateur press associations that have been included in recent issues of *The Zine Dump*, *The Incomplete Register*, and *Blue Moon Special*. (Rest in peace, Guy H. Lillian III.) It shall also be distributed to current recipients of *The Stf Amateur* and known science fiction clubs around the world. All faneds, Official Collators, Official Editors, other apae distributors, and club officials shall be allowed and encouraged to reprint or otherwise circulate and distribute the Manifesto to their readers, participants, and members. Permission has been granted.

The Stf Amateur #27, the December 2025 edition, shall be the ultimate issue of that bundlezine. Publication of *Wahflestomper* has already commenced. Publication of *Wahflestomper* shall continue for one year. That year shall be the year 2026.

This, I pledge.

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Wahflestomper

#9 | Jan. 21, 2026

Since moving to Portugal in late October 2025, my roleplaying game involvement has been primarily solo play—and online interactions. The biggest news in this neck of the woods is that the first three Fighting Fantasy gamebooks were translated into European Portuguese, published in mid-2025 by Porto Editora, whose offices we drive past on the way to Porto. (<https://www.portoeditora.pt/noticias/fighting-fantasy-esta-de-regresso-e-tu-es-o-heroi/262466>) I procured the three volumes—*O Feiticeiro da Montanha de Fogo*, *A Masmorra Infernal*, and *A Cidade dos Ladrões*—for myself, purchasing the third book at Lipóvoa Livraria Papelaria in Póvoa de Lanhoso near our home, and several copies of the first book to give to friends as presents. As I turn my attention to learning the language—right now I’m primarily using the app Practice Portuguese and reading various newspapers and magazines, not yet working with a tutor like my wife is—I’ll also use the gamebooks as a learning tool.

I didn’t go to Lisbon for Rolisboa (<https://rolisboa.pt>) at the end of October because we’d just arrived, but I’ve been impressed by the number of gaming cons in recent months. From a growing list of Portuguese cons and other events first published in *The Explosion Containment Umbrella* #36 for eAPA, here are a few of the game-related gatherings:

Algarve Con, Faro, Oct. 18-19, 2025; <https://www.facebook.com/algarvecon> and https://www.instagram.com/algarve_con

Bardos do Mondego, Coimbra, multiple roleplaying game events, <https://linktr.ee/bardosdomondego> and https://www.instagram.com/bardos_do_mondego

InvictaCon, Porto, Dec. 6-8, 2025; <https://www.boardgamersporto.com/invicta-2025> and <https://www.facebook.com/InvictaPortoCon>

Leiriacon, Vieira de Leiria, March 26-29, 2026; <https://leiriacon.pt>

Lisboa Games Week, Nov. 20-23, 2025; <https://lisboagamesweek.pt>

Olisippo Obscura: Vampire LARP Lisboa, multiple event dates, <https://vampirelarplisboa.wixsite.com/olisippoobscura/about>, <https://www.facebook.com/olisippoobscura>, and <https://www.instagram.com/olisippoobscura>

Rolisboa, Oct. 31 to Nov. 2, 2025; <https://rolisboa.pt>

Sword and Shield LARP Portugal Lisbon, multiple event dates, <https://www.facebook.com/Swordandshieldlarp> and <https://www.instagram.com/swordandshieldlarp>

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VianaCon, Viana do Castelo, Nov. 7-9, 2025; <https://vianacon.pt> and <https://www.facebook.com/VianaConOficial>

I might be missing one or two others that I know about, but I'm sure the list will grow. Boardgame and tabletop roleplaying game culture is strong here. As you can see, based on my current assessment, the last three months of the year are the most active in terms of public gaming cons.

While my son was visiting from Tokyo during his winter college break, we checked out the collectible trading card store that ~~is~~ was located in Póvoa de Lanhoso. As a shared Christmas present, we obtained a couple of Magic: The Gathering—Marvel's Spider-Man pre-release packs to spend time together at the table. (<https://magic.wizards.com/en/products/marvel/spider-man>) Jonah might have been more interested in the recent Avatar: The Last Airbender cards, but Spider-Man is more up my alley—and the cards would remain in Portugal when he returned to Japan. We enjoyed playing during his visit, but the pre-release packs don't come with basic lands and our belongings hadn't yet arrived from Los Angeles, so we couldn't build decks of our own. Then we learned that the local shop, Mystic Mirage, <https://www.facebook.com/MysticMirage.PopStore> and <https://linktr.ee/mystic.mirage> moved to Guimarães in between the holidays. That's only 30 minutes away vs. 15 minutes—and is likely a larger market for such a shop—but I'd been looking forward to a local store. The proprietor had even offered his tables for *Dungeons & Dragons*.



While the cards are beautifully designed and Magic clearly Magic, I did experience a bit of cognitive dissonance while playing. For me, Magic is primarily a high fantasy experience; it was a little jarring to incorporate superhero themes in the gameplay. I'm not sure that hardcore Magic players will want to play non-core card sets, the Spider-Man set will lead Magic players to the reading of comic books... or it will lead comic book readers to play Magic. Regardless, it's a fun set. And it was a good way to socialize with my son!

During Jonah's visit, we also played a card game called *Oh Captain, My Captain!* (<https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Ultimate-RPG-Series-Presents-Oh-Captain-My-Captain!/James-D-Amato/Ultimate-Role-Playing-Game-Series/9781507222829>) It's a card-based storytelling game that three or more people can play, each answering a storytelling prompt or question until there's some kind of crisis and resolution. You take on the role of a crewmember on a ship led by your captain. It's a very fun game—definitely a roleplaying game—and if you like nautical themes... or pirates... its replay value will be high. I think it'll be fun even with just two players.

Online, in addition to the RPG Portugal Discord server (<https://discord.com/channels/545549902248149013/593729046249209859>), which I don't visit often enough (heck, I also don't visit the Ever & Anon server often enough!), I've also found the people involved in the Comunidade Geek Douro server (<https://discord.com/channels/1438480480927219775/1447938101891567626>) to be very friendly and welcoming. Most of those participants seem to be in Viseu, which is a little more than two hours away, and it's good to know there are RPG enthusiasts outside the big cities of Porto and Lisbon. As we settle into our new home, and over time, I'll explore all the pockets of activity!

In mid-December, my solo play returned to the 1978 printing of the John Eric Holmes-edited *Dungeons & Dragons* and its Sample Dungeon. I most recently did so almost a year ago exactly! (*Emulators & Engines* #20) This time, not distracted by *Pocket Hex*, perhaps, the experience was a lot more fun—and bodes well for continued play. I played several sessions using a party of characters either included in or inspired by the Holmes edition as a sample character. I'll definitely return to the sample dungeon.

But once our belongings arrived from Los Angeles (by way of the Panama Canal and Rotterdam, the Netherlands, then overland through Spain) in mid-January, my unpacking of the library and other boxed items to work into our new home began to uncover portions of my roleplaying game collection. The shipment arrived a week ago, after which we also picked up our new car, so I've yet to assess or unpack every box. Almost everything we own has been in storage since April 2025, finally in transit to Europe in mid-November. Any gaming I've done since last spring has been utilizing PDFs on a tablet or the few items I picked up while living in Madison, Wis. this summer. With our belongings in boxes and inaccessible for nine months, it's wonderful to be able to explore and use the library and my various collections again. I am especially excited about the comic books and roleplaying game materials.

The first game-related items to be unpacked included several Basic Fantasy volumes. (<https://www.basicfantasy.org>) So my solo play has recently turned to Basic Fantasy, which isn't that dissimilar from Holmes D&D. Since mid-month, I've been concocting an adventure dubbed the Dungeon of the Melancholy Knife, using Viridian Dice's (<https://viridiandice.com>) Dungeon: Layout Generator Die and similar dice, as well as Axebane's Deck of Many Dungeons. (<https://www.thegamecrafter.com/games/axebane-s-deck-of-many-dungeons>) It's a little loose and easy, but it's fun—and the result might end up as something I can revise for a one-shot to be used by others elsewhere.

That brings us to *Ever & Anon* #7, weighing in at a whopping 211 pages! I can't promise to read or respond to everything in the issue before this month's deadline, even with the favorable difference in time zones, but I'll do my best to participate in some of the conversation. In fact, because it's pretty chilly in the basement this evening and I've yet to buy a space heater, I might merely resort to scanning for egoboo this month in case there's any personal remarks I should respond to.

In *Cowman Baloney Face: The Neverending Saga* #3, Matt Stevens expressed appreciation for my Lake Geneva, Wis., trip. It's definitely a city that anyone and everyone who's interested in roleplaying games should visit at some point. Hopefully my experience will offer some inspiration and assistance if you do so yourselves in the future! I found TLB Games' *Adventurer's Map of Lake Geneva* invaluable. (<https://www.tlbgames.com/products/adventurers-map-of-lake-geneva>)

Lisa Padol's *An Unlooked for Zine* #6 offered hopes for a smooth relocation to Portugal. It's gone pretty well, all things considered. (It's kind of a big move!) This was the first December and January we've ever been in the country, as well as our first Christmas and New Year's. Since arriving in late October, we've hosted friends from France and Spain, and our son from Japan. Then it was the holidays, and it's really just now that we're starting to experience what life is like here day to day. (Shopping for and buying a car also took some attention and energy.) It's probably fair to say we're not yet used to living here and that we're not yet used to no longer working professionally. But it's fun and interesting. Now that our belongings have arrived, we can make the house more of a home.

Thank you, Jim Vassilakos, for correcting my *Random Jottings* URL in *Traveller Play-By-Email—Plankwell Campaign*, Ch 52: *Captain's Mast*. You're correct: <https://efanzines.com/RandomJottings/RandomJottings>

[22-Compleat.pdf](#) is a much better link. Also in that issue, Timothy Collinson shared enthusiasm for photographing bookshelves. Here's another, more recent such photo, taken in early January at the Palácio Nacional da Ajuda in Lisbon. Who knows, perhaps royalty played an early form of *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen*! There have to have been parlor games with a roleplaying or storytelling component.

In *Quasipseudoludognostication* #7, Patrick Riley addressed this edition's Ignorable Theme. This probably falls more squarely in the dumbest or silliest arenas of player behavior, but when I was actively involved in public play at Aero Hobbies in Santa Monica, Calif., (<https://www.smdp.com/development-displaces-80-year-old-hobby-shop>) there was a younger player—we're talking middle school, most likely—who enjoyed his characters doing two things: climbing trees and setting things on fire. That was occasionally irritating and distracting, but sometimes, when the situation provided especially fortuitous opportunities, it could result in great fun and amusement. Unfortunately, it was usually more irritating than delightful.

Roger BW's *Firedrake's Hoard* #5 suggested that the *Mission: Impossible* television program might make for a good roleplaying game. I totally agree! One could consider using *Top Secret*, *James Bond 007*, *d20 Modern*—perhaps even the more recent *Everyday Heroes*—to do so. Now that I'm thinking about it, one could use those rule sets or *Twilight: 2000* to play any number of men's adventure book series-inspired games: Mack Bolan, Matt Helms, Remo Williams, and so on. That idea might have long legs!

And in *Twisting the Rope* #7, Myles Corcoran mentioned recent healthcare appointments. I'm sorry to hear about your gastric issues. May you heal fully and quickly! Your remarks on game conventions reminded me of one of very few regrets I have in life. When I was a preteen and teenager—and Gen Con was held at the Milwaukee Exposition & Convention Center & Arena—I did not think Gen Con was for me. I loved perusing the scheduled games in the promotional materials published in *Dragon* but felt intimidated. I was worried that I'd play the game wrong, that I wouldn't do well "competitively," or that I'd otherwise not fit in. Looking back, I totally should have gone. I would have loved Gen Con in the late 1980s and early 1990s... perhaps more than I would now!

My hands are cold, so upstairs I must go.

Putting it on a tight beam,
Blasted Heath Row

CC: Alan White



Accidental Recall #7

For Ever & Anon 8 © 2025 Joshua Kronengold eaddr: mneme@labcats.org

Dreamwidth: <https://mneme.dreamwidth.org> Gaming blog: <https://labcats.dreamwidth.org/> (with Lisa Padol; defunct-ish) Tumblr: mneme / Mastodon: @mneme@dice.camp Bluesky: mnemex.bsky.social

Well, my joblessness continues, as resumes flow out and mostly rejection letters flow in. Still, I'm using the time to try to fix my sleep schedule a bit (the last few years have tended to make it even less regular than usual) and try new things where time allows.

We did several holiday things towards the end of the new year—and for one party, I made some glogg (mulled wine) which went over well enough that I brought it to the other gathering as well. It ended up overcooking a bit at the New Years party, so what was left is at about double strength—it now fits in a single wine bottle (I started with 4 liters which expanded to 5 once adulterated even though I didn't add that much liquid); half fill a glass and fill the rest with water, and then drink it down and you get a nice, sweet and spiced drink.

I also started a webnovel (Pet Simulator, which I enjoyed but can't recommend both because it's on a website with an annoying monetization scheme but also because it doesn't have many characters beyond the protagonist, his (eventually) 3 magical pets, and are more complicated character who acts as a patron of sorts, but also because after 350 chapters or so it ends extremely abruptly, with the author taking a single chapter to wrap it up and reveal all the secrets they'd been trickling out earlier; presumably, they found some reason they couldn't continue and decided to finish it; at the beginning of the story they mention that it's a rework of an earlier work but much improved so I should have been warned I guess?

Regardless, this plus reading some other webnovels on the site (see: terrible monetization scheme; one of the ways to get access to free chapters quickly was to read other novels) gave me a dire picture of modern isakai webnovels—we've all (or many of us, anyway) seen anime in the pattern—a person from our world (probably in modern China or Japan or Korea) is yonked into another world, and expected to save the world/realizes they're the villainess in a book or game they've read/has no particular destiny whatsoever but they have the ability to grow their abilities in a way that resembles a computer video game. Oh, no! But fortunately, they have two abilities that people of this world don't possess: First, they were a tremendous nerd in our world so they know exactly how this world works and maybe even knows the exact plot of the story they're in and can anticipate events. And second, they have some kind of "cheat" skill that nobody else has despite otherwise sharing the same power set and growth curve, which gives them an incredible advantage once they can figure out how it works.

Ok, no, they're not all like that, but those elements show up incessantly, and used judiciously, they can be quite effective. In *Solo Leveling*, the main character, once isakaied into his own body (by, SPOILERS, dying and coming back to life or close enough), becomes the only person in his world that can interact with it fully like a video game, leveling up, accessing an in-game shop, collecting unique to him items like keys to locked dungeons, and having an intangible inventory he can pull items out of at need. In *I May be a Guild Receptionist but I'll Solo any Boss to Clock out on Time*, our heroine has somehow gained access to the only Godlike skill available to humans in her age of the world, which is why the tactic of "solo monsters so adventurers will stop backing up the queues and I can

clock out on time" is even available to her. In *Lord of Mysteries*, which Lisa and I have mentioned here before, our protagonist has not only access to the normal Sequences and progression available to everyone else; he also realizes early on that he can access a tertiary world that only he has power over, which at first allows him to gain contact with (and information from) people he would otherwise not have contact with, but which he eventually realizes can also grant him some advantages in other ways. In *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level*, the heroine could be viewed as having three cheats: First, her reincarnation (which unlike the usual actually has reasoning and agency behind it, which as I'll mention later is precious and unusual) includes an indefinite life span. Second, paired with this, she has an ability which significantly increases the amount of XP she gets from low level monsters. Both of which, of course, add up to her actual cheat: That while living a peaceful life for 300 years in which she did no adventuring or exploration of her world other than killing low level monsters to make ends meet, she's somehow maxed out her level and become the most powerful person she will ever meet.

And...there's nothing wrong with this; as can be seen, you can tell some pretty interesting stories in this model. But the pattern I saw in webnovels (which are often the original sources for these stories) was much more repetitive—again and again, someone was sent/brought to another world, and their first thought was "I've been isakaied! Well, as I know from reading too much fiction, if you're isakaied, you generally get some kind of cheat skill! So what's mine?"

Which...wait, what? First, it's just lazy writing; the main character is transported into a new world with no mechanism, and they don't know how it works...except, they do know how it works, because it's just like the fiction they've read (and not like in the villainess fiction where of *course* the world is like the fiction they've read/played because it's literally that fiction). But also, to assume that they'll have a cheat skill just like in other worlds where this thing happens? There's being genre aware, but this just feels tired to me (my guess is that only the best stuff gets made into manga/manhua much less anime and it gets the hard edges filed off then but I might be wrong).

Also, we did Arisia! It was fun (there won't be one next year so we had more motivation to do it than usual)! And, I think, the first regional SF con we've done in years, since we skipped a bunch of local Arisias after people could do in-person cons, favoring Worldcons and specialist SF cons instead (and also a bunch of other localish SF cons died around then). My Arisia consisted of hanging with friends, dancing (a bit), filking (a bit), and playing games! The main new board game I remember was *World's Fair 1893*, which was delightful—the game is a light area control game played in a roundel—each turn, you select one of the 5 game areas (by color: Grey for manufacturing, green for agriculture, red for fine arts, blue for transportation, and yellow for electricity), place an influence token in it, and play all people cards you have left over from your last play, then take all the cards in the area you've selected. One card type (of 3, there are just the project cards from the 5 colors, the midway tickets, and the people cards which give you extra opportunities

to play influence counters)—the midway tickets, acts as the game clock, as taking those cards advances the midway and can trigger a scoring round. And once three scoring rounds have happened, the game ends!

As such, of course, the key to the game is the interrelation between three different ways to score points. The most efficient are the project cards, which can score triangular numbers of points within a set (1 for the first, 2 for the second, 3 for the third, up to 5 of a type), and are only scored at the end of the game, but can only be played in rounds where you have first or second place in influence for the matching influence region, and only as many as 3 in a scoring round. The second most efficient are the midway tickets themselves, which are always worth one point each, plus 2 more points if you have the most (but of course when a certain number of midway tickets have been taken, the round ends). And finally, the least efficient (sort of) but most critical are the areas themselves, granting only 4 points no matter how many tokens you have for the most and sometimes (depending on the number of players; we played a 2 and a 4 player game) 2 points for second place or a tie for first. But without area control you can't place the most efficient scoring opportunities for that sweet (up to) 15 points at end of game!

The 4 player game was quite chaotic, with one player accidentally taking an area they didn't need because they misread the colors in the dark (there are also symbols for the color blind or easily confused, but it was his first time playing and for only two of us, our second!), and the 2 player game can be quite cutthroat, as you can see what project cards your opponent is collecting and might be motivated to place counters in the same area to make it harder for them to play their projects! (the projects stick around if unplayed, but with only 3 scoring rounds and an ideal goal of 5 projects played of a type you invest in, there's only so much time!

I've also played around with Typst (and also google Gemini to get me pointed in the right direction) so I have a typst header that meets my desires and will see if I can produce my zine that way this time; it will probably be pretty obvious if I succeed!

I'm amused at how, even more than late Alarums and Excursions, the APA is dominated by OSR talk (counting Actual D&D) AND by weird hippie games like the ones Lisa and I play more often! It's a really interesting split, but it's nice we have a place to talk to one another!

Comments on E&A 7

Everyone: thanks so much for people's kind thoughts on my job search!

Cover: I love this cover illustration (published in a collection in 1921). That said, it would be nice to get contributions of fart from more living artist some day, even if they weren't quite so polished, and I'm pleased and excited with the news that we have a living artist's contributed cover (albeit solicited) for 08!

Matt Stevens: Yeah, the concept for Seventh Sea was good, but there were just so many problems with that game (the flow of the ongoing story also had some problems; I remember this detail about a revolution to start in 3 weeks from the sample setting that wouldn't be detailed until the next scenario book was published, many months afterwards, which was certainly a choice).

My impression is that people who enjoyed the game (and I know people in the category) did so by leaning into the possibilities and not worrying about optimizing (which was possible but really frustrating from the jump). Want to play a character who starts as a sailor, with those expensive overpriced sailing skills? Sure, I guess this isn't a game about fighting at all; it's a game about sailing and exploring! Which, ok, most of the game's mechanics were about fighting, but if that worked for someone, I guess it worked.

Yeah, contact works for me as a term because it's just so hard to describe the c(common among storygames) idea of a game that is touching the mechanics constantly but has very simple, easy to understand mechanics without it. By my lights this can work well or poorly, in addition to working better or worse for different players. For instance, while not perfect as a game, the mechanics of Solaris are really, really clean and enjoyable to use despite being a high contact game where the mechanics are always "on"—because what they are is a script for challenging or modifying the narration of others, the fact that the "mechanics" (stuff like responding with "but only if" to add a conditional narrative on someone's narration, or "you ask too much" to back out of something) fit well into the flow of play helps enormously; when we played, the main issue we ran into was forgetting that corruption gains could happen just as a result of roleplay, so if people steered their characters into the darkness rather than fighting it every step of the way, they could still get corruption and the game could still progress.

On the other hand, Capes (the GM-less RPG from the early 2000s, not anything else called "capes") doesn't work for a lot of people because the mechanics are so involved and it can just be hard to figure out where the fun is. IIRC we tried it in our series of experiments and it didn't really work for us at all, though I gave it my best try! Good Society is trying to accomplish many of the same goals (players as the source of tension and opposition for one another, mechanical tokens as the primary driver of mechanics) but aside from GS not being tactical the way Capes are, it will just get out of the way if people are just vibing and roleplaying and framing/playing scenes, while I couldn't see using Capes without referencing the mechanics all the time even when people are basically agreed on where the narrative should go, since it's all about opposing people's narrative just to farm the tokens and drama.

Re Advantage/Disadvantage systems and rolling multiple dice: In fairness, it's not usually that much trouble for dice goblins to have enough different-colored dice. When I was playing a lot of 4e, I took to rolling multiple attacks in the same turn (which happened a lot; IIRC, unlike 5e you generally had to declare your multiple attacks before you rolled them so there was no advantage to be had for rolling them sequentially, plus 4e replaced most saves with attack rolls against reflex/fort/will, so area abilities would make a lot of simultaneous attacks against different targets but the same damage dice) by linking up the damage die colors and the attack roll colors, so I could do an entire round's worth of damage by rolling a fistful of dice and then sorting it out.

Re Fiasco: Yeah, I think you probably overgeneralized. I do think it might be a game you might not like—it's very meta-narrative, with so much of the play being in framing or resolving scenes (and, yes, if played as written

Patrick Riley: Honestly I don't remember players ever doing something (not even me) just because it's funny or because they can. "Because it seems to make sense at the time" or "it's in character and lets see what happens?" Well, sure.

At one point the not-very-bright "lawful good" (the player, Dan Gelber, explained that as his character was a fanatic willing to kill unbelievers, he kinda considered him evil) paladin in Stephen's Twelve Kingdom games responded to an open portal by picking it up and inverting it—something the experts would have considered impossible, but he didn't know any better. But since the GM let it work, it was tactically sound and quite effective; just outside what was expected!

In my experience, a measure of YOLO is actually beneficial to roleplaying games. It can be too easy to drop into a hyper-cautious mode that just feels less free-wheeling and fun; remembering that these are characters in a fantasy game and that you, the players, will suffer no lasting consequences even if the worst result comes to pass will result in a more memorable and enjoyable game much of the time. Of course, if doing so breaks character and feels out of place, that's different, but it's easy enough to be YOLO without

being Leeroy Jenkins; trying the wild and risky thing that Might Just Work rather than playing it safe all the time.

Re roleplaying stopping in D&D when combat starts and picking up again when it ends: A lot depends, in my experience, on how much people need to concentrate on the tactics and what style of play other people are modeling. It absolutely happens, of course, in that a lot of people will by default hyper-focus on tactical goals “kill the enemy, make sure they don’t run away or otherwise survive, etc,” and stop talking until the combat is over by default. But it’s not that hard to shake them out of it, either, certainly as a fellow player by continuing to actively stay in character and engage in repartee (tactical or otherwise) both among the group and with the enemy as combats continue. I also think that if the GM engages in RP as the NPCs that can also help restart normal play in a combat, but it can be hard to do so as the enemy (someone in a tactical mindset might ignore enemy conversation even if it’s relevant), but that’s where having NPC allies around can help dramatically.

But absolutely if people drop into tactical goal-oriented play as a combat starts and nobody shakes them out of it, it can be easy for a D&D game to stay in that mode until the combat ends. I just don’t enjoy that play so I’ll tend to disrupt it, on purpose (by initiating conversation during the combat and making sure that it’s clear that I am staying in character even if nobody else is) but also just by example.

Re “Frame scenes and narrate your interactions” and where the roleplaying happens...I mean, right there? This did take us some time to figure out for our first games with an explicit scene framing step, like Prime Time Adventures, but at this point it’s old hat. The key, I think, is to remember that “scene framing” isn’t some new thing where the person framing the scene describes everything that happens, and that having a scene-ending mechanic (if you even have one) doesn’t mean you have to dive for that mechanic right away. Instead, scene framing is just the thing the GM does when describing a room—establish what’s in the room, who is there (maybe let people narrate themselves into the scene) and what the core element is of what’s going on, and then play proceeds to normal roleplay, including dialogue and descriptive play until a mechanic shows up. The same thing is true in Fiasco, in Blades, and in Good Society—,whoever is framing a scene (or in Blades, the engagement roll), once it’s clear what that opening situation is, people play normally including dialogue until the mechanics come into play, whether it’s (in fiasco) someone throwing down a positive or negative token (in which case the scene may still take some minutes to hit a satisfying stopping point, especially if the positive or negative point in the scene has yet to be reached), in Blades hitting a point where the GM thinks it’s appropriate to call for a scene change (Blades is actually really traditional except for all the ways it isn’t), and in Good Society, players agreeing that the scene has reached a natural or unnatural conclusion (“is there anything else anyone wants to do in this scene?”), the facilitator asks if things seem to be dragging a bit). Part, I think, of spelling out the formula of play as has entered vogue is that when “and then you roleplay” often not being spelled out, players can forget it’s an option, but often it’s implied and intended.

Re 5e: I think the Barbarian might fit into this category as well, but since the subset is typically Rage, this might be less of a problem—,except in atypical games, a Barbarian should be able to go into Rage in every fight, and Rage is clearly beneficial enough to be worthwhile, so tying other mechanics to “when you’re in hulk mode” isn’t that dire. Plus, of course, a barbarian in rage has about as much freedom as any other fighter type in being able to maneuver and the like freely, so stuff being locked behind your rage isn’t as much of an issue. That said, I’ve not actually seen someone playing a Barbarian in any of our 5e games, so I don’t have direct experience of this (the last new game we started was the Strixhaven game, and justifying a barbarian in a magic school might have been a bit challenging—I went with a smart fighter instead, and while I was originally thinking of going with the giant-inspired Rune Knights, I

got persuaded to go with an Eldritch Knight that people thought I was playing instead before play started).

Re Lisa running into the page limit in A&E: All the time, I think. It ended up being a mix of stuff—,Lee might suggest that she hold one section for the next APA, but more often, she’d massage things so they barely fit, either by cutting unnecessary words, tweaking font sizes, or if necessary, lending Lisa some of my extra pages. But when Lisa was close enough to the edge mostly Lee would resolve it.

Re your game: I think I’d call it mission-centric, with improvised missions rather than pre-written ones (making it have some sandboxy elements because the players decide on the mission and the GM might not have much prepped for the mission they choose)? The framing structure pushes things towards a mission structure, but the GMing style makes the nature of what kinds of missions players choose and how they go the players’ toybox.

Roger BW: Fiasco has generally worked for me, but I’ve never played the second edition, and hadn’t quite realized that the cards are locked to the playset. Which...why? As said, the dice work fine and it’s pretty easy to come up with new playsets, so I don’t know why you’d want a card version that needs a new card set whenever you switch playsets.

WRT Absolute value: There’s a chart for the endgame roll; you subtract the result of your black dice from the result of your white dice and look it up on the chart. If you get a high negative result, your character has a strong positive result with some “dark” aspects to it; a middling negative result and they’re basically ok but with a dark twist, low negative result and their screwed. Low positive result and things aren’t good, medium positive result and they have a mediocre unassuming life, high positive result and things are all great. So if what you care about is whether your character at the end of a Fiasco session gets a “good” result, you don’t care whether it’s negative or positive; instead you care about the absolute value and if it’s going to be negative want as many negative dice as possible and the same for positive; the worst odds is if you have the same number of black and white dice.

I’m bemused but pleased that Outgunned includes tables of probabilities. We just tried it with a playtest with ex-A&Eer Bryant Durell, and I hadn’t found those, but I generally find it easy to calculate probabilities (or at least approximate probabilities if I can’t be bothered), and in a push your luck game like Outgunned, knowing the probabilities is even more important than usual. We had one point where I needed a critical success (3 matching dice) and had 7 dice to roll, rolling a critical and garbage. And I looked at the result and went “yeah, no, I’m good”—,yeah, my odds of either improving my result or at least rolling a simple success so I didn’t lose my match were extremely good, but it wasn’t worth it; since I had what I needed, a tiny chance of rolling nothing was still too much. But then, while the odds of a bomb out at that point was only 7%, we rolled zeroes multiple times (at least 3-4 times) in a fairly short game, on 5 dice, which has only a 9% chance. So it was reasonable to think that luck wasn’t with us. (it’s counter-intuitive that rolling 4 dice to match a set has a smaller chance of a success than rolling 5 dice has to get any sets, but apparently true! I guess because any single matching die will pass, while no single number on the 5 die roll can guarantee a pass; only a pair).

Re visual impairment: As someone who, as a middle aged adult, discovered that I could get some use out of glasses for longer distances (I still don’t regularly wear them but I’ll carry them in case they come in handy), I find that the most obvious symptom of not wearing glasses when I should is that text that would be eminently readable becomes thin and wispy. Put my glasses on to read something 6-20’ (2-6 meters for the rest of the world) away, and it springs into full readability. Since “the text is thin” is the most obvious symptom, presumably, as you imply, a thicker, bolder font (or higher contrast text) will tend to mean I can read it, even without glasses, at longer distances.

Re Middle Earth being all about the Ring quest: Don't be ridiculous. Clearly, the books are primarily about the doings of sentient foxes.

But seriously, I do think that Middle Earth, as a pretty fully fleshed out Epic Fantasy world, has a lot more going on than the Ring. The Ring is clearly the locus of the Third Age (and was created towards the end of the second age), but even in Lord of the Rings, there is almost always more going on than the Ring and in fact when the narrative splits, the section with the Ring (and Frodo) is often the least interesting and complex of the split narratives.

Re computer tools for playing RPGs in person and online: I feel that the issue isn't the existence of tools but how ambitious they are. roll20 always seems like Too Much to me—, too much navigation to try to find what you're looking for, too much trying to force shared mechanics into the map tool the system is built around despite having basically lost the map space to more dedicated online map tools, too much visibility of scripting or having other people navigating messing up what you're looking at, and too much giving up on mechanics and just rolling dice using the /roll tag in the text window so why aren't you just playing the game on IRC or Discord? D&D Beyond, on the other hand, despite the clunkiness of it (particularly homebrew where only things that they'd had to implement to let official content work with similar things that have never had official content often not working) mostly just works, which I think explains why it's so generally accepted to D&D players that they don't consider other options (well, that and that the character building tools is solid if you're playing D&D)—, if you're a player, you basically just want the ability to roll dice and have everyone see them (without having to announce the result or type anything), and if you're the GM you want to be able to see everyone's stats, so defaulting to very simple views works much better than a lot of competitors with more complexity. Now, we just need similar tools for other games that aren't D&D—, well, I guess I now own the yourpgtable.com domain so we'll see if I have the round tuits to put something together before I'm too busy.

Myles Corcoran: Yeah, I think that's why they changed the name to "Hit Point Dice" in the latest sub-edition (or at least I think they have; they've been using the new term but the change wasn't well advertised). And yeah, to me as well the main appeal is that it makes the cleric not primarily a big bag of bandages.

Re your name: I usually think of your name as being like a crow would pronounce it and this usually works for me! Cor!

Re new Everway: I haven't read the new book either—, but since I playtested it and have played it post release with others who have, I've mostly gotten the sense of them from osmosis.

Patrick Zoch: It sounds to me like your son's first in-character death was a useful learning experience—, and not one that destroyed his courage, but instead gave him a sense of perspective and realization that even if his character died, the game continued! As a fellow "brave" player (see my comments to Riley above; I haven't killed many PCs though since I pair a devil-may-care attitude with a mature tactical sense as I mostly started doing this in my 20s), well done!

John Redden: I'm sure they'll change the POT and NOT mechanics before publication since they're making the game less focused on debt, but in essence each player starts with a number of tokens that when used, represent the PC helping or messing up another PC. If a NOT is spent, the roll is dropped by 1 (before the roll) or the degree of success is reduced by one level (after the roll) and the inverse is true for a POT. But at the end of a job (in the playtest) you make a single roll to see how well you get paid, and all left over POTs add to this roll while all left over NOTs subtract from it. Since the payout roll is extremely hard to modify otherwise, the optimal thing to do is to use all your NOTs on complicating your friends' lives in interesting way when it won't ruin the mission, and save your POTs and only use them to turn failures into successes when it's necessary, saving them as possible to boost the payout. But

at least in the playtest, this was too effective; when we executed this well, we got a huge payout and it wasn't very interesting given that as we playtested it, the game was about (this has changed according to vidcasts) managing debt.

Wait, why can't Hawaii ship produce to the mainland? Why not? Is this about protecting California and Florida farmers at Hawaii's expense?

Michael Cule: Yeah, it's fine to build characters like you'd reveal them in a TV show or movie, but you generally want something to hold onto; a central trait or core description at first, and then you can continue to build from there as play goes on.

That said, because it's very much discover in play (even the player), Cerberos the Crystal City starts you off with a two word description. But that game is explicitly weird, since it's not the player who is adding traits to the character, but instead other players who have written extra traits before play that get revealed as play continues.

Very much glad to introduce you to Willoweep! Since they're not webcomics, they are slightly harder to stumble across than Baldwin's and Garrity's webcomics, but delightfully worth the trouble.

Re why the PCs have healing magic and their enemies none: Often it's a question of the PCs nature vs the enemies they encounter. The PCs are an adventuring party; as such they'll generally include a variety of specialists, including a healer. But most of their enemies are going to be hungry monsters, rampaging undead, or organized groups whose primary purpose is performing a ritual or ambushing travelers, not a planned adventuring group focused on taking out equivalent-threat foes, so it's reasonable that they don't have the kinds of healing resources that PCs plan out, though they might plausibly, if powerful, have a small number of powerful limited-use heals, which can act as fight resets/transitions, particularly for "boss" enemies. On the other hand, if the PCs run up against an adventuring party or other group organized similarly, they can expect them to have a dedicated healer and will need to adjust their tactics accordingly, but it shouldn't happen all the time or the game will be too slow.

More generally, one can often justify the PCs having some unusual advantages because if they're not special (and they might be special, like if the PCs are superheroes, reincarnated warriors, or an elite gang of thieves) they're still often facing enemies very different from themselves. The rest of the time, one can rely on enemies using different rules just because the GM is playing them rather than a player; in the fiction, they might have similar capabilities to a PC, but a GM might, say, amp up their HP, lower their healing, and give them some free "get out of a disabling situation free" uses so they can give the PCs a satisfying fight without having the complexity (and time) of running an entire adventuring party.

Re Amber vs Everway: Yeah, agreed that Everway is in practice easier to run than Amber, despite having pretty similar concepts. It's not just that Everway gives you three resolution mechanics (Karma, Drama, and Fortune) while Amber gives you just one (the same as Everway Karma), though that's part of it, but that Everway's guidelines are more compatible with running a good game, and, sure, having 20 character points instead of 100 (+ bad stuff) certainly doesn't hurt.

Re D&D and alignment-specific languages: I mean, they basically *have* given up on the idea while keeping just a useful vestige. Shifting them (as of 3rd edition) into plane-type-specific languages kept the idea that devils, demons, angels, elementals, aberrations, and the fey all spoke distinct languages, but junked the idea that *everyone* who was the same alignment as them spoke those languages too. Sure, demons speak Abyssal devils speak Infernal, Dragons speak Draconic, Fey speak Sylvan, Angels speak Celestial, elementals speak a dialect of Primordial, and Aberrations speak Deep Speech, but the only really ridiculous part of that is that Demons and Devils (who one would expect to interact a lot) don't basically speak the same language; if one takes the approach that like dialects

of Primordial, they're basically the same with different accents it mostly makes sense.

Lisa Padol: Yeah, I also though the Monsterhearts GM should have made the player roll Keep Your Cool to avoid eye contact rather than let it Just Work (and yeah, in retrospect I think that was Mendez) but it was late in the con and you can't catch everything, and anyway I only noticed in retrospect (like, when coming back from the con). And yeah, I think it probably was Mendez, but I knew him less well at the time so didn't remember.

Re Dreamation: TRIP is a time travel adventure game by acquaintances of mine from elsewhere in Queens. The playtest went well but was soured by some, um, personality issues among the designers. A Tale of Myths and Legends, in fact, is a PBTA fantasy game I playtested a couple of years ago and am in the discord for, so I figured it was worth signing on to the playtest to see how it was coming since I don't actually pay that much attention to the discord!

Re Over the Edge 3rd edition: Like Unknown Armies Feng Shui, and Everway—all games which came out in the early 90s, had a second edition that changed almost nothing a few years later, and then had a major update edition this century, I tend to lose track on which versions (past the first) are which. It's probably not a coincidence that all but Over the Edge have changed hands since they were published, but a lot depended on choices—Atlas Games didn't choose to label their 1999 reprint of Feng Shui a new edition so their updates in 2015 were the 2nd edition, but they did increment the Over the Edge version number when they reprinted the game in 1997, so the substantial changes in 2019 were the third edition. Unknown Armies did make a few significant changes for the 2002 Atlas 2nd edition, but the real meat of the changes were the ones made in the 2017 3rd edition where the madness meters and stats were entirely altered. And as for Everway, while the Silver Edition (not numbered but that doesn't stop me from forgetting its name) didn't make substantial changes to the base rules, it signifies by coming out over 25 years after the original printing, containing substantial new material (including quite a few optional rules changes), and bringing back a game that would otherwise have been quite hard to publish, given how its original printing had the muscle of Wizards collectible card acumen and money behind it, with a substantial set of art cards in the book, booster packs, etc—the silver edition had an optional expanded Fortune deck (as you know, the tarot style resolution deck in the game) but relicated art cards mostly to online use and tools rather than continue a busted model. And, as someone who did do some playtesting of the game, I know that the designers considered and fortunately rejected quite a few ideas for how to change the mechanics, so having the silver edition be largely unchanged (with a slightly clearer set of directions for the magic rules, which always did lack clarity and were a fertile ground for tinkers) is still very much a win.

Re BESM and charging more on focus skills: I don't really want to dive back into this but I'll do it anyway. I like the idea, but not the practice, of BESM charging more for the key skill of a premise—being good at martial arts in Ramma, or or being good at driving cars in a game that's about car races. In concept, this encourages people to not all play The Amazing Driver (to use the last example), but one person can play the Great Driver, while someone else can be a Good Driver Who Is Really good at Memorizing Maps and another can be a OK driver who is really a mad scientist inventor, and since the game is about driving, the fact that the Toretto isn't that great at a lot of other things is balanced by the fact that the people who are more broadly specced aren't as good drivers and driving comes up a lot.

In practice, it often doesn't work that way—everyone piles in and puts half their points on their lightsaber or driving skill and the differentiation is all in the other skills, or, as Brian recollected, they all decide that they can do better by investing points in side skills and roleplaying to make *those* the main activity rather than the activity the system was tuned to.

So my more recent ideas on the subject is that rather than charging more or less for a core activity-focused skill, to instead dive into it and make it more detailed, so people who invest in it are still differentiated and feel distinct. Driving is the core activity? Ok, so if you're building a driver, in addition to building your character, you also will want to spend time building and deciding on the focus for your car; it will give you a different feel if you're a muscle car driver, a truck driver, or a stunt driver. And maybe you'll also get some driving shits and can figure out whether you want to be better at absorbing damage on the road, at accelerating to high speed, or at boosting other people who you are driving around, because you literally can't do it all. The same for light aaber use—are you a defensive jedi? superb at blocking and reflecting laser blasts (not the same thing as being good at parrying in general)? A powerhouse who specializes in outlasting other light saber users? And what about your saver? Do you have an ordinary, well-balanced saber, or have you opted for some trade-offs (or perks) to let you have a double lighter saber, light saber greatsword (light quillions! People might think this is silly, but I'd appreciate the hand protection as long as it's designed not to cut your arm if you're disarmed!), etc!

Basically, in all cases the core idea is to make sure the characters aren't mechanically identical; it's just a question of how you go about it and whether it's likely to succeed.

RYCT Avram on backing something on Kickstarter and then forgetting about it: Worse, I've backed something, had it take a while and finally deliver, and I only noticed I had files waiting for me years later! (fortunately, they generally were still waiting for me then; this is obviously only really a problem for digital delivery; for physical delivery the object shows up at your door and you get a presumably pleasant surprise.

Vary starting to understand this Way business: well, at least in theory. I've taking a single dot in Attune but Vary has yet to roll it, so it's not clear they know they know.

Re treasure the PCs can't use: Sure, sometimes the PCs will find a way to use it anyway. But my experience of D&D where the PCs got a lot of treasure that was Evil Evil Evil (or at least was mildly inconvenient, or intelligent and untrustworthy, or) is that the first reaction is often going to be to throw the complicated treasure in a bag and try to forget about it.

Gabriel Roark: I think I've tried Shinobu, or at least I have several friends who collect a variety of good Japanese whiskeys eve if I don't remember which are which name. Just looking at our current liquor cabinet, we have Smokehead, peat monster, and several bottles of the Lalaguvin 16, which I think matches recent travel plus our tastes (and that everything else with bog in it has eventually disappeared (whereas we conserve the Lalaguvin a bit); we also have some Balvenie, Oban, and various Irish whiskeys, but those tend to last a bit longer based on our current tastes. (Balvenie does have a bit of peat to it, though, so it can certainly act as something of a gateway).

Limli the Librarian: Welcome to the APA! I was amused at how much your writeup resembled dungeons in early D&D (hardly an accident).

Alter Mass sounds like a really fun spell-particularly in its lunar/lighter variant! I feel like there should be mechanical effects specified (particularly for the heavy version) or too much is left to GM interpretation—if the character's strength is the same, wouldn't that mean that your encumbrance grew by the entire increase in your weight (or potentially went negative if you mass was reduced)? Shouldn't you do more damage with melee attacks at higher mass and less (with crushing attacks anyway) at lower?

Pum: Red Catehdral! Underwater Cities (two very different games, but both good). Seti I've heard of but haven't played, and I don't know anything about the other games yet.

Avram Grumer: I hadn't realized that Starfleet Battles has its own spin-off roleplaying games! As said, though, the main branch has licensed plenty of distinct games.

Re game systems getting longer: I think it's more a matter of the current fads. With D20, Hero, GURPS, or Fate, you're building a game according to a system (maybe with more or less kit-bashing, like making a Gumshoe game, but there was a clear expectation of what mechanics you'd take). But starting with the line from Apocalypse World (and it's worth noting that everything you listed descended from the Apocalypse—,AW beget Blades and Monster Hearts, and Brindlewood Bay (carved from Brindlewood!) which begat BoB; Good Society is off on its own somewhere though), you had the ethos that you weren't using someone else's system so much as being inspired it, so the "brand" name was all about how your game wasn't Apocalypse World but Powered by the Apocalypse, etc. It's a different ethos about game descent, and certainly a wordier one.

Re Briar forcing everyone into darkest self in the first scene in the game: Well. Briar plays really hard; I'm not convinced I approve (I'm more used to working your way up to darkest self even though "force someone to go darkest self" is absolutely a hard move in the game), but if it worked for the players... From what Lisa says, it gets worse, so think there may have been some mistakes made.

Ok, reading a little further, I'm going to guess that the monster-out noise was the opener of the GM's plot, and that the idea was that the PCs would get together as a "party" to figure out what was causing students to monster out...which would seem to indicate that Briar doesn't really understand what Monster Hearts is about. At root, it's not a party game where the PCs get together and solve problems—it can drift into that if that's where play takes things, but at root, you have PCs and, as you say, the NPC emotional terrain, and the PCs do stuff and things tends to spiral out from there. Sure, the GM can absolutely and should have NPCs doing things the PCs can react to help get the and keep the ball going, but expecting a Monster Hearts game to turn into a mystery hunt (a game with no "mystery solving" mechanics except for Gaze into the Abyss!) is trying to bend it into a different game entirely.

I mean, that said, the play you were actually having? With Steffan and blue and Johnni fighting, Steffan in the grip of his Darkest Self? That's golden; that's what the game is -about-. So I think it's a win and to a degree you had Monster Hearts style fun almost despite the GM.

Minor rules error (possibly) with the Turn Someone On roll—the roll *never* fails. You only roll when you turn someone on; by the time the roll happens that's already happened. As such, the turning happens—but on a 6 or under it might go badly, and on a 7-9 there are complications. It's quite intentional in both AW and Monster Hearts that "nothing happens" isn't generally an option when dice hit the table (the exception, of course, being Keep Your Cool where you're rolling to try to have almost nothing happen, and stuff definitely happens if you fail).

Brian Rogers: Doctor Hormone sounds -wild-! I mean, massively non-consensual, but also wild! Having him be something of a manipulated sap does seem on point.

Re Speed: Of course he can interact as himself. He just has no secret identity—,except as a horse, of course.

You continue to do awesome work to rehabilitate V&V. I still think you should compile your "hacks" (including the ones you used for the Legion game) and come up with a V&V-inspired supers game!

As said, I see what's going on with most of the heightened attack abilities (particularly Heightened Attack, Defense, Expertise, and Weakness Detection, with the concern being "but what if someone combines this with a powerful offensive ability?" but given that a power like Animal Powers (Shark) can make a complete hero on its own, these need to be less limited even if they *also* have overall boosting capabilities.

Also re the skills It isn't always clear what in your description was part of the power and which is your addition.

Brian Misiaszek: I'm so sorry about your dog Sadie!

Re Black Lotus: I also once owned a Black Lotus (but it was UL, not Alpha or Beta, and by the time I traded it, the condition was pretty poor—,still, it wouldn't be valueless if I'd kept it! I don't even know where the two Time Vaults I traded it for have ended up! Erica Frank; I'm with you; I'm not entirely a never-GM (I'm a pretty good LARP GM! and I've run the odd one-shot or Dangerous Refuge playtest (though that's technically facilitating) or Enchanted Education playtest, or other odd session or even a short attempt at a Chuubos campaign when that was still in playtest. But I've never run a long campaign and I spend the *vast* amount of my roleplaying experience Just Being a Player.

Oh, right, Well of Souls isn't Flux and Anchor—,when I think of Foster I mostly go to Flux with its high tech magic system (and, yes, so much kink, but it's Chalker so what do you expect?); I don't think I remember Well of Souls at all at this point.

Weirdly, while Blades is one of the more afiel PbtA games (until you consider the Bakers' own efforts like Firebrands and the like, but if they can't do stretch hacks, who can?), it was also one of the first, with work on it, I understand, starting before Apocalypse World was even out. I think it would handle the same role being used well, unless the role has a power that doesn't work well if there's another copy in play; I don't remember one but I don't have encyclopedic knowledge of Blades.

Huh; what are the GMless games you're in that use gain/spend a token but not strong move/weak move? **Yazeba's** doesn't describe them that way but has the same mechanic (they call them Bingos and Whoopsies instead). Wanderhome I assume is one of them; it is generally regarded as a BoB game, and I think has strong and weak moves even though it doesn't have a *list* of per-playbook strong and weak moves like Dream Askew and other games closer to it have.

Re Brindlewood Bay and running out of crowns: On the other hand, I think it should be easy enough to adjust the expected game length (potentially on the fly) by adjusting how many crowns are available. At points where the characters are entering a new field of play (because they've just clued into the big mysteries) the GM could even let them uncheck a bunch of crowns to keep things going.

FWIW, there are quite a number of Glitch fans in our local larp group (I, as might be implied above, have read and enjoyed Chuubos and a bunch of other Moran works but have still never gotten around to reading Glitch), which probably pushes things well over 30 in total.

Thanks for the details on the not-D&D D&D descended game! Reminds me a lot of some of Lee Gold's campaign premises, where her group was solidly descended from 30+ years of play, but of course since they mostly played notional Lands of Adventure and not D&D (or even Toon even when we were playing Toon), the way the game progressed was also very different.

Myself: Apparently I managed to write about my job hunt two months in a row? I guess it's been a weird month, so I didn't remember writing about it before, just that I hadn't talked about it everywhere. I was also inconsistent on how long it lasted; I believe I started in early 2002 and left in late 2025, so...24 years in total I guess. It isn't a small number.

Jim Vassilakos: Re Traveller misjumps: It could be that when you're stuck maneuvering in Hyperspace, that the only things you can see from the real world are gravity wells—,enough to head towards stars and hopefully steer away from black holes or exiting jump inside either. Presumably under that model as long as you were following a plan and things didn't go awry, you could generally end up where you wanted to go, even if you were jumping within a system—,but the moment you ended up off course, the best you could do was head for a safe space near a random star.

Re removing alignment from D&D, large scale: One could just keep the planar map similar but not make it didactic—the Celestial realms are focused on the personalities and preferences of the gods who people them, which will often be some kid of Good (because the gods made the world and most good things, and provide pleasant afterlives to remind mortals to do the kinds of things they like), but of course some gods aren't very nice at all; just allied to the ones that are patrons of Civilization and Law even if they are all about Trickery and Treachery (“why do we even keep that guy around, anyway?”).

Similarly, even without system-level alignment, the hells could have competitive cultures, rough conditions, and systems that encourage awful behavior (like magics that work on a soul economy), so even though there are absolutely some nice demons and devils (why not?), the majority of the denizens aren't really nice, and even the nice ones were raised on some pretty awful norms. Could a revolution shake the Abyss and replace the current ruler with a singing, dancing, hopeful Demoness? I mean, maybe! After all, big plots like that sound like a lot of fun!

Regardless, we've never ended up with one singular ruler of the world, so it's not unreasonable that a fantasy world would have similar logistical issues making a single ruler of the multiverse unlikely and unlikely to last very long.

Re rules changes: Please, no, we had so little fun the last time! Ok, in all seriousness, I'm actually more pro-rules changes than some people here, I suspect, but I also think it's not why any of us are here, so restricting it to, say, a singular annual meeting (or even every 3 years or so) is probably better so as to not try anyone's patience, with the OE having the ability to float rules changes before that on an emergency basis, but being discouraged from doing so without good cause.

Love the idea of round robin roleplaying! As said, the convention of the GM hat passing around the table will lower the bar, but by doing so it would let people get a taste of GMing without expectations that they'd have to do it -well-.

Timothy Collinson: Re reading A&E on different devices: Of course, not all phones are alike; one of those folding phones (that lets you use the entire unfolded area to tablet around) has plenty of real estate to read!

Re characters comparing abilities: I think it's reasonable for most characters to know what they're capable of (amnesiacs aside)! That said, comparing them is more challenging; in the interest of time it's often easier to just compare stats, but if you want a bit more color you could have them play out a contest to “prove” which one is better and by how much.

Traveller Play-By-Email

Plankwell Campaign, Ch 53: Distraction

GMing: Jim Vassilakos & Timothy Collinson, Playing Capt. Plankwell: Conrad Rader

The character of Capt. Plankwell was conceived by Phil Pugliese

Major Fa'Linto was all handshakes and smiles, but inside, I could sense a whiff of annoyance. I'd called his marines down the well yesterday to enforce my Section 678 interdiction, during which they weren't allowed to shoot anything, which meant to them that it had all been a political exercise, and then today I put them on a Bravo-99, which entailed prepping equipment and manning various vehicles only to receive the order to stand down. Stefani had fortunately attended to that final detail or they'd still be on high alert.

As he showed us around — mostly barracks, galleys, lockers, and showers — his people came to attention, a fact that led me to tell him we didn't actually need to inspect the showers.

"I've already used one," I said.

"Oh, right."

The psi-enhancer, still in my system, allowed me to sense that the Combat Master had said something to him about my having heard the name *Captain No-Show*, which had made the Major's jaw involuntarily tighten.

"Don't let your people use a derogatory nickname for anyone in command," Fa'Linto had told him at the time.

"Does that include you, sir?"

"What do they call me?"

"Major Trigger-Happy."

The Major felt a complex wave of emotions before shrugging. "Do they mean it as a critique or a compliment?"

"I wouldn't know, sir."

"Well, I'll take it as the latter. Better to shoot first than not live to regret it. And you can tell them I said that." At least it was better than *Captain No-Show*, he'd thought.

"I believe you're already familiar with our gym," Fa'Linto said, showing us into the room where yesterday I'd attempted to clear my name. The Combat Master was there in his wrestling gear, standing with a small group, all of them fixated on the two soldiers grappling behind a flexible transpex shell. Although translucent, the shell formed the walls of an imaginary room inside the gym, walls the two fighters could use to slam each other against something vertical but slightly bouncy — fewer injuries that way. He didn't turn as we entered but instead kept his full attention on the soldiers at practice, but then one of his people, a young woman with what looked like a bionic hand, noticed us and came to attention.

"At ease," the Major said.

"Halt!" the CM called out to the two fighters. "Take a break."

The shell began to slowly retract itself into the ceiling, Fa'Linto smiling. "I believe you two have already met?"

"Captain," the CM said with a nod.

"What is your considered opinion of the combat readiness of this division?"

I could feel Fa'Linto bristling that I would have any call to consider his division less than stellar. The Combat Master considered my question, taking in the just barely suppressed annoyance of the Major and the flat, calculating gaze of the First Officer, all of us combat veterans. I was hoping he knew what I was going for. Always testing, always pushing. That, at least, had been my *modus operandi*.

"My considered opinion, sir, is that these Marines will be ready to board any errant *Zho* you ram, forgetting that you're flying a cruiser instead of a fighter. Sir."

I held the command face as long as I could, until a chuckle broke through and then a laugh.

"As the Emperor wills, I will try to keep in mind that my ship is now a little larger. But I make no promises. Marines!" I addressed the wider gym. "I apologize for the unsatisfying nature of the last two calls to duty. But I commend you all on your response, professionalism, and although you did not get to shoot anything, you did carry the honor of the ship and the Emperor. I am very proud I have the opportunity to serve alongside you."

I turned to Fa'Linto and saluted him. "No concerns here, Major. Carry on."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Commander," I said, "I have a dinner appointment. Set up a secure meeting room for after."

* * *

I'd invited Dr. Kosy Willin and Chief Engineer Onneri Martinsen to my private dinner with SPA Highport Director Mazarin Scarletti, and so the three of us gathered in order to greet Maz outside the same airlock, P.A. #1, where Sublieutenant Jimenez had deposited me earlier in the day. It was the airlock closest to the Special Galley opposite my quarters, and Dr. Willin suggested we save any tour of the ship for after dinner.

"It's healthy to walk after eating," she said, invoking her medical expertise, although I could sense her curiosity as to how I'd respond.

She'd known about the surprise party for much of the day, but Nizlich had only just visited sickbay to personally ask her to see to it that I arrived between 1930 and 2000

hours. The surprise part — or rather non-surprise part, which the crew incorrectly presumed would be a surprise — would happen in the fighter hanger, as it was among the largest rooms on the ship, and of all the hangers, it was the one least occupied given the number of fighters that were still planetside undergoing maintenance.

“So I need to get him into the Fighter Pod’s hanger? How am I supposed to do that?”

“Ask the SPA Director if he’d like a tour of the ship.”

“And what if he doesn’t?”

“He’ll cooperate,” Stefani said. “He already knows about the party.”

“Oh, well that certainly makes it easier. And I assume you’ve told Onneri?”

“I’m about to.”

Kosy nodded, now understanding that she wouldn’t be alone on this all-important mission, but there were still potential problems, especially considering that I was, after all, the Captain. What if I simply decided to turn in early?

“What if the Captain isn’t feeling well?” she asked.

“He’s on probiotics, you know... due to the crew stew.”

“He’s fine now,” Nizlich said, momentarily averting her gaze. I couldn’t sense what she was thinking, as this was Dr. Willin’s memory, not hers, but in that brief moment, I could sense Kosy’s intuition telling her something was off. There had been a slight flutter in her stomach, some part of which was probably due to the fact that she *really* liked Stef. There was a certain hyper-awareness that had been activated the moment my XO strolled into her office, and it extended until Stef left sickbay in order to brief Martinsen, Kosy sighing silently to herself, her gaze lingering on the doorway even after Nizlich was gone, but the upshot — what was important right now — was that Dr. Willin could apparently sense when Stef was holding something back. Either there was something wrong with their new Captain, something she didn’t want to discuss, or....

“You didn’t tell him, did you?”

“Tell him what?”

“About the party.”

Stef pressed her lips together, somehow managing to grimace and smile at the same time.

“Are you kidding me?! You told the Captain about his own surprise party?!”

“Ssh!” Nizlich shot her a pained look. “He doesn’t like surprises, okay? He made that crystal clear.”

“But...”

“In any case, the party’s not for him. It’s for the crew. It’s for morale.”

“So the Captain knows we have to end up in the fighter pod? Wouldn’t it be simpler if we just dispensed with this whole charade?”

“Aside from he and I,” Stef said, “you’re the only one who knows he knows, so can you please keep it under your hat?”

“Oh, dear Cleon. I can’t believe you’re making me do this.”

But she was, in fact, doing it. She would do nearly anything for Stef, who I suspected had no idea how she felt.

Of course, I couldn’t help but ponder the novelty of this window into the lives of my crew. Part of me wanted to dive in and counsel Dr. Willin to crew up and tell Stefani exactly how she felt, but the saner part of me understood the vagaries of emotions and feelings and how sometimes you ended up doing things without really considering the consequences. A more mischievous part of me wanted to telepathically project my memory of Stefani in the shower and watch Dr. Willin’s reaction, but instead, I kept my silence, both telepathic and otherwise.

“I like to walk after dinner,” Onneri chimed in after a rather long pause. That much was true. After dinner, he would often walk the engine rooms, listening to the hum of the power plant, his gaze darting to various panels and gauges, searching for anything that might be amiss. All the machinery he worked with, as complex as it was, was easier for him than dealing with people.

As for the surprise party, needless to say, he’d initially intended to skip it, but then Nizlich cornered him just minutes ago and told him he’d need to make sure I got there.

“Why me?”

“Have you not bothered to check your messages?”

He’d frowned and consulted his wristcom, finally noticing the dinner invitation I’d sent.

The truth was he hated parties, and he especially hated mandatory ones. Maybe he could sneak out right after everyone yelled, “Surprise!”

In any case, he was pretty sure I disliked him or at least distrusted him. He assumed this was due to his hesitation with respect to informing me about the suspected misalignment between the sink array and the lanthanum grid. Flight officers, in his view, were prone to overreact to issues involving jump drives. But it wasn’t like this problem appeared out of nowhere. The grid had been damaged, and though his people had repaired it to the best of their abilities, it was still a field repair, and so it shouldn’t have come as a great surprise that the ship’s jumps had become wobbly. The real problem was that the jump governor wasn’t detecting the fault, which meant it would most likely happen again and again, and this wobble could potentially get worse.

The engineer the IISS sent up told him flat out the pod had to go: “I’m not signing off on a patch and pray when I know damn well the next jump this ship makes could be its last. It’s not worth the risk, and if you cared about your crew or your ship, you’d feel the same!”

Who in Cleon’s stinking bowels did she think she was?! All he’d said was the pod could be saved. With a few weeks of work, they could have reinstalled the grid over the

damaged section, and yes, there might still be a jump-wobble, and if so, that would obviously have to be ironed out just like you'd do on any shakedown cruise of any new ship entering service. But scrapping the whole pod? Even as a safety measure, it was blatant overkill. Then again, it wasn't his money, and swapping it out would make his job a lot easier. Still, on some level it made him feel like a professional failure.

"Oh, here he comes," Dr. Willin said, and sure enough, the airlock door slid open, and out came SPA Director Mazarin Scarlett.

"Maz!" I stepped forward to greet him. "Welcome aboard!"

"Nice ship you've got, Gus." He offered a gloved hand, and as we shook, he glanced toward my two officers. "Have we met?"

"I would like to present my Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Kosy Willin, and I am sure your people have worked with my Chief Engineer, Onneri Martinsen."

"Ah, yes..."

I caught Onneri's relief as well as a touch of surprise when I'd pronounced his name. He was used to it being butchered any number of different ways: with a long O, with a double-O, with "near" in the middle, and so forth. The correct pronunciation was ON-nuh-ri, with a glottal tick between the first two syllables. Of course, nobody would guess that from the way it was spelled, so he had to teach nearly every one of his 170+ staff how to say it, and then he had to correct them when they forgot. It was either that or accept it being mangled on a daily basis. He'd heard a rumor that some of them were referring to him as *Ornery* behind his back, and it made him smile. If they wanted to think of him as ornery, that was fine, so long as they didn't mispronounce his name like nearly everyone he'd ever met.

Hence, when I began the introduction, there was this familiar feeling of resigned annoyance as he considered whether he should correct his commanding officer, but then I said it correctly. I'd heard Nizlich say it twice, so it wasn't too hard. Regardless, this anxious annoyance, which had been at the forefront of his mind, immediately evaporated into surprised relief.

"I hope you're hungry," I said as they finished shaking hands. "So tell me, how is the SPA reacting to all of the events of the past few days?"

"Oh," Maz said, the pupils of our eyes momentarily locking upon one another as we walked. "I assume you're talking about the interdiction."

I was pretty sure I felt a telepathic tendril poking its way in at my proverbial windowsill, and so I immediately closed the drapes, Maz frowning slightly as he no doubt realized something was blocking him from getting into my head.

"Was there something else that snarled traffic around the Heron downport?" I asked, feigning ignorance with respect to what just happened. Josafeen, after all, would be

extremely upset if I went willy-nilly revealing my newfound capabilities to every person with whom I happened to cross paths. "I distinctly remember several messages to my Comms about freeing up traffic patterns. But that's all right. It's not like anyone was trying to shoot me. Oh, wait. They were." I smiled.

"Someone tried to shoot you?" Maz asked.

"Someone did shoot him," Onneri said.

"Someone shot you?" Dr. Willin gasped.

"He was tased," Onneri clarified. "I think that counts."

"You were tased?" Maz and Kosy both asked in unison, as if of one mind. "When did this happen?" Kosy added, Maz continuing to focus on her as Onneri replied, "Yesterday."

"Why wasn't I informed?" she wanted to know. "Have you been to sickbay? Did you lose consciousness? We should run a full neurological scan, just to be safe."

"I have been a little busy managing the crisis that erupted out of that incident," I said, as we passed through an iris valve and entered officer country. The Special (i.e. Captain's) Galley was just around the corner along with a public fresher. "I will report for a work-up tomorrow," I promised, "but I have maintained command in situations far worse."

"Oh?"

I began to describe what it was like coming out of a misjump when half the crew were puking their guts out and the other half were trying to work through mental fog and hallucinations.

"I was lucky to be one of the pukers," I said. "In any case, here we are." I motioned to the galley and then to the fresher. "There's a sink in case any of you want to wash your hands before eating."

"That's always a good practice," Dr. Willin said, going in.

I poked my head into the galley, noting that the eating table had been elongated, and instead of four chairs, as I'd expected, there were six. Although the "surprise" party was scheduled for later, I half-expected some enterprising crewmembers to manufacture an earlier surprise. I'd done it on occasion, and I remembered the blistering dressing down it earned when I'd once caught my supervisor right before a disciplinary hearing. She didn't appreciate having to go into it covered in glitter and caught an "insufficient gravitas in a procedural hearing" lecture from the XO, so I got the full brunt of her official ire: three weeks of cleaning backup sensor lines.

Dr. Willin came out of the fresher, exchanging places with Maz. Onneri, meanwhile, fixed his gaze on the carpet.

"So where did this happen?" Dr. Willin asked.

"The misjump? We ended up on Forrodkhkhokh. It's near the spin-rim corner of the Uthe Subsector. The jump-sickness was so bad, I had to sideline a third of the crew for mental incapacity." Some of those people would later be

medically discharged, but just as I was pondering whether to mention this, Josefeen rounded the corner.

"I'm not late, am I?"

"Of course not," I replied. Nonplussed by her appearance, I riffled through my memory, wondering if I invited her or if I was in for another "training" session. Josefeen being here changed things. I drew open my psionic curtain and sent the memory of the probe I'd just felt as well as my reaction. *«I think Maz might be a psion.»*

«Oh, he is.» She was pleased with how I'd handled being telepathically probed, both that I'd detected the intrusion and erected my natural shield without giving away that I'd even noticed. Her plan was to tell him the Navy had outfitted me with a subdermal psi-shield. There was one problem with this analysis, however, but before I could discern what it was, Maz emerged from the fresher, and with his return, I shut my psychic curtain, cutting off my connection to Josefeen.

"Hello again," he said to her. "Josefeen, right?"

"Yes, and it's so nice to see you again, Director." Maz's posture sagged a bit as they shook hands, almost like a child being scolded, and deciding it was his turn, Onneri peeled his gaze from the carpet and headed into the fresher. "Are we waiting for dinner?" Josefeen asked.

"We're washing our hands," Dr. Willin explained.

"Oh," Josefeen said. "Rather pointless for me, I'm afraid. There's no amount of washing that'll get the blood off my hands." Then she laughed and entered the galley, Kosy and Maz both staring after her, wide-eyed.

I fixed a smile on my face and gestured for them to follow her. "After you. I would apologize for my Intel officer, but she likes to push buttons to see what falls out."

"Push, pull, untie, unzip," Josefeen clarified.

"Oh dear," Kosy said. "Is this going to become one of those conversations?"

"No," I replied. "It will not. Although I can't stop Naval Intelligence from treating people like vending machines."

"I can't help it," Josefeen said, eyeing Maz. "Just like you can't."

"The terrible part is that it mostly works," I went on, for the moment ignoring whatever private subtext was going on between them. "So what does that say about us, eh?"

"It's quite alright," Maz said, scraping a hand through his blond hair. "I fully respect the Navy, and while its guest I will certainly adhere to all of its various rules and protocols to the best of my ability."

Onneri came in, frowning as he sat. He obviously had no idea what we were talking about, only that the issue of rules and protocols had somehow surfaced.

"Excuse me one moment," I said. It was my turn, apparently, so I went out to the fresher and washed my hands, hoping maybe it would get my head straight.

Clearly, Josefeen must have telepathically conveyed something to Maz while they'd shaken hands, perhaps a

stern warning for him to keep his telepathic tendrils to himself while aboard Navy ships. Obviously, they knew each other to be psions. Much of the upper nobility were psions, and apparently some of the agency directors as well. Why were we fighting the Zhodani again?

I searched my eyes in the mirror, looking to see some evidence of change, something to signify that I too was a psion, but there was nothing new. I looked the same as I had last week before any of this started. Well, perhaps a little more tired than normal. I took a deep breath, dried off my hands and made sure my uniform was straight.

Time to be social and then indulge the crew.

As I exited the fresher, I saw the steward, a rather frail-looking fellow, quietly approaching, his data slate firmly in hand. Following rather closely was a robotic grav-tray with a bubble top. It looked like some appetizers and drinks were about to be served.

"Sir," he said, "Lt. Abbonette asked me to show you this."

He handed me a data slate, and there was a login screen with the outline of a left hand print. I placed my hand on it, and a message appeared.

*With your permission, I'd like to help you take an important step in your training before this booster wears off. As I distract him, you go in from the opposite side. I'll signal it's time with the word "**distraction**". Good luck and be stealthy.*

Oh, for the love of Cleon.

I pressed the "Erase" button underneath Josefeen's message, and the login screen reappeared. Well, suggestions from NI were tantamount to orders, and I already had a vivid idea of how Josefeen would punish me for refusing her suggestion. How was I supposed to probe Maz's mind without him becoming aware of it? Like I even knew what I was doing.

As I handed the slate back to the steward, I imagined the difficulties. If Maz's curtain were closed, I wouldn't be able to get in, which meant Josefeen must be planning to be in telepathic dialogue with him, which, assuming Maz assented to this, meant his curtain would be open. But how exactly was I supposed to *be stealthy*?

The steward, his gaze unfixed, as if deep in thought, seemed to be patiently waiting for me to go ahead of him into the special galley. I let go of my curtain and took a peek into his mind, catching the slightest whiff of impatience. Because the kitchen had short notice on several of the dinners, they were busy working on those meals now. All the main courses would be served in a few minutes, once everything was ready, but for now, all he had to offer were the drinks as well as the appetizers Maz and I had pre-ordered.

"Let's get this dinner going, shall we?"

“Very good, sir.”

Upon re-entering the room, I noticed they were all sitting in the four chairs along each of the table’s long sides, Josefeen and Maz on one side, and facing them, Dr. Willin and Martinsen on the other. This left me to choose between the two end chairs. If I wanted to follow Josefeen’s lead, I’d need to sit between Maz and Martinsen rather than between the two ladies, so I went ahead and did as she’d asked, seating myself to one side of Maz with her on the other.

“Welcome Maz, and on behalf of the Jaqueline and her crew, it is my pleasure to spend some time with you. Steward,” — I’d forgotten his name — “...if you would? A brief description of what we are going to be eating?”

“Of course, sir. We took the liberty of contacting the station for the Director’s culinary preferences, and, well, we hope we have created something for everyone to enjoy. This is a four-dish appetizer course to prepare your palate for the meal to come. First, these are eswayne fruit, reduced to pulp and flavored to bring out the sweet tart notes. We froze them to stabilize the shape, but they are amenable to being cut or bitten into as you prefer. These are fungi slices, lightly cooked and seasoned with a deeply umami amino acid, a favorite of the Captain, if I am not mistaken. Then there are seared jambon slices wrapped around dried pruum fruits, and, finally, dried grain crackers with a vegetable medley puree for dipping. Please share and enjoy.”

Everyone talked about the food as the robotic grav-tray set the appetizers on the table and distributed our plates and drinks. Before, with Reggie, the steward had done all this himself, but this time, he appeared to be focused on his slate.

“I’ll be back with the main courses, but in the meantime, is there anything else anyone needs?”

Nobody needed anything else, and so he left, the grav-tray following him out.

“I noticed there was no seafood on the menu,” Dr. Willin said.

“I noticed that too,” Maz said. “Do you like seafood?”

“I do,” Kosy said. “Actually, I’m a pescatarian.”

“Is that a religion?”

“No, it’s like vegetarianism, but I also eat fish and other seafood.”

As they talked diagonally across the table, Josefeen looked over to me, and our eyes locked onto each other for a few seconds.

«If he looks at you for even two seconds while your curtain’s open, shut it tight and look away. You only enter his mind while he’s focused elsewhere, but not until I say so.»

“So what sort of seafood do you eat?”

“Oh, all sorts of things. I like clams and tuna and...”

“I like clams,” Josefeen interjected. “I’ve heard they’re an aphrodisiac.”

“It’s mostly their zinc content,” Kosy said, “that as well as D-aspartic acid and NMDA.”

“What do you think, Director?” Josefeen asked Maz with a coy smile. “To zinc or not to zinc?”

“Uh... well, I too like seafood. Actually, I’m quite fond of aquatic life in general. I’ve an aquarium, quite a large one, where I’ve been able to breed some species. It’s segmented, so I can adjust the chemicals and temperature for different sections.”

“And they have babies right in front of you?” Josefeen asked. “That sounds like it would be awfully **distracting**.”

He laughed and nodded. “You’re all invited to come see it, if you’d like.”

“Actually, I would be curious,” Kosy said. “Not that I intend to eat any.”

“My taste has always run more towards fungi and algae,” I said, trying to interject something into the banter. “My cadet tour tending the aquaculture system of the INS Maledictor may have something to do with it.”

Actually, I’d mostly been doing the paperwork rather than the actual maintenance, but I was nonetheless supposed to learn how the system worked so I could help troubleshoot problems. Unfortunately, there was a lot to learn and a lot of different checklists and flow diagrams that had to be memorized, and I was a pilot, not an engineer.

After a few questions, I decided to relate the story of the cadet hazing I’d been subjected to, which involved a multiple leak alarm escalating to a supposed critical failure, all of it orchestrated by the technical chief. Although not at all funny at the time, I emphasized my sense of panic as I’d run from flush point to flush point in pursuit of what I thought was a cascading crash of the entire system. Of course, it was all an elaborate drill to teach me to pay closer attention to the diagnostics.

By the end of the story, Maz and Kosy were laughing, and even Onneri cracked a grin, but Josefeen stared at me with protruding eyeballs, like they might explode out of their sockets.

«Did you not hear me say the code word?!»

«You said distracting.» I telepathically replied while Maz was looking at Kosy. “The code word is distraction.”

«It’s close enough!»

«So now?»

Not waiting for a reply, I turned my gaze from Josefeen to Maz.

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 #7:

When Rules Interfere with Roleplaying:

Matt Stevens (E&A #7, pg. 10): "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."

Yeah, I hate this sort of thing. See my zines in A&E #513 & #526 for details.

The Inevitable Decline of Civilizations:

Clark B. Timmins (E&A #7, pg. 14): "The Starry Wisdom presents the history of the kingdom in three main eras..."

Sad to see how the "alignment" of the society slowly transformed from lawful-good to lawful-evil.

What to Do with the PCs of Absent Players:

Patrick Riley (E&A #7, pg. 22): "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."

I would typically NPC the PC whose player couldn't be there (or allow another player to do so), but this doesn't always go well.¹ The problem is that nobody will play the PC as well as the player who is most familiar with their abilities (who's absent), and, of course, nobody wants to be responsible for killing the PC by doing something risky (like scouting, for example). One solution to this might be that the PC comes down with a bad cold, flu, mysterious pain, or magical disease. Maybe they can still travel (at reduced speed), but as far as taking part in the festivities, that would be asking too much. Or if they're a spell caster with a powerful mentor/master/patron/deity, maybe they're needed for some reason, so they get teleported away and reappear by the same method when the player returns. In either case, it would be necessary for the party to adjust to the fact that one of their number, possibly one with an indispensable skill set, is temporarily unavailable. Would be curious to learn what other methods people have found for addressing this problem.

1 See "Obeying the Dice" on the 1st page of my zine in A&E #364.

Initiative/Combat Rules:

Roger Bell West (E&A #7, pg. 36): "...the old DC Heroes game had actions declared in ascending initiative order, then resolved in descending."

Interesting idea. Do you think this works better than other methods? What are the pros and cons?

No Solicitors, etc.:

Myles Corcoran (E&A #7, pg. 43): "No hawkers, panhandlers, graverobbers, starving artists or would-be duelists..."

This would make a great sign for the front door. Ironic, however, that the house's occupants just robbed a grave (or at least ordered it done). As for Alfonzo grabbing the body and escaping "at speed", have you ever carried a dead body? Actually, it might be better if you don't answer that.

Submitting Zines before the Deadline:

Patrick Zoch (E&A #7, pg. 60): "Worry not, Jim. My zine will be in your inbox by the time you start working on the APA."

One advantage of getting it in a little bit early is that I'm more likely to notice some mistake (usually a formatting error) and let the contributor know about it so they can get it corrected before the deadline. This has already happened many times with many different contributors, so it's something to keep in mind.

Hooker CCG:

John Redden (E&A #7, pg. 62-63): "I was amused walking up the strip and collecting hooker trading cards."

Ooh... I'm trying to imagine the collectible card game. *Hooker: The Hooking*. Okay, maybe the title needs some work. Don't know about you, but I smell money!

Epitaph:

Attronarch (E&A #7, pg. 71): "Here lies king thrice cursed for treason, torpor, and triviality..."

Treason and torpor we could have accepted, but *triviality*... that was going too far!

Sleeping Beauty Wakes Up:

Pedro & Camila (E&A #7, pg. 73): "...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.'"

I vote for the alien. Actually, ‘no one’ is also a good option. Imagine falling asleep and *not* ever having to wake up. Pretty sweet, right?

I think you just re-invented Google:

Michael Cule (E&A #7, pg. 74): “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.”

So long as the question is sufficiently stupid. Great idea for a magic item. I’m sure it would be of inestimable value to sages, and whole libraries might be copied from its contents. Curious as to its limits.

Sandbox/Scripted & Roll/Roleplay:

Jim Eckman (E&A #7, pg. 88): “I almost always run campaigns as sandbox, but characters may get caught up in a scripted sub-adventure as a consequence of their actions.”

How do you keep the players on-script? What happens if they do something the script didn’t anticipate?

Tower Dungeon:

Dylan Capel (E&A #7, pg. 90): “Tower Dungeon (...) 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.”

A few years ago, an idea started to germinate in my head for either a novel or 1PMG AD&D campaign that would follow a non-classed character, the sort who would normally be an NPC, basically a commoner or peasant. I wanted to poke fun at the whole genre as well as various rules that could be interpreted in such a way so as to incentivize some interesting behaviors.

For example, what would a henchman make of his employers talking about needing a few more XP in order to hit their next level? Likewise, how might the lords of various cities respond to the apparent fact that there are riches all around them, guarded by monsters in these deep caverns called dungeons?

I imagined a situation where criminals would be marched in chains to dungeon entrances, handed a weapon, and told to go in and get some loot, and not only would their crimes be forgiven, but they’d get to keep a percentage of whatever they brought out. With enough criminals, the prince of a large city could effectively spring all the traps and overwhelm the monsters through sheer numbers. Or, at

the very least, he could soften up the dungeon’s defenses prior to staging a frontal assault.

Tower Dungeon reminded me of this idea in part because the beginning (I just read through Chapter 1 — thanks for the web-link) depicted an organized effort to take a dungeon. However, this protagonist — super strong and with a heart of gold — seemed way too perfect, almost like a young paladin, way too much of a [Mary Sue](#). And like most manga, there’s a lot here that’s left unexplained. Like, for example, where did this Tower Dungeon come from?

I understand that such characters as well as the lack of explanation about basic questions is somewhat par for the course, given that this is Japanese manga. However, just like the argument I was making about insanity in *Call of Cthulhu*, not all genre conventions deserve to be followed.

Dungeon HOA:

Lisa Padol (E&A #7, pg. 109): “I didn’t want to say anything, but the dragon has a hoarding problem...”

This is brilliant. Curious to learn about any other funny observations and/or situations that arose.

Exploding Air Sharks:

Gabriel Roark (E&A #7, pg. 114): “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.”

I think you meant hydrogen. Helium’s inert.

More maps, please:

Limli the Librarian (E&A #7, pg.): “*The Estate of False Griffin Point* is set on the island of False Griffin Point and the nearby village of Broadwing.”

Nice adventure and nice map of the village of Broadwing. One thing to consider adding to this would be a map of the island of False Griffin Point. It always helps to include this sort of material so that if, for example, the PCs decide to investigate the rest of the island, the DM/GM will at least have a starting point from which to develop additional details. Hope to see more adventures from you in the future.

Reselling “Demon Destroying” Dirt:

Pum (E&A #7, pg. 137): “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.”

Found it. *The Greater Demon Exterminating Company* at the bottom of page 6. Can't really blame the PCs for being willing to profit through a little arbitrage when someone offers them 10,000 gold pieces for a bucket of dirt. In any case, the original sellers were offering a money back guarantee (1 CP), so the PCs could theoretically argue it looked legit. Although I'm not surprised they ended up "very horribly dead."

Variant Rules for D&D Combat & Hit Points:

Pum (E&A #7, pg. 138): "Healing potions and spells work as normal, except that Endurance is healed first, then Hit Points."

So let me get this straight. Hit Points are basically Luck Points. Endurance represents the character's physical state. So if endurance is healed first, you could have a situation where a character feels perfectly fine (completely healed), but they're still way down in terms of Hit/Luck Points. So how do they know whether or not they need another quaff of that healing potion or another *Cure Light Wounds* from the party's ~~medic~~ cleric?

Devil's Bargain in Scum and Villainy:

Avram Grumer (E&A #7, pg. 145-146): "...guys from the local Governor's Office (...) 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..."

Devil's bargain? Okay, I just looked this up, and so I sort of get what's going on here. But I'm more interested in the extent to which this got roleplayed. Obviously, Von is trying to talk the Planetary Governor's representatives out of seizing the ship. So what did his character actually say to make them change their minds? Or was it just a roll of the dice with little to no explanation as to what was being said?

Beware the Switchboard Operators:

Brian Misiaszek (E&A #7, pg. 165): "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."

I like how you breathe life into even the minor characters that are unlikely to ever come up in actual play. This also reminds me of that scene in *The Crown*, where Elizabeth II and Prince Philip are having what is supposed to be a private phone call, but, of course, everyone manning the various switchboards between them is listening in, and they both know it. In any case, I'd imagine the investigators (especially Mr. Duvall) would do well to get to know Sra. Pacheco and/or her three underlings.

The Head of Vecna Incident:

Elf (E&A #7, pg. 185): "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 can't top that. My condolences to each of the players' families for being related to someone so stupid. That said, I'll bet it's a TPK none of those present will ever forget. BTW, what was their plan on the off-chance they brought Vecna back into the world? Oh, and what about the last PC after all the rest had died? Did he cut off his own head as a declaration of party unity?

Dungeon HOA:

Joshua Kronengold (E&A #7, pg.): "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)."

Don't suppose anyone bothered to up write up the CC&Rs. Generally, I don't see any problem with the dragon being a hoarder. That's what dragons do, after all. But if he's parking a torn, threadbare, and unsightly magic carpet out front (one that's presumably highly dysfunctional, if it functions at all), then I could see that becoming an issue. Same if he's keeping the whole dungeon awake with his loud snoring. As for what to do about the adventurer/looter problem, I'd be curious as to what plans Kory or other members of the HOA came up with.

IgTheme: GMing tricks you've either "borrowed" from other GMs or figured out yourself.

Unfortunately, most of what I've learned from other GMs is not what to do but rather what not to do.² However, I've also found that most GMs have something they do especially well, and so even if you have a GM who's terrible in ten different ways, there's probably still something they can teach you if you keep your mind open and pay attention.³

I can't help but recall one game where there were around ten players. It was a larger group than I'd ever attempt to GM, and as you might expect, the GM's attention was constantly divided between the loudest players present, of which there were several. So I could see immediately that this wasn't the sort of group that I would be likely to return to. Then we got into a combat — I think it was with a bunch of orcs — and of course it crawled due to the sheer number of players, but nonetheless, when it came time for the monsters to act, the GM became extremely animated. He waived his arms around and raised his voice, and I think it gave all of us a sense that the monsters were basically just like people, and they were panicked, but they had a strategy, and they were going to do the best they could to kill us, and I found myself admiring him, as this was a performance, and he was doing it so well.

There was also a GM, a friend of mine, who asked us to begin composing write-ups in the form of journals or personal letters, describing the events of each session, and that, I thought, worked quite well in terms of igniting my interest in the campaign.⁴

And there was another GM, another friend of mine, who wrote out the strategy a green dragon was going to use before we decided on our own strategy, and he put the paper in front of us before the combat, but it was folded up. He said we couldn't read it until after the combat. My vague recollection is that we walked into a trap. The dragon got the better of us, but the fact that he'd written out the dragon's plan before we'd stated our own proved the outcome was entirely legit.

There was also that GM who used a computer to speed up combats, and it worked to a degree.⁵ I liked his idea enough that I decided to copy it, although I did other things to speed up the combats even further.⁶

And there was a GM who would have players do a little bragging at the end of every session in order to accumulate extra "roleplaying-related" XP.⁷ That simple act of recalling

what we'd done made the whole game more enjoyable, so I started having the players do this in my own games as well.

As for good ideas I stumbled across accidentally, I'm reminded of the time I had one of the players play the adversaries during a combat encounter, and that was fun. Terrifying, but fun.⁸

And I came up with the idea of creating a random matrix to establish the relationships between a bunch of NPCs.⁹ I haven't used it very often, and there are some bugs that obviously need to be worked out, but it's been somewhat helpful just in terms of getting me to think about whatever pre-existing relationships might be there prior to the PCs coming into the picture.

There are many other tricks of the trade¹⁰, so many that trying to list them all seems like an overwhelming task. My guess is that learning to be a better GM is something that never ends. It just goes on forever.

Timothy's Comments on E&A #7:

Matt Stevens – Cowman Balony Face

Thank you for the mention of Peterson's *The Elusive Shift* which I will have to look out.

Clark Timmins – Elaria

That's quite a timeline/history! And I like the notes on languages – I think Marc Miller (Traveller) would definitely call this a "Rich Decision Making Environment"!

Roger BW – Firedrake's Hoard

Thanks for the link to Planetfall which is rather fun. If I've seen it before I've long since forgotten it but well done. Glad it uses Mongoose rules – yes, would definitely like to see it offer all worlds within X parsecs (I mean, 2 or 3 would be a reasonable limit). I've only found *actual* trade at the gaming table doable for most people's interests if it's highly simplified, so this is a great solution.

On one occasion for a one-shot at TravCon it was relevant to the plot so I ended up doing the calcs and trading for each world while the other five players did the adventure! I didn't mind it – but only once!

RYCT Myles C and his comment to Brian M on The Fall of the House of Usher, I was given a copy of Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* at school when I won the Davison Literary Prize that year. I've treasured it ever since. As it happens, I introduced my French brother-in-law to The Cask of Amontillado at Christmas when we were visiting. In French, poor chap, it's hard enough in English.

2 See my IgTheme comments in A&E #578.

3 See footnote #26 in my zine in A&E #363.

4 See pages 4-6 of my zine in A&E #359.

5 See E&A #6, page 178.

6 See my comments to Nick Smith in A&E #567, particularly the last paragraph of the 1st column of page 8.

7 See the 2nd paragraph of my comments to Myles Corcoran in A&E #357.

8 See my comments to Lee Gold in A&E #307.

9 See my zine in A&E #348.

10 See my zines in A&E #364 & #365.

RYCT Lisa P about there being no skill list in *2300AD*. I know, I know, annoying isn't it? There's not one in Traveller either which I always think is a lack and remedy by having my own list to hand for writing purposes. [Love the hedgehog image!]

RYCT Joshua K with a table showing how Boon/Bane dice affect rolls: thank you for that – that's brilliantly useful and not something I've seen before. Cut and paste into my rulebook. Cheers!

Myles Corcoran – Twisting the Rope

Hope the intestinal investigation goes well and having recently been through it pray that you avoid anything like my surgeries, stoma and other woes. Take care.

Re your Solo Traveller-adjacent game, even if it's not continuing, I hope there's more of something similar. Have enjoyed reading it. My apologies if not formally saying so wasn't encouraging!

Pedro Panhoca da Silva – Children's interactive fiction

Obrigado pelo link do *Millennia*. My Portuguese isn't up to much more than surviving in Rio for a weekend with a family that spoke no English, but I'll be interested to take a look. Currently it looks as if download is halted for the moment, but I'll try again later. Cheers!

Lisa Padol – An Unlooked for Zine

Really, really, must read *The Stars My Destination*! (Love *TCoMC* – thanks for the summary video. Love a summary being 45mins! But it deserves it.) Pretty sure I started *TSMD* once but in an ebook which didn't lie around reminding me to read it and I got waylaid...

RYCT Joshua K about *Camelot*. Bother! Now I'm singing "C'est moi! C'est moi!" :-)

Avram Grumer – Going to be Ad-Libbed

Regarding your note on: *Three Raccoons in a Fast-Food Dumpster system* with some ideas from the *Achromatic Verdant Conceptions Slumber with Violence* <snickers on the bus so loudly other passengers look up>

Also, really want to play: *Three Raccoons in a Fast-Food Dumpster system* with some ideas from the *Achromatic Verdant Conceptions Slumber with Violence*.

RYCT to Lisa P about fonts and line spacing etc. You're quite right, that will save space but in my experience of publishing things, once I'm at that point, I invariably *really* need to rethink what I'm trying to fit into what space I have. <hears colleagues telling him off for making "two-page" Library Guides far too dense>

Brian Misiaszek – Age of Menace

Really sorry to hear about Sadie. Having spent a week at Christmas getting to know my brother-in-law's new(ish)

dog Ulysses (and nearly losing him over a 500m cliff), this news hit me harder than I might have expected.

Lovely maps – might have to pinch them for Traveller.

RYCT Michael C on *Prepolec's Professor Challenger: New Worlds, Lost Places* book – thank you for the pointer.

Erica Frank – Shiny Math Rocks

Absolutely love the bureaucrats! More please! (Having just written a bunch of articles on the Bwaps – intelligent newts who *love* bureaucracy in Traveller – I feel they must be related!) There's an adventure for Bwaps here: <https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/advents/perpethwe.html>

Joshua Kronengeld – Accidental Recall

Good luck with the job hunt and all the logistics during that.

RYCT Lisa (in an ongoing discussion) about 'making' a sanity roll. I firstly despaired of the player being so pernickety but then despaired of anyone involved as my dictionary has one definition of 'make' being to achieve something, not just to do something. My *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* has in Section V, entry 37 of 'make' (which has two small print pages of entries): "verb transitive, accomplish (a distance, a speed) by travelling etc; reach (a place) in travelling, come to, arrive at; colloquially catch (a train etc), manage (an appointment, date, etc); achieve, accomplish, reach, (chiefly North American) attain the rank of". Ah well.

RYCTM about *Tian Deng* – ah! Not out yet. That would make sense. I'll hold my horses and look forward to it.

I agree that e-ink devices, mostly brilliant (no pun intended) though they are, aren't *quite* there yet IMO.

Jim Vassilakos – Plankwell Campaign

RYCT Myles C and Jumping into deep space being campaign ending – that reminds me, I keep meaning to write an article on ways you might "save" such a campaign. However, I thought the rationale for ships emerging near stars was to do with their Jump shadows (or something) where the mass precipitates the ship out of Jump? But yes, expanded rules on this would be great (though I think there might be bits in *Freelance Traveller*, I'll have to look).

RYCT Lisa P on starship engineering – one of the reasons I wrote my *ATV Schematics* was so the engineer had something to do. I keep thinking I should extend it to traveller scale starships.

Entirely agree on having better sensor rules. Can you write them?!

LAST WORD: I'm glad my online games took a break over Christmas; somehow I return to them with more enthusiasm.