

EVER & ANON

Issue #11 May 2026

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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 #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?

Issue #14 – July 21st: Intraparty Conflict

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

Issue #16 – September 21st: GM-Dickery

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 #11 (ver. 1) – May 2026

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This issue’s IgTheme:

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?

The picture on page 5 was generated and converted into a sketch by [Canva](#). The pictures on pages 192 & 194 were generated by [DeviantArt’s DreamUp](#). Our logo was designed by Richard Iorio II of [Rogue Games](#).

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

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://atronarch.com/goodbye-to-alarums-and-excursions-apa>

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

I Want YOU!

to join our flippant fellowship



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

Send your thoughts to apa@everanon.org, 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

Brazilian Interactive fiction – part I: *Ladrão de Histórias* (2003)

by Pedro Panhoca da Silva <ppanhoca@yahoo.com.br> and Maira Zucolotto <maira_zuc@hotmail.com>

With this new series of reviews, now focusing on interactive fiction (gamebooks without an RPG rule system), we will attempt the ambitious task of presenting (almost) everything that has been produced in Brazil, unfortunately without translation into other languages. These are experimental works that have not yet gained widespread recognition, but which were significant in their time. This also shows that, however many different media and formats involving text there may be, branching narratives are always a recurring theme.

The first interactive fiction to be reviewed gets off to a surprising start. *Ladrão de Histórias* (2003) – “Stories thief”, in free translation – is a book written by the multi-award-winning João Anzanello Carrascoza, an important author in contemporary Brazilian literature. This is because it is rare for authors linked to the current literary canon to experiment with literary creations of this kind (Torero and Pimenta, authors whose six interactive children’s books we have reviewed, are another rarity). Unfortunately, *Ladrão de Histórias* did not go on to win any literary awards, perhaps because the period of its publication coincided precisely with the decline of interactive books of this kind in Brazil and worldwide (1998–2008).

Ladrão de Histórias is a beautiful metaphor about the importance of words and reading, the power of imagination, and metalinguistics, as it questions the reader’s role as a participant in the creation of stories. In the plot, two young people—Jorge and Alice—discover that the Arcanes, creatures that feed on letters, are causing chaos by consuming the world’s letters. Film subtitles begin to fade, pages of books simply vanish, comic strips are left with blank speech bubbles, people forget important parts of the stories they are telling (or how they end) and no longer know the origin of famous quotes. To solve the problem, they enter the Land of Imagination, a place full of fantastic characters and situations. At the same time, the protagonists face challenges and seek to understand the origin of these creatures. Their mission is to stop them from continuing to destroy the world’s stories. Jorge is curious and brave, whilst Alice is intelligent and observant.

With readers who have never encountered choose-your-own-adventure books in mind, the book opens with a flowchart showing all possible paths (called a “reading map”), making it easier to follow this branching narrative. On the other hand, this takes away the suspense of the reader’s discovery as they explore the narrative across multiple possibilities. The narrative is short (57 paragraphs in total), and may feel too brief for a fan of gamebooks, who are accustomed to more direct paragraphs.

Carrascoza’s book shows that stories only survive when they are read and imagined. Interactive fiction, in this respect, is even more demanding: it only exists if the reader engages with it according to its rules. The fact that a contemporary Brazilian author is experimenting with interactive fiction lends credibility to narratives of this kind, which are sometimes regarded as ‘minor’ or even infantilised.

COMMENTS #10

BRIAN ROGERS: At the end of the day, it’s all about having fun 😊

ELF: Interactive fiction can always be inspiring, which is why it’s still going strong!

LISA PADOL: I think a good interactive fiction manages to open up its “umbrella” of branching paths without becoming incoherent. Although simple, the interactive books by Torero & Pimenta are good examples for anyone who wants to read or write interactively. It’s like teaching reading and writing through (mini) short stories.

BRIAN CHRISTOPHER MISIASZEK: Glad you liked it! I get a lot of rejections for not using academic jargon. I worry too much about whether the reader is understanding what I’m on about. I think that’s why I’ve been sending my research to lower-impact scientific journals.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: Exactly!

JIM VASSILAKOS: I agree LOL.

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: Thank you very much 😊

BUMBLING Through DUNGEONS

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ISSUE #9 (E&A #11)

Hello. A brief intro this month. On to it!

Belated IgTheme: City Building for Fun and Adventure: What do you need and where do you start?

On my now-mostly-shuttered Youtube channel, I made a lengthy video on city adventures several years ago (likely filmed in 2019), linked below:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DBsY_-QuGUw

That's from a GM perspective, and while my thoughts have matured some since then, I rewatched it for reference and found myself pleased with it (more so than some of my other videos from that same era).

Bottom-up design is as valid as top-down, but I tend to do the latter when I know we'll be staying in the same urban location for an extended period of time.

Saying that I like to know things like economic forces, leadership structure, geographic considerations, and so on feels like a lot of work, but those things can take up no more than a couple sentences each oftentimes.

Then at a "middle" level, factions, religions and the like start to inform a city's character. Is it a port town? Is worship of a particular god prominent? And so on. Again, these things can be detailed in a few bullet points, so I am not taking copious notes at this point.

I then want landmarks and points of interest, whether in the city as a whole, or broken out by neighborhood. I've run a lot of campaigns in the city of Waterdeep, for instance, which has myriad possible points of interest. In each campaign, each of its Wards (regions of the city) is fleshed out with a couple points of interest that either give it character/flavor, or which will act as a quest hub or location of a mission or contact. These are often related to the "middle-level" details like factions or religions.

So then the major factions, individuals, landmarks, etc.

start to inform plot hooks or possible plot arcs made up of several hooks.

Take my current Waterdhavian campaign, a skullduggery one. They raided an off-the-books warehouse area on the docks, where several businesses import items where they don't want scrutiny from the authorities.

They found a large shipment ledger and some leftover baubles from the Temple of Gond, and while they haven't pinned anything illegal on the Gondians yet, it was suspicious. The temple will be reappearing on their radar soon, and they'll have a chance to learn more.

That wasn't why they were at the dock warehouses, but it was a plot arc I built into the campaign based on those earlier details (factions of note, etc.), which allowed me to include it in an earlier, unrelated mission.

I also did this due to one of their city contacts, a brilliant tinkerer who occasionally invents things for them. They determined this pre-campaign, and it helped push me toward the Gondians, since their contact can help with mechanical information regarding inventions of the Gondian crafters.

This contact is, in a loose sense, one of their "points of interest" and serves much the same function as a literal location of interest might.

Having lots of interesting little points of interest also allows one to make the world seem "alive." I always have various minor encounters on the city's streets for my players, or have small events for them to attend that aren't related to the main plot. These are good fun, and help to ground the campaign.

Variouly in Waterdeep, for instance (which is far from the only city I've brought to life, mind you, but is the easiest to cite), they've attended a community gathering of dancing in an anti-gravity field, hosted a rave, and franchised a restaurant (not all in the same campaign, granted).

I am more at home running in urban settings than wilderness ones, though I've done both. A good, interesting city is without peer for me in its potential for interesting adventure.

Responses to E&A #9

Brian Rogers

Thank you re: your comments on pay range stuff and job hiring ethics. I'm thankful to have a job again now.

Re: D&D rangers, I am actually not among the voices wishing for them to be more powerful, per se. More than anything, I want them to have a more unique, differentiated identity. Most other classes feel like they excel at one or more things in ways that other classes don't. This is not the case with rangers to the same extent. Additionally, the Beast Master (i.e. animal companion) sub-class isn't underpowered, per se, but experientially it hasn't lived up to fan expectations for a long time, and I don't think their most recent (2024) tinkering fixed it. I am content playing the class, but have never felt like D&D "nailed it" with Rangers in the same way that I've felt with a couple other classes, like Artificers and the most recent (2024 pseudo-edition) Monks.

Re: *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, this is the source of the most fun I've ever had playing in a pit orchestra (I'm a violinist). A wonderfully comical musical!

Clark Timmins

Might adapt *Charm of the Fortunate* into a campaign sometime, cheers!

Elf

Nice to see the No ICE bundle doing so well. *Baba Is You* is such a delightful puzzle game. I can't say I recognize anything else in the bundle, but name-recognition games isn't exactly the point of many charity bundles.

Matt Stevens (Cowman Baloney Face)

Interesting historical tangent on Clerics, thanks for sharing!

Lisa Padol

Re: my recent writeups, if Rynn et al weren't sent for their diplomatic skill, why were they sent? This may have gotten a bit lost in my writeups, but the idea was that the High Council of Baldur's Gate wanted good diplomats, but then they deputized a bunch of the city's faction leaders to appoint diplomatic envoys. These mid-level leaders didn't care at all about creating ties with the new city, and so they scuttled their "problem adventurers" off on this mission to be rid of them. So then with minimal input (i.e. "Uh, go make trade relations or something?") it was an excuse to allow ourselves to get sidetracked.

Re: listing what you pay, yes, this should be standard practice, and I've even caught my current company not

always doing it (they thankfully listed the pay range for my position). Lots less time wasted all around.

Re: my IgTheme (resurrected father, bathtub full of butter), yes, it was a delight, even as I was livid in-character. It's one of my fondest session memories of an RPG, nearly 10 years later.

Paul Holman (Pum)

Re: *Twilight Struggle*, no arguments from me on your assessment of it. I do think there's opportunity for some creativity in using the game's operations points on the map, but I've encountered the opinion before that the events dictate much of play, an opinion I can't really refute except to say that I still enjoy it. There are other card-driven wargames I prefer slightly, ones that I think allow you to express a bit more strategic and tactical creativity. *Unhappy King Charles* comes to mind, as well as some where the cards are a lesser force and subservient to the on-the-board maneuverings, such as in *No Retreat: The Russian Front*.

Patrick Riley

Yes, as you mention, D&D's chief advantage is its ubiquity, and insofar as a LOT of RPGs more than satisfy my roleplaying itch, the one with the lowest societal barrier to entry due to popularity is going to be my favorite almost by default.

Patrick Zoch

Quite an ordeal with the Master Campaign files. Best of luck in running them. Saltmarsh is a book I really enjoy but have never gotten to run or play in. I'll be reading your writeups with interest.

Roger BW

Agree, *Skull Queen* should have a different name. I prefer it to *Skull King*, but the comparison is unfortunate.

Joshua Kronengold

Scary about the bleeding; hope it's resolved swiftly and painlessly.

Glad you enjoyed the writeups!

Interesting comment re: Cheapass Games, and I appreciate the business context. I agree a lot of Ernest's designs are half-baked, but he does churn out a lot of interesting stuff in the aggregate.

Agents of SHIELD made the mistake of believing the MCU would care about it. The Netflix street-level stuff (Daredevil, Luke Cage, etc.) sort of knew they were on

their own. There's a couple small tie-in Easter eggs, but part of me didn't even want to see Daredevil return on Disney+ (good as Charlie Cox is in the role) because something would feel slightly off about it.

Re: Pairs decks, *Continuous Pairs* and *Port* are the two I see the most people gravitate toward. Lesser known but still fun, I've enjoyed *To the Moon* and the 2p-only *Burnout* and *Pendelton*.

Jim Vassilakos

Amused at how you managed to find plot hook fodder in my stories of job searching. I'm sure I could infuriate my players (in a good way) with some similar shenanigans as you suggest.

And...Great Moments indeed. Glad you enjoyed my IgTheme tale!

Several

My thanks to several who expressed kind thoughts in regard to my recent job situation. I dislike ranting about such frustrating things in joyful rags like E&A, but when it takes up so much of one's life and emotional bandwidth, it's nice to have occasional outlets.

And to All Others: RAEBNC

Responses to E&A #10

Myles Corcoran

I shall not inquire about the camel story further, but I got a good chuckle.

Elf

Glad I could clue you into the new Munchausen edition. Enjoy!

Good luck running Brindlewood. I haven't been entirely glowing toward it in my past zines, but it's true to say that I've both enjoyed myself in my two sessions of it thus far and that I have no issues whatsoever with the mystery not having a defined conclusion. Indeed, for years I've heard of GMs who run other games with various mystery elements, and whatever the players come up with is retroactively true (plus or minus some details depending on plot needs).

Lisa Padol

I'm not overly concerned about over-prepping my 5e campaign. Though in part I brought it upon myself with the campaign structure I set up. The missions themselves are largely standalone enough that I can hang onto them for future campaigns, and the actual preparation amounts to

drawing a map, having a handful of bullet point notes, and knowing what enemy stat blocks I'd want to have handy. If I end up with 3-4 unused, I won't be upset.

Joshua Kronengold

Re: Once Upon a Time, I don't doubt excellent sessions and stories can happen through it, though for example it sounds like Brian Rogers (in his comment to be in E&A #9) ran into the same issue that I have. I'll happily agree, though, that playing any such game with good storytellers (or at least those enthused at the prospect of storytelling among friends) is a prerequisite to my enjoyment, and the best way to play them.

Your comments are well-made in regard to boring combat tactics. I occasionally lament how often I default to the "attack until killed" combat encounter with no additional nuance, though as I've matured as a GM I've avoided it more.

Continued well wishes on your medical situation.

Patrick Zoch

I wonder to what extent your players' propensity to visit shops is due to the influence of *Critical Role*. The long dalliances that show takes in its shops and taverns were perhaps not the norm prior to the show's popularity.

I have something of a hybrid solution in my campaigns. One or two shops or establishments are set up with a narrative hook, and the rest are faceless stores where I randomly roll for the shopkeep's name if prompted and it's just there to facilitate the purchase of goods.

Jim Vassilakos

Re: *Syncretics*, you're right that a countdown isn't strictly necessary, but instinctively I think the countdown adds more drama than you'd get with a more silent indication that everyone's word is ready.

Patrick Riley

I like the "teams" variant of *Syncretics* you suggested. I may try it sometime, cheers.

Matt Stevens

Interesting musings re: *Shadow of the Colossus*, which is of course a lovely model for "mythic" encounters, as you put it. I've put some thought into how *World of Warcraft* mechanics could be ported into a tabletop RPG, and I do think some of the gimmicks of WoW bosses could be adapted easily enough. But you're right that much of it doesn't translate well.

Gaming Roundup

Skullduggin' in the Deep (5e Campaign)

Our skullduggery 5e campaign continues, which is set in the city of Waterdeep (session reports someday, perhaps, I hope).

A few introductory missions were set up to 1) introduce them to the setting, 2) have a grab-bag warehouse heist that hinted at what will become 3-4 different plot hooks later on. And 3) with the 3rd mission, give them a classic heist (of a Rod of Animal Control) that's untethered from any larger story arc.

The party is adept at illusions and disguises, less so at overt combat, which is appropriate. Missions tend to be a lot of subtle trickery, followed by a chaotic and madcap escape once everything goes awry.

Two larger arcs have been set up: one involving the ascent of a would-be arch-fey, whose power grab involves conscripting the party to help him obtain a series of artifacts. This is all under the guise of a human priest. Since this is not an heroic campaign, they'll have an opportunity to ally with the fey lord later on, though this will be at odds with the Arch-Fey patron of the party's warlock.

The other involves a nefarious sect of Gondians (tinkerers, inventors) whose efforts will see them making a power play within the city, killing citizens and leaders alike to solidify power.

The party is currently investigating the disappearance of a Gondian priest

These two arcs map loosely to the plots of Thief (the fey arc) and Thief II (Gondians).

As the plot collapses toward these two arcs, I have 1-2 side missions that they can take up at any given level, for a total of about three missions per character level. They're large maps/missions, and we also do some "downtime" city stuff between each mission, and so three missions has taken around six real-life sessions thus far (our sessions are generally around 3hr).

The side missions range from sacking a temple of Umberlee, undermining a casino at the behest of a rival casino, and raiding the lair of the Xanathar (crime boss) while the largest part of his forces are otherwise occupied in the city.

Issue #11 IgTheme: Setting Design

I always have a few such settings I trot out as representative of ones that work well for me: Numenera, Forgotten Realms, Mouse Guard... The former two there are excellent example of sandboxes not in the campaign sense but in a whole-setting sense. It's a smorgasbord of ideas; a feast of plot hooks, factions, colorful characters, mysteries and more.

And so when I homebrew settings or setting elements, I'm looking for much the same qualities. I have a space setting I've been building slowly for quite some time (much of it in my mind still, but some has made it to the page). The closest tonal comparison might be the *Mass Effect* games, and my aim is something akin to its fleshed-out history and adventuring environment. I don't know the exact adventure I'd want to set there, but I want numerous reasonable options to feel as though they could grow organically out of the setting.

And so this amounts to creating interesting locations, then simply allowing the imagination to insert interesting characters and hooks into them. The space station that's a casino-city, for instance... what illicit faction leaders do business here? What goes on beneath the main decks that the station's leaders want to keep secret? Who do the players need to squeeze for the information they're looking for? How will this person have set a trap for them? I don't know what the details are of any of that, but the point is how the location suggests the hooks naturally. I'd enjoy exploring any of them.

Media Roundup

Finished re-reading *Lord of the Rings* recently. Much had been forgotten since my last reading, some 20 years ago. It feels more of a myth than the movies, owing to worldbuilding that necessarily must be cut from the film. Shocking to realize how much attention Faramir and Prince Imrahil get, relative to the movies. The latter might have more spoken words in *Return of the King* than Legolas or Gimli. Faramir might have more than either of them across the entire trilogy of books!

In the movie world, I've been working through *the films of Wong Kar-Wai*. Color-soaked, immaculately shot, plot-lite, moody, dreamlike, are all statements that apply to any and all I've seen. Thus far, *Chungking Express* (my favorite), its spiritual sequel *Fallen Angels*, and a pseudo-trilogy of mostly doomed love stories, *Days of Being Wild*, *In the Mood for Love*, and *2046*. The last of which approaches something transcendent while remaining intimately grounded in a flawed protagonist's journey.

De Ludis Elficis Fictis

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April 2026

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Recently I have mostly been ...

... playing in Michael Cule's Wednesday evening GURPS campaign with the High Wycombe RPG group. We are all beginner mages who have been "recruited" into the Institute of Magic in the city of Aegis, the city now of two thousand gates. We are now on the winter mid-term one week break. The demonic slug under the sewers has been dealt with and the gods of the city have returned ... in person! We are starting to get the impression that they are upsetting the secular powers that be, possibly by poking their divine noses into secular matters of the city, or something like that.

On the board games front, this month seems to have been a heavy games month, with a first couple of plays of *Hegemony: Lead Your Class to Victory*, and a first play of *On Mars* — I enjoyed both, but they are too long to play in an evening, not the least because there is so much to setup and pack away, as well as many choices and considerable strategic depth to ponder.

IgTheme: Setting Design

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?

Some settings just appeal at a basic, aesthetic level — you hear about it and think "oh, that sounds cool!" *Night's Black Agents* has recently been a case in point for me. Also, I recall Mr Cule's *In Nomine* game being a similar case — just the first impressions of the game concept appealed very much.

Verisimilitude is something that also helps make any game campaign better, and for me that is possibly best achieved through depth to the campaign, or at least the convincing illusion of depth. Adventures, plots and scenarios should feel connected to something deeper, or at least some of them should. Perhaps a great example of this is the episode structure of *The X Files* TV show, and probably many others, where about half of the episodes were stand-alone, monster of the week episodes, and the other half were part of a big plot arc. Any reasons behind what is happening adds depth; even a bizarre and convoluted reason why 5 goblins were in a locked room guarding a chest of treasure is better than simply 5 goblins in a locked room with a chest of treasure.

Consequences also add depth. Try to make anything and everything that happens consequential in some way. This might be quite directly consequential, such as a relative of a slain foe appearing a few sessions later to seek revenge. Or it might be as little as passing references back to people, things or events in previous sessions, perhaps harkening back to long ago. This all helps the events and other elements of the campaign feel at least somewhat joined up, so more realistic, and so hopefully satisfying. I suppose the logical extrapolation of this is the "epic campaign".

I'm not one for running a new and different campaign every few months or year. I don't have any campaign settings that I particularly want to create, although I currently hope to enjoy the published setting of *Night's Black Agents*. I would like to further explore my long standing fantasy campaign, as I have put a great deal of thought into its background over the past 40 years.

Night's Hacked Agents

After playing a couple of intro sessions with the first stage of my old school hack of *Night's Black Agents*, I've now finished going through the rules section of the base rulebook, converting it to my older school style hack. I now need to review some scenarios and prepare to run them. At some point I suppose I may go through the expansion rules in *Double Tap*, but that's way too much work for now, as I want to resume actually playing ASAP.

Comments

#10 Brian Rogers: RYCTM, yes, thanx for your email, your input is appreciated. Yes, I've had a look through *Mutant City Blues* for inspiration.

#10 Michael Cule: for the sake of common decency, I would like to clarify to everyone that my fifteen and a half inches of new equipment was a laptop computer!

—————
I have to abandon this contribution early in the month for personal reasons.

—===### More hopefully next time ###===—

Cowman Baloney Face

THE NEVERENDING SAGA #7

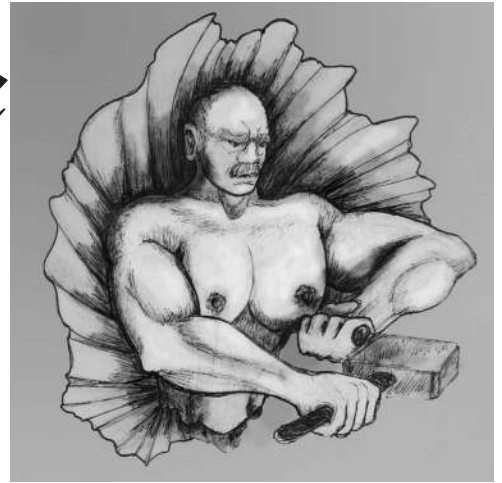
SMOKE 'EM IF YOU GOT 'EM, FOLKS

BY MATT STEVENS

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ALL ART BY ME AGAIN



Wow, I thought the world was f*cked *last* month. Hoo-boy.

For the record, I'd talk more about my life but it's extremely boring. I'm living in the exurbs, under-employed and with almost no social life. My marriage seems fine, and all the animals keep us company (we call this place "The Menagerie" for more than the *Star Trek* reference), but not much to discuss. I need to find a gaming group around here...

TO SERVE WORLDS (IGTHEME)

Well this is one hell of a broad topic!

Personally, I love conworlding as an artform *in itself*: Working out the history, the languages, geography, climate, religions, even details like fashion and architecture. I like to get into the nitty gritty, trying to make even my fantasy worlds (relatively) realistic. Those of you who like that approach can check out [Artifexian's wonderful videos](#) or Mark Rosenfelder's [Construction Kit](#) books.

(My interest in the technicalities got me in hot water in the Worldbuilding Facebook group. Almost all posts were very basic, icebreaker questions: "Where do you put your Orcs?" "What are your Elves like?" etc. Finally I got grumpy, and asked, "Is there a group where we can talk about more advanced material? This is beginner D&D-world stuff." Holy f*ck-nuggets, did I step in it! They accused me of "gatekeeping" -- which was fair, I guess -- and proposed that *anyone* who made posts like mine should be instantly banned. So I left the group.)

I have to be honest, though, and admit little of this work is necessary for an RPG setting. The Forgotten Realms is just a hodge-podge of D&D cliches. It's a crude conworld -- I'd say even worse than Greyhawk -- but Ed Greenwood created a ton of background material to use in a D&D game. It would work just as well as a conworlding masterpiece like Tékumel, and may even work better.¹

Some of us still try to work our worlds into beautiful little gems, not because we need them to be, but for our own satisfaction. As Miyazaki said, "I work because doing nothing is boring." With that in mind...

¹ Yes, I still think Tékumel is a masterpiece, despite what we now know about M.A.R. Barker's horrible politics. Bad guy, great world.

MY WORLD OF "PENDARTHER" OR WHATEVER

I've been building my own world, off and on, over the last half century. I work on the same world, rather than many different ones, because I want something with depth and variety, and to avoid a sort of world-design-by-numbers approach that's natural when you start from scratch. This way I take fragments from different creations over the years and find ways to fit them together.

The first "fragment" was a mythology I created as a pre-teen, itself based on a mix of surface Hinduism and Marvel cosmology. (Only a few names survived.) The second was the map of my first D&D world, originally imagined on the Western side of the old Greyhawk map. Again, the names survived -- including the name I know it by, "Pendarter," which I dislike but don't know what to replace with -- while the map was updated and moved to a world of its own.

In my 20s I worked out a more coherent vision. I worked Abrahamic religion into the mix, and came up with the idea that humans were (in a sense) fallen angels, divine beings who were forced to live like animals on Earth. This is why they feel guilt and shame, and why hedonism doesn't bring them true happiness. I also came up with a word list for the primordial human language, and used sound-change apps for the language's descendants.

From that foundation I slowly worked out the rest of human history, making adjustments to the origin myths as needed. I've tried to stick to two key principles:

1. **Unity.** All the different peoples share the same history; their mythologies share many of the same gods; and their languages derive from a common source.
2. **Diversity.** Most of the major "races" on Earth have analogues in my world. And while I know that their languages & lore derive from the same core, they have diverged so much over the millennia that humans don't know this.

All of this is fine for a world as an aesthetic object, but it doesn't necessarily work as a game setting. To do that, I've had to narrow my focus to specific times and places, which I did for three different D&D campaigns.

Domain of the Dead

This was the closest to "standard" D&D. The setting was vaguely Byzantine, although the names looked Welsh, and the religion resembled medieval Christianity, at least on the surface. (It was monotheistic but had a cult of saints, called "Syawar," who were deified heroes.) The campaign began as a pilgrimage across the Awrgawn Empire; then the PCs joined a rebellion against the ruling dynasty. It started with D&D 3E, was converted to 4E, and ended when the players moved out of the area.

Heralds of the Sun

This was inspired by the companions of Mohammed, and took place in a psuedo-African village far to the southwest of the Awrgawn. The PCs inherited a miraculous book, written by a (supposedly) illiterate fisherman. They had to travel to a mysterious pillar to decipher the book and unleash its divine power. A D&D 5E campaign, it ended when two players (boyfriend and girlfriend) broke up, and a third became upset at the game's religious overtones.

The Skyborn

This one took place thousands of years before the others, and was loosely based on the Mahabharata, although the setting was meant to echo Bronze-age Mesopotamia. A noblewoman, fleeing a tyrant, asked the gods for help. They responded by impregnating her with four children, who grew up to be the PCs. The PCs then had to overthrow the King to avenge their fallen father. This 5E campaign took place over the Covid lockdowns, and convinced me I needed a new system.

I'll talk about the gods next issue when "Gods and Other Riffraff" is the IgTheme. Also, I made a [crude comic book](#) about the world's creation myth, and wrote up the background ("[The Story of the Syawar](#)") behind the *Domain of the Dead* campaign.

COMMENTS E & A #10

Me

So about the name thing... I accidentally misspelled **Brian Rogers'** name in CMBF # 4, and he complained. I thought I'd make a joke about it last issue, but when I sent in CMBF # 6, **Jim** told me I'd misspelled *his* and **Joshua's** names, too. That's when I said "to hell with it" and misspelled *everyone's* last name, so no one would feel left out. In all seriousness, I *will* try to do better.

If you want to hear more people losing their shit in *World of Warcraft*, I was reminded of our guild's most infamous quote: Jessica Q -- a diminutive Korean-American with a Queens accent -- screaming, "If you hadn't F*CKING DIED none of this would've happened!!"

Patrick Riley

Derailment at St. Faustina Station was impressive, thank you! I hope you told players the bird names in Room E7; for some of us, our avian knowledge ends with "some fly, others don't."

Gardener Fox

Sneaking in D&D: I don't know how this was handled before *Greyhawk*, to be honest; maybe they thought the Surprise rules covered it. I do remember discussion in *Dragon* for AD&D1, somewhere between #48 to #78 or so. There they said you shouldn't give Thief abilities to other classes, for Game Balance reasons, and the absolute best would be a base 0% chance + racial and Dexterity modifiers, making sneaking impossible for humans below Dexterity 17.

I like the *Soldier of Fortune* piloting mechanics, and feel like a fraud for not having something similar in 2FT. OTOH I wouldn't want them crashing *everywhere*. What the heck is the GM supposed to do if they crash in, say, Belgium? Have an adventure in a chocolate factory?

Pum

I know why you follow U.S. politics to some extent: You need to know if the president is a [STRING OF EXPLETIVES DELETED TO MAINTAIN NON-PARTISAN STATUS], because that has a huge and obvious im-



pact on the U.K. But knowing the status of the Voting Rights Act, as **Michael** does? That's impressive!

Democratic politics junkies -- like myself -- follow Starmer's progress for many reasons. We're worried about the Reform Party, and hope Labour (or another moderate or left party) can beat them. Starmer's troubles also come up when discussing Democratic strategy, and the continuing debate between our moderate and liberal/socialist factions. While the Clinton wing could point to Tony Blair's successes, and Jeremy Corbyn's failures, in defense of a centrist approach, Starmer's travails give ammunition to the other side.

John Redden

"How about socioeconomic analysis?" Oh, SEA is fine! (Particularly for world building.) Hell, I don't object to "politics" per se, only to crappy or irrelevant political writing.

Erika Frank

I have Campaign Cartographer and could make some maps if you like. As for art, I'm a fairly good penciller but my inking and coloring skills aren't great (see linked comic book, above).

I ran a number of mysteries in my Hartland City campaign; **Josh**, **Lisa** and **Avram** were among the players. I used your method # 1, more or less, and they never had any problem solving them. The trick is to make the "mystery" more than a big puzzle; basing them on the pulps, rather than the cozies, helped me realize this. The PCs should be threatened, stabbed, shot at, drugged, kidnapped, thrown off cliffs, and even have to talk to people before the final clue is revealed. Exciting enough that the "mystery" is almost an afterthought.

Clerics: Yeah, part of the problem with D&D Clerics is that the medieval Catholic Church is a *really bad model* for a "generic" fantasy game. Hierarchical, supra-national, and with the power to enforce orthodoxy across an entire continent? No other institution in human history comes close. Gygax's choice reflects his historical interests, not what made sense for his game. (Especially as Gygax, a devout Jehovah's Witness, refused to even mention Christian religion in D&D, considering it blasphemous to do so, which didn't prevent idiots from declaring it a Satanic conspiracy anyway.)

"A game jam would no doubt collect several variants of existing systems." Thanks for this list! I would like to get a handle on this whole scene, and will try to restrain my skepticism as I check them out.

Roger Bell-West

"Regarding politics, one of my concerns is that 'we don't talk about politics' can very easily become 'we don't question the status quo.'" Well again, *I'm not opposed to politics* per se, just to bad political writing! And when I think of bad political writing in A&E, my examples are *libertarian and right-wing zines*, not left-wing ones. (I didn't say this in the essay because I wanted to make a bi-partisan point.)

For example, I remember one guy, an obvious Ayn Rand/Heinlein fan. Once he talked about running a *noir* campaign. Great! I thought, I love *noir* and was curious what he'd come up with. Then a couple of paragraphs in, he said something like, "The crime-filled world of *noir* can only exist under Big Government." Well, that killed my interest. (Yeah, I get it, you can't have crime unless there are laws to break, but even with Prohibition, the 1920s were not a "Big Government" period by any reasonable measure.) He wasn't rude, and he was on topic (more or less), but that monomania was incredibly tedious.

Lisa Padol

Pulp and the 1990s: Another issue with the “nostalgia” angle -- which I didn’t mention last issue -- is how pulp authors thought about their own work. Their recurring themes, oddly enough, were realism and authenticity. They prized accuracy, in their settings, in their science, and in other details. Saying “this is a game where you replay dumb, happy, slappy romps” seemed alien to that spirit, even if that accurately describes some bad pulps. It’d be like basing a *Star Wars* game on the Holiday Special.

“Oddly, it is the isolated city in a fog that is currently old hat.” Damn! That’s surprising. I guess I’m just another [man who always peaked too soon](#).

Game jams: This may be a personality thing. If I really care about something, I want to perfect it. I laughed at John Wick (the designer, not the assassin) when he whined about working *ALL NIGHT* on *7th Sea* mechanics. Basic game mechanics are like the operating system, they’re the last thing you want to half-ass.

There’s also the question of focus. RPGs have many, many components from book to table, from rules, to setting, to campaigns, to single sessions. There are many rule sets and many dungeons, but much less work in between. Why not work on those?

Avram Grumer

Oh Calibri has bold and italic, but MIDDLE AGES (my heading font) does not.

“[Sometimes] when I think some statement is ‘horseshit’ it’s because I’ve failed to understand it.” I heard a memorable lecture at Hampshire College on this issue, distinguishing between “this doesn’t make sense” and “I don’t understand it.” One helpful hint is if they’re using common words or jargon. You might not understand references to “myocardial defecation syndrome (MDS)” unless you have medical training, for example. Using familiar words in an unfamiliar, jargony way can also cause confusion.

So with that in mind, “noun” versus “verb” based games ... Yeah, it sounds like B.S. to me. Take your example of dodging rolls: Lots of TTRPGs, particularly older ones, do without them. Typically the chance to hit is affected by an enemy’s stats, dodging and parrying are assumed, and the action is resolved with a single roll rather than two. It’s a design choice, not a deep philosophical disagreement.

“Part of me regrets the apparent need to tame the bizarre wildness of the Marvel comics universe.” Understood; part of the appeal of James Gunn movies is that he leans into the overstuffed wooliness of contemporary comics. OTOH I find current comics grotesque to the point that they literally disgust me. Hearing that the Joker became a “4th dimensional entity” and *ate China*, killing its one billion inhabitants, makes me think “this is a franchise that is begging to die.” How jaded do you have to be to find a story like *that* entertaining? And why is a jewel thief in grease paint the right vessel for that fantasy?



Brian Misiaszek

Damn, I'm so sorry about your loss of Zoe, and right after Sadie, too.
The Mazorra continues to be a remarkable achievement.

Joshua Kronengold

Glad you liked the background on Hartland City! It *was* a fun campaign. None of the D&D campaigns I've run since have been as good, alas.

Whale Whores: Well, let's start by pointing out that my original "whale whores" story had no literal whales in it! Assuming there *are* whales... My first question would be, "How in the world would whales exchange sex for money? They don't seem to have any." Answering that question would lead to lots of world-building. Maybe they exchange sex for songs, and these songs are guides for 'vision quests' that they need to complete to reach higher states of existence. What challenges do they face in these 'vision quests'? That would have to be worked out as well... The possibilities are fascinating, much more interesting IMO than "How do I adopt *Blades in the Dark* rules for whales?" As I said to **Lisa**, though, my problem is more with focus than objections to new rules per se; if you have limited time, fill out the setting first!

Jim Vassilakos

RPG Magazine Index: I checked it out, and it's impressive! It included some magazines I wouldn't expect, like *Analog* and *Heavy Metal*. Did the listed issues have RPG content?

With AI, I've been hearing two narratives:

- a) AI produces nothing but useless junk
- b) AI is going to take our jobs and take over the government

Some people embrace *both* narratives, but that's silly since they're clearly contradictory. In the past I was partial to A, but your essay (among others) is inching me towards B.

It's a frightening prospect for the professional middle class (which I'm part of, of course). Is it bad for democracy? I would say it's bad if it makes it coercion easier. Leaders are reluctant to massacre protesters if they can't trust their troops to shoot. If AI drones kill without human intervention, or without the right to refuse orders, then yeah, that will be bad.

And no, I don't think your AI essay "crossed the line." Once again, *I don't object to political content!* Just to bad content, which is often (but not always!) political.

Game system identification: In a recent BlueSky meme, people listed their First game, Latest game, Longest game, Favorite game, Favorite mechanics, Favorite setting and Favorite art. Would that help?

SEE YOU NEXT MONTH, COMRADES!

Clark's inchoate thoughts on Settings

I've been considering what I, personally, prefer in RPG settings. Trying to break this down into manageable bits:

- 1- **Complexity** – if the setting is too big, too dense, or too complicated, it's not a good playground and starts to feel like a chore to use. *Forgotten Realms* is an example of this. Sure, it's rich in detail. But it's sprawling, constantly expanding, and kinda vanilla. You almost need to "major" in the setting to use it, and it doesn't get the game table much beyond generic fantasy in feeling. On the flip side, there needs to be some substance. I think *Ravnica* was an interesting start but instead got offered as a one-shot book. In the end, it had some great options but was too shallow for meaningful campaign choices or exploration. More like a sourcebook for fantasy than a usable campaign. *Numenera* is fascinating but it takes a lot of time to figure out what things even *are* before you can engage. Some players may be willing to make that investment, but many just want to play. My ideal would be:
 - a. Enough lore to provide a foundation
 - b. Not so much lore that it feels like homework
 - c. Enough detail to spark imagination (it "builds its own adventure hooks")
 - d. Permissive enough to be adapted easily to a wide range of play styles
 - e. It should feel intuitive – easy to grok, but *something* below the surface
- 2- **Framework** – a good gaming setting needs to offer a set of clear ideas you can build on without having a massive canon or complex rules you feel you must memorize. The GM should be empowered, not constrained. When the published lore starts to feel like an obstacle, the setting isn't useful for gameplay.
 - a. *What I want*: how the world works, what cultures and factions are about, the assumptions that shape life, sources of tension and conflict, rules of reality that are easy to use but allow improvisation.
 - b. *What I don't want*: exhaustive timelines; dozens of insignificant NPCs, detailed maps that won't ever be used, arbitrary constraints on play and player decisions, and (most important) canon that feels like it *must* be respected and used centrally.
- 3- **Gaps** – there needs to be empty space on the scale the campaign will operate within. This varies considerably with play style, of course. *Star Wars* does a great

job of this for space opera because it's so vast you can borrow the "look and feel" but spin up a whole campaign somewhere out there that isn't channeled by canon. The gaps can be filled in to create the campaign's own version of the setting.

- 4- **Coherent** – there should be a consistent tone, recognizable themes, and a good sense of what fits and what would be out of place. But a setting or a canon that says "you can't do that here" enforces too narrow an aesthetic for gameplay. I'm OK with "you can bend it but probably shouldn't break it" concepts, not with "you have to do it like this" concepts.
- 5- **Tensions** – good settings have structural tensions built into them. Old rivalries, strange relics, cultural misunderstandings, dormant threats, etc. You shouldn't have to dig into the setting to generate adventure ideas. That should be automatic, and in most popular settings it is – you consider the setting and a dozen types of feels-right adventures should be obvious. Sure, you might have to provide the specifics, but it should be easy to do that. And the players should easily understand how the adventure intersects with the setting.
- 6- **Summary** – Putting it all together, I think that a good setting is:
 - a. Fast to understand
 - b. Easy to explain
 - c. Simple enough that it's not overwhelming
 - d. Rich enough to provide long-term enjoyment
 - e. The backstory should be concise, digestible, and relevant to actual play
 - f. The depth of the setting should be grasped through actual play

Media-rich settings (movies or series) can help with some of these points. The look-and-feel is very clear to most players. Visual media offers a rich tableaux to exploit and can even suggest typical adventure scene construction. However, some of these settings suffer from being too restrictive. One of the reasons I usually don't care for *Star Trek* campaigns is the assumption that characters will be Federation/Starfleet approved. If that's what the players *want*, OK. But if they're seeking a more open-ended sci-fi game...?

Riposte at the Post Office

Rogers: I remember Owen KC Stephen's spinning up a "52 in 52" type thing, where new content would come every week for a year. I looked at several of them, when 5e resources were few. I wonder if that effort got finished. The early ones I remember were pretty good.

Corcoran: Regarding magic items in an actually magic world, I think we'd see a ton of stuff that no sourcebook will ever present. How about a magic comb that just fixes my hair without snagging? Some kind of magic T-shirt that stops perspiration and B.O.? Shoes that triple my exercise outcomes? Clothes that never need to be washed and never get wrinkly... I mean, a +3 sword is great and all but really how many times would I need that? I'd rather spend that money on wall paint that always looks fresh and clean. And that will change colors when I feel like a new look.

Redden: I really like that map. Cool idea and well executed. That would be a fun game.

John Redden



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Mix Natter And Anti-Natter

Kauai

My son, granddaughter spent a week in Kauai. I have never seen so *many feral chickens*. A beautiful place. The trips to the two areas where Jurassic Park was filmed were rained out by a storm. Boo.



Regardance

We finished the second season of Foundation. The third season will focus on the Mule. We find it entertaining

I am continuing to read Children of Ruin, the second book by Tsaikovsky. I am closing to the end. From my perspective, interesting alien and alien human mix.

We took in the Hail Mary Project. Fascinating, but depressing at times. In general a good flick.

My daughter had never seen Forbidden Planet. I saw it when I was ten years old, making me a science fiction fan for life. We spooled it for her on our screen. Its amazing how it still holds up.

Stressful but Necessary

Heart surgery is scheduled 7-May-2026

Stay tuned for results.

Ignorable Theme

RPG setting design, I prefer science fiction adventures. Open ended with limits.

Sum Comments

Patrick Riley, that is a very impressive and well organized implementation of your Wildcard role playing system.

Pedro and **Maira**, Investigar... interesting with only investigation, no combat.

Brian Rogers, breaking in a new boss? Eek.// I'd be interested in a Starwars writeup.// I don't know if I'll be part pig or cow.// I enjoyed the traditional superhero comics writeup.

Matt Stevens, re Shadow monsters and mythical quality. I enjoyed the piece. Unique weakness makes them more entertaining.

Paul Holman, Maybe a living star ship might have unique *monster tactics*.// I also have to keep track of the political mess in the USA depressing as it is.

Myles Corcoran, I don't believe the AI bubble will burst. After reading a number of articles in the IEEE there is a movement to use less power and move towards environmental responsibility.// Too many players for Mausritter? A nice problem to have.// Yes, E&A is a large read. I speed read some of the zines. // Nice gravity situation for an out of control neutron star.//

Good card suggestions.

Clark Timmins, re Elaria Construction, any magic?// Flights to Oahu for medical. Kaiser pays for them.

ELF, that's a nice application of tarot for gaming.//De Ludis Elficis Fictis, now I know what people are talking about.

Attronarch, it seems the players have a bit more wisdom.// Well organized zine as usual.

Michael Cule, re raw prawn. Interesting.// I enjoyed the cat scratch.

Dylan Capel, it's not politics. It social commentary.// re comment to Joshua Kronengold. The Emacs editor had the ability to run a shell and edit through it as a session and select and edit. This was in 1987 before any *windows* editor. The Elisp component was also powerful. You could extend the editor.

Roger BW, Lions. Tiger and Dragons and Iraq?// I like the images of old aircraft.// Fortunately I haven't played a GURPS game with magic other than (sic) high tech.

Gabriel Roark, hang in there.

Lisa Padol, That's an excellent list of COC modules. Are any of them designed to be ran as a one-off? // The hippie Tarot. *snicker* // I've always preferred dice to cards going back to being in a casino.// My son has an interest in OSR gaming.

Avram Grumer, hmm, a *linking*.// Narration is used in many situations. Role-playing is a specific projection. You can narrate roll-playing. Role playing is a conceived and projected behavior.

Patrick Zoch, Another beautiful zine. The advantage of going last is you get to go two times in a row. That doesn't happen again until going first.

Brian Misiaszek, I've been having conversations with my daughter about the pain oif losing a beloved cat. You, me and her have felt it. // I continue to read Habana Horror as a campaign and as a story. Excellent.

Joshua Kronengold, best wishes on the medical situation.// re the job situation. Keep trying. One of them will stick.// Once you introduce magic historical accuracy goes out the window.// Shipping is critical for Hawai`i. Shipping by air is expensive and even more so now.

Vassilakos, Collinson and **Rader**, I continue to enjoy the birthday party

with all the psionics.

Jargon Zen

The student asked the Zen Master, "What is a *going up* sentence?"

The Master answered, "The Buddha and all eminent teachers fell into the fire."

Easter Humor

A goalie and a striker on a soccer team have an incredible game. Afterwards the goalie invites the striker to a dinner he will host. The striker asks if he can bring his dad to the dinner. Sure. They all gather at the incredible dinner.

There they are. The father, the son and goalie host.

OVERLORD'S ANNALS

ATTRONARCH, THE EXALTED OVERLORD OF UNCONTESTED VASTLANDS

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

Adventurers escape from trouble and then run into new trouble—because that is what adventurers do!

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS CAMPAIGN

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

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

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

ATTRIBUTIONS

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CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 106

Adventurers

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

Ambros, cleric level 5. 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.

Riker, magic-user level 2. A magic-user seeking glory or death.

Tiberias, normal human. Regretting his employment.

Longgrass 12th, Waterday

Engulfed by noxious yellow gas, Hagar and Ambros could barely see. Led by Darius's voice, they retreated from the chamber where they just faced four demonic creatures.

"Shut the doors! Let 'em come to us!"

But nothing came.

Peeking into the chamber revealed it was empty. It was stained yellow from top to bottom. There was one door to the left and one to the right. Opening the former reveal a spacious chamber with two dwarven corpses. One was lying on its right side, with its back to the adventurers. The other one was torn in half.

Adventurers shut the door and went for the other door.

They moved forward, down the corridor, until they reached a hard turn. Hagar peeked around the corner, only to be dazzled by a festival of colourful lights. Unsure what to do, other adventurers passed Rorik's corpse—a third of it they still had—to Hagar. Then the dwarf chucked it around the corner.

In a split second the party had been flashed and surrounded by glimmering light. Horned dog sized bunnies were all around them! They rammed and gored few of the members before vanishing into thin air.

The party moved on, following the twisting corridor. They found a dead end with thousands of silver and gold coins arranged in small nests. Another dead end was an unfinished room with stairs leading down into nothing. Third dead end were stone doors with skull on it and two large keyholes.

The adventurers were too experienced to be lured by two matching keys laying on the stone table right next to the doors. Thus they backtracked all the way to the chamber with dwarven corpses.

It was a large fifty by fifty feet chamber. There were three corpses in total, all in horrific shape. The corpses were decomposing, but were still much fresher than other dead people they encountered so far. Doors in the south-west corner were covered with blood and gore from bottom to the ceiling.

More interesting was the curious mechanism in the center of north wall. Some five feet above the floor, a tilted horizontal disc jutted out of the wall. From it three rods—as spokes of a wheel—stood straight. On the upper face of the half-disc was an etched mask with frowning face.

Abandoning the contraption, the party backtracked to the chamber with large stone face. It had matching facial expression to the face on the disc—a frowning expression.

The face was almost twenty feet tall and ten feet wide. Dark hole in the mouth was in fact an opening into a tight crawlspace. Tiberias volunteered to investigate it. He had to strip into nothing but loincloth and rope around his waist. Then he im-

provised a weapon with burning torch tied to it, and went into it.

The space was very tight, forcing him to crawl on his belly with little space for looking forward. After ten or so minutes he heard a voice speak in unfamiliar language. Ignoring it, he proceeded forward. His eyes were red and teary from the smoke coming into his eyes. At one moment he decided to pause to rest a bit. But he couldn't! In fact, he was now sliding forward, scrapping his forearms and knees.

Even worse, moments later he was in a head on free fall.

Hagar felt the rope suddenly move much faster. He dropped his body weight and held onto the rope.

Tiberias felt the rope around his waist tightening. The drop was stopped with a powerful jerk. The shock nearly made him black out. The man vomited down the chute. Then he decided to drop down his torch so he could see what lies ahead.

His torch disappeared in thick darkness.

Hagar was joined by other adventurers in pulling the rope. It was tense until it wasn't. They pulled out empty rope. The loop and knot were still there. Tiberias wasn't.

There was no time to grieve.

Party headed back to the room with weird contraption. There they investigated it for hours until one of the clerics suggested at least three characters try to push on the rods. Lo and behold! The disc rotated. Moments later frowning face was replaced with a smiling face.

Running back to the room with stone face confirmed it too had changed its facial expression. This time Hagar volunteered. They tied several hundred feet worth of rope around him. They also agreed on various rope signals.



Getting down on all fours, Hagar entered the mysterious crawlspace. Moving on, he too reached a moment when he could hear someone or something speaking in an unfamiliar language. He too ignored it and moved on.

As dwarf he could feel several inclines. He turned right, twice. After long time he reached a dead end. But he could feel a cold wheel touching his exposed belly. Since there was so little space, he had trouble getting a good grip. But once he did, he was able to twist it with great ease. Floor underneath him gave in and he fell face first

on a hard stone floor beneath.

Dazed but alive, he pulled on the rope, signalling others to follow. Everyone stripped, and made sure to carry only the most valuable items that fit through the crawlspace. They also dragged Rorik's corpse through, as well as stiff FoxGlove.

Reunited, the party lit up a torch. Unarmoured and barely armed, they rapidly moved, following a long corridor forward. They passed a chamber, ignoring whatever might be inside, moved into another chamber, and then left through archway. Here

Hagar recognised the chamber with framed gold sheet.

"I know the way out! Be careful for there is a dart trap activated by pressure plate!"

Adventurers exited the ruined tower just as night was about to fall. They camped in its ruins, enjoying the smell of fresh air once again.

Survivors returned to Hara on Longgrass 13th. Just in time for Hagar to recuperate and prepare for dinner with Aseti Namelin, one of the most influential people in the region.

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 107

Adventurers

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

Ambros, cleric level 5. Follower of Aniu, Lord of Time.

Darius, cleric level 4. Follower of Dacron, God of Craftsmen.

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

Tamren, cleric level 3. Stoic paladin of Coriptis, the Goddess of Battle and Inamorata of Berserkers. Aventail hides all but his two piercing blue eyes.

Lucie, fighter level 1. Physically competent, but mentally and socially inept.

Sunstrong 2nd, Waterday

Large chestnut tree towered above the poorly concealed entrance into the drug den. As always before, the hole had been covered with a wooden plank, which in turn was covered with bushes and brambles and soil.

Unlike before, the tree was now flanked by two shoddily made wooden towers and several rows of poorly made wooden palisades. The latter were in fact just sharpened tree

branches and trunks driven into the ground at an angle.

None of that was enough to stop Hagar and his crack team. They jumped two sleeping pig faced orcs and killed them in cold blood before either could squeal. Then they dispatched orcs on the towers.

Stupid pigs were blind as bats during the day. And even if the weren't, they could possibly not match the bloodthirsty Tamren, bent on earning absolution for his cowardice at the same place months prior. He would never stand a chance of being consumed by Coriptis eternal flame—unless he bathed in blood of those that had broken his resolve once.

But they weren't here for Tamren's redemption. No. They were here to demolish and eradicate the beastmen that established camp so close to Hara. Not due to benevolence nor heroic aspirations, but due to Hagar accepting Namelin's offer to become their candidate for Hara's new castellan.

The party chucked the plank to the side and descended into the drug den.

Bell-shaped entrance chamber was different than before. It was cleaned. There were no impaled corpses.

Adventurers decided to head right. They swept chamber after chamber. All empty. Rotting straw mats, broken weapons, signs of being lived-in by filthy creatures. Gone.

"I recall orc and goblin barrack being around here. These were probably their rooms."

Ransacked library housed three mutilated corpses. Hagar recognised Celeborn of Revelshire whom he had adventured twelve months ago with. Two decayed humans were unknown to him, but were probably adventurers as well.

Pushing on, the party followed a twisting corridor into a dry, tobacco smelling storage room. There another door led into a trap that failed to foil Hagar and Tamren. Upon forcing the doors open, they both noticed a corridor extending into infinity. Instinctively, both looked away.

There was no magic, only trickery of perspective using two bottom to ceiling mirrors facing each other. Averting their gaze, the adventurers pressed forth, into a sixty feet wide chamber with a thirty feet long pool.

"What a weird chamber. . ."

The chamber was pristine. The water was crystal clear and warm. Stone pegs jutted out of north wall.

“Look, a dagger!”

Indeed in the center of the pool a dagger rested at the bottom. The bottom was at an incline, with south side being three feet deep, and north side around ten feet.

One of the adventurers pushed the dagger with the ten foot pole to the south end. Then Hagar jumped into the water and picked the dagger up. It was a nice looking weapon, but ultimately mundane.

“The night should fall soon. We should get out before orcs come out and realise somebody killed the guards.”

And thus the adventurers rapidly backtracked, hopped on their horses and rode hard to Hara. They got lost during the night, but once they found the Farhills river it was trivial to follow it downstream.

They reached Hara on Sunstrong 3rd, few hours after sunrise.

Beastmen got to live yet another day.

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 108

Adventurers

Riker, *magic-user level 2*. A magic-user seeking glory or death.

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.

Hagar the Hewer, *dwarf level 4*. Imagine Conan as dwarf.

Ambros, *cleric level 5*. Follower of Aniu, Lord of Time.

Heran Marod, *cleric level 2*. Bearded, aging man with shaved head. Follower of Umannah, the Sun God, The Radiant Death.

Sunstrong 4th, Fireday

Hagar led a new party to the Den. Half of the men were clerics, armed with Cure Light Wounds and Hold Person, as well as one magic-user with two prepared Sleep spells. Once again the party had borrowed six horses from the Namelin stable, allowing them to reach their destination in six hours.

Two shabby towers as well as wooden palisades still surrounded the tree. No new sentries were to be spotted anywhere. Scouting the environs revealed no traces of ambush or anything suspicious. The party descended into the dungeon, and opted to march

straight ahead through the open archway.

Long corridor gently sloped upwards, something Hagar spotted after fifty or so feet of marching.

SLAM!

A loud thud of wood hitting against stone wall could be heard up ahead. A large, six feet wide barrel rolled out of the darkness and towards the party. A lit fuse could be spotted on its right side.

Luckily the party was just at the junction so there was plenty of space to evade the rolling danger. Unfortunately two members failed to jump to the side. Stalwart Heran decided to hold his ground, shield raised up while agile Riker opted to jump upwards. The former was hit by the barrel, forcing him against the wall. The latter was hit by the barrel mid-jump, landing with his belly on the top.

Due to Heran's interference the barrel changed course, turning right and getting stalled in the corridor. Lying on top of the barrel, the burning fuse was just in Riker's face. Heran sprinted around the corner, some twenty feet away, and stopped, for whatever reason.

Magic-User tried to extinguish the fuse with his palm, but only suffered burns and blisters. This was one inch thick rope, soaked in flammable oil. Unwilling to risk any further, Riker slumped off the barrel and sprinted to

the junction and then left.

Heroic Beorg charged from around the corner, leading with his polearm.

“I will cut the fuse before it burns up!”

Beorg the Legend reached the barrel just in time for it to explode, suffering maximum impact and fire damage. Those that lurked around the corner were singed as well as forced to the ground from shock.

Smell of burnt flesh permeated the corridor.

Clerics rushed to heal each other. Surprisingly, charred Beorg was carbonised but alive.

SLAM!

The same sound was heard once more. This time everyone ran left and around the corner, and then burst through the doors, slamming them shut just in time. Little flames surged from underneath. Dramatic, but harmless.

Catching a moment to breath, the party realised they fled into a familiar chamber. A small altar with the symbol of three crossed swords was in the middle. Bunk beds lined all the walls.

“There should be a one-way secret passageway just there. . .”

Indeed, the adventurers had easily found the secret doors they perused in the past. From there they easily found their way to the bell shaped entrance chamber. But their way was barred!

First, they caught an orc by surprise.

Pig-faced monster was waiting with a club, facing the doors leading into the entrance chamber. It certainly did not expect a bunch of adventurers to exit from the doors behind it.

Monster was hacked to pieces in seconds.

Second, the doors were nailed shut. Without equipment, Hagar spent significant time to tear down plank by plank.

Eventually the party broke through and fled back to Hara to lick their singed asses.

Sunstrong 6th, Airday

Healed but hairless, the adventurers returned to the den once more. One their way out of the town, Akasi Namelin derided Hagar for putting their plans into jeopardy. The dwarf had little patience for Namelin's eldest son.

Riker the Wise remembered to bring a magical construct which had been collecting dust in the company's vault.

It was a palm-sized bee which can follow simple instructions and offer one to three word description of what it sees.

Scouting the dark corridor from whence barrels rode revealed little but closed doors.

Checking remaining three doors in the bell shaped chamber revealed they were all barred from the other side. Hence the party decided to go through the broken doors.

From there they rethreaded some of the chambers they've been through before.

Passing the stairs down, the party decided to explore southern portion of the dungeon. Alas, they were mostly empty and junk rooms. Peak excitement were a gelatinous cube guarding a completely empty room, and a finger ring-sized snake eating its own tail resting on a pillow under a glass dome.

Beorg broke the later, and then one of the adventurers grabbed the ring. Nothing ill happened to anyone, despite the warning uttered to them.

"One last doors to check" led the party into a thirty by thirty foot trap chamber. The doors slam shut behind them, and green gas begun filling the chamber as magic mouth spoke:

"Unbidden, I come at night Unasked, I am gone by morn."

A set of glyphs appeared on the door in vertical line: a star on top, crescent moon in the middle, and a sleeping man on the bottom.

Half of the party immediately succumbed to the gas, dropping to the ground as if dead. Tarkus yelled the correct answer but nothing happened until he touched the correct glyph as well.

Gas stopped hissing and doors opened by themselves.

Tarkus dragged everyone outside and administered awakening slaps.

Once everyone got back to their senses, the party stopped to think about their further course of action. They were at the literal and proverbial junction.

Where next to conquer?

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 109

Adventurers

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

Ambros, cleric level 5. 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.

Riker, magic-user level 2. A magic-user seeking glory or death.

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

in Revenge.

Almaric the Legendary, elf level 1. Very smart and quite good looking; adventuring just for the money.

Sunstrong 6th, Airday

"Where are some beastmen to slay?! Show them and I'll kill 'em all!"

Akasi Namelin boasted to Hagar and his crew. The eldest son followed the party shortly after they left Hara. He was accompanied by Leticia and Almaric, just to make sure no ill fortune befalls him, despite marching with three dozen light footmen.

"Remember to keep the kid alive." Riker reminded everyone.

"I'll go first, you right behind me!" Hagar commanded to Namelin's eldest heir.

"Yes! I'll be right behind you! Let's go!"

"Let me remind you that monsters here are intelligent. Don't rush forward blindly—" Riker attempted to educate the young man, but was interrupted with brash "I have hunted before!"

"You might become the hunted here..." commentary went unanswered.

Heran Marod left the dungeon and waited for the party above, overseeing a Akasi's thuggish band.

“Where to next?”

The party had three possible venues: go down the stairs and deeper into the dungeon, go east and explore the beyond the ransacked library, or go north down the corridor with exploding barrels.

Afraid to go down or to face the fiery doom, they opted for the second option and went for the library. Nothing much beyond a large kitchen with adjoining pantry, and two dead ends with smashed statues.

Having adventured for nearly sixteen hours, the party withdrew from the dungeon and camped by the tree. Surely nothing would dare disrupt their sleep with their numbers.

Sunstrong 7th, Waterday

Well rested, the adventures continued their delve. They explored kitchen surroundings in the time it takes a lantern to burn through one filling of oil. Little did they find beyond more looted rooms. In an act of desperation they caressed and tapped many walls, hoping to find any secret shortcuts.

“We will have to go through that corridor. There is no way around it.”

“There was a large dinning table in one of the rooms. Let’s break it and turn it into a mantlet!”

“What a great idea! Let’s do that!”

More hours went by as they put their plan in motion.

Once in the bell shaped chamber, Beorg shot a lit arrow and hit the doors out of which, supposedly, barrels were rolling out of.

Nothing.

Next Leticia stripped her metal armour, lit a torch, and sprinted down the barrel corridor. Reaching the junction she jumped left and peeked around the corner.

Nothing.

So she ran up to the doors, knocked, and ran back.

Nothing.

Remaining party formed ranks and advanced up the corridor, with Riker and Ambros ready to unleash magical and divine wrath alike.

Nothing.

Almaric brought Leticia’s armour on his Floating Disc, so the lady was armoured once more.

Reunited, the party marched to the doors.

Nothing.

A dwarf and an elf decided to listen at the doors.

Nothing.

Finally they pulled the doors open!

Empty barrel rack was all there was to be found. Besides three rusty levers, that is.

“Unbelievable!”

“Let’s check the corridor we passed...”

Indeed there was one unexplored corridor leading east, then turning north. Faint smell of death and rot could be felt. Marching on soon revealed the nature of the challenge: a labyrinth. Multiple dead ends, sometime empty, sometime with insulting traps. Skeletons of long dead monsters and humans alike. One of the skeletons was a large human with a bull’s head. A rusty massive battle-axe rested next to it.

Hours and hours went on as adventurers trudged through endless corridors. At one moment the stench of death became almost overbearing. By now the adventurers had learned this must mean trouble. They carefully proceeded, ready for whatever might await them.

Hagar at the front turned the corner and came face to face with a horrible creature. A human female-looking

face floated some eight feet in the air. Its eyes were almond-shaped; long, lanky black hair was stuck to its pale face; fangs and long split tongue protruded out of its slack jawline.

“Purge the Evil!!!”

Tarkus yelled and charged past Hagar; the dwarf charged too. Almaric and Beorg went right behind them, while others backed them.

True extent of the creature’s unholy existence was revealed with approach of light. The face was not floating mid-air. No. It was attached to a tubular body made of most horrible make—mangled, broken, and headless bodies of women.

Hacking into the monster made it ooze slimy, dark purple ichor. The creature gazed into Hagar’s eyes. Stout dwarf resisted voices in his head and struck the creature. Next the monster flew up in the air and swirled in circular motion. Almaric, Leticia, and Akasi dropped to the ground, sleeping soundly.

Riker’s spell had failed to produce any effect. On the other hand Riker’s Awakening Palm worked quite well on the sleeping members of the party.

In a moment of shock, the ghostly creature towered over Hagar and then bit him in the neck. Dwarf’s eyes turned upside down and he went limp in seconds. The monster wrapped its long body around Hagar and flew off with him into the darkness.

Ambros pursued the monster without missing a beat, with Tarkus, Beorg and Almaric right behind him. Following the purple snail trail was easy. Moments later they caught up with the abomination and hacked it to pieces.

Tarkus the Promising delivered the killing blow straight to the face of this horrible creature. Its body fell apart, leaving a pile of mangled corpses on top of Hagar.

“What a blessed dwarf he is...”

“Oh no...” Akasi muttered, distraught.

The bite marks were already necrotic-black; the flesh rotted away.

Hagar's veins were dark purple, bloated and firm. His eyes were completely white, with yellow pus on the lower lids.

Spittle and foam caked his angled mouth.

The future castellan of Hara had died.

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 110

Adventurers

Ambros, cleric level 5. 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.

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

Riker, magic-user level 3. A magic-user seeking glory or death.

Gomm, thief level 5. Swarthy, good looking, dark-skinned thief. Sweet opium-like aroma is his fragrance of choice.

Dalkanarion, fighter level 2. A youthful specimen in full strength, full of purpose, bluster, and eagerness to prove himself.

Almaric the Legendary, elf level 1. Very smart and quite good looking; adventuring just for the money.

Sunstrong 6th, Airday

Hagar's flesh rapidly necroticised. Nightmarish creature's venom was potent indeed. Without much to do about it, the party had decided to peek around the only unexplored corner of this accursed labyrinth.

Doors!

Forming battle ranks, the adventurers pushed forth bravely. A simple but well furnished room with several bookcases, comfortable sofa and a bed.

More importantly, it was not empty.

A dark-skinned lithe man stood by the bookcase, thumbing through some of the books. He was guarded by a large, muscular man sporting well oiled muscles covered with little more than a cape, helmet, and few select pieces of armour.

After a bit of back and forth it was established that the man was Master Thief Gomm, and Dalkanarion was his bodyguard. The duo decided to assist the party in the further exploration of the dungeon.

Adventurers spent rest of the day trudging through unexplored rooms finding nothing of value. Exhausted, they retreated above and camped by the dungeon entrance. Akasi was distraught with Hagar's death, worried what will his father do to him when he finds out the bad news.

Either way, the party slept well, and Akasi's mercenaries did a solid job during night.

Sunstrong 7th, Waterday

“Let's go deeper!” Tarkus proposed, and finally everyone agreed to it.

The party traversed the first floor without any resistance. Following the stairs down led them to a rectangular chamber, fifty feet deep and thirty feet wide. There were two doors on the east side, one door on the north side, and two on the west side.

Adventurers fanned out and listened at each of them.

“Pssst! Over here!”

Loud snoring could be heard coming from the second doors on the west wall. Gomm tried to identify the source, but failed due to all the noise from his allies.

Strongest fighters took the lead, and everyone stormed the chamber.

Large, brutish figure stumbled up from a straw mattress. Groggy and weaponless, it was quickly hacked to death by the adventurers. Dalkanarion delivered the killing blow—a straight piercing move through the belly. The party then ransacked the monster's chest and chambers.

The room had a door on each side. Interestingly, all doors but the one they came through led into the same corridor. Exploring slowly, the party opted to head north.

After few turns they came to a straight corridor ending with doors. Moreover, there were two doors to the left, and one door to the right.

Sneaking, Gomm could hear sounds from the first doors to the left, as well as doors up north. Securing all the doors sans the first ones, the party formed a marching order and charged into the room.

Four hairy, tiger-faced monsters stood in the corner, seemingly arguing over something. Adventurers caught them by surprise, and encircled them in seconds. Thorm killed one of the monsters with a strong blow with a warhammer to the side of the head. Ambros was the next to draw blood with a majestic over head sweep, smashing into the monster's temple.

Dalkanarion took serious beating but stood his ground, allowing others to attack monsters safely. Almaric drove his spear straight through one monster's ear to the other. The final beastman was slain by Gomm. What an ignominious death it was! Gomm first chopped off the beast's arm. Then he sliced its face. Lastly he gouged out its eyes. The beast writhed as it bled to death.

Clerics administered healing spells, and Gomm handed out several vials of healing liquid. Restored, the party took their attention to the northernmost doors. Once again they formed battle ranks and stormed through the doors.

This time beastmen were not surprised.

Large oak table dominated the center of the room. Massive ogre sat at the north side. Two hyena-headed beasts sat on the west side, and two tiger-faced beastmen on the east side.

Dalkanarion rushed forth and grabbed the table with his mighty thews. Gomm yelled for him to wait as he uncorked a bottle with strange substance in it. He chucked it at the ogre.

The vial smashed straight on the beast's chest. A giant ball of thick, stringy web exploded forth, enveloping ogre, one gnoll, and one bugbear.

With most of the adversaries trapped, the adventurers had little trouble overcoming the remainder of beastmen. The skirmish was brief and brutal.

The party had suffered no losses!

"Chop off ogre's head so we have something to show in Hara."

And so they did.

Collecting coins in the room, the party decided to leave the dungeon and head back to Hara with all the accumulated treasure and Hagar's corpse.

Akasi was a nervous wreck, completely consumed with worry.

The party had debated what to do about Hagar all the way to Hara, without reaching consensus.

How will they explain this one?

IN NEXT ISSUE

The burden of geas...

DENIZENS OF THE LIBRARY #10

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

All About Me

It has been a weird damn month. There have been major changes for my special-needs kiddo and if anyone really wants to hear about them you can reach me offline as I don't want to go into them here. Easter with the family was a little discombobulated as a result but we did get to see our collage age kiddo and the extended family and made the not traditional but still yummy Easter meal of chicken cordon bleu, with homemade rice pilaf and asparagus. Because asparagus. My BIL's side business of home clean outs got 20 boxes of contemporary genre books which everyone in the family thoroughly picked over before we donated the rest to a church yard sale.

The Mystery of Edwin Drood went off a treat at the High School, and I was very happy with how the minimalist set design worked. Basically it was a trio of movable windows that were stonework on one side and wood on the other to evoke various in and outdoor scenes, along with two theater boxes elevated over the stage for the play within the play aspect, and one other rotating wall that was a fireplace and mantle on one side and an opium den on the other. The kids did a great job and we laughed a lot at the opening night show; it was a great send off for the seniors I've been working with for their entire HS experience, and we have promising kids in the wings. Next year we're starting with Narnia, but the director opted for the commercially popular *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* over my suggestion of *The Magician's Nephew*. No one respects chronological order these days.



both views of the windows and the set at the end of act 1, opening night



Finally, the **Star Wars** group is meeting up at the end of the month, so expect more detail on that nextish.

Inside the Library:

More on the Knaves this month, as there have been some interesting events. Since over the two sessions we eventually had everyone there I'm going to do a roll call. Keep in mind that Knave is a classless system where your points in each stat measure how good an X you are (STR for fighter, DEX for Thief, WIS for Ranger, etc. distributing 3 points per level). Characters start with 2 usually random careers, plus they can train to learn new ones; actions in a career's penumbra are +5.

- **Eldon of Hart's Hill** (Level 4, *Tattooist, Carpenter, Insurgent* S7, D1 C2, I1, W0, CH1, HP 19): Tall, lean, strong of arm, he left northern thorp of Hart's Hill in search of fame and fortune on the south side of the island. Inflating his skills to the folk of Mordha Town he scored a contract to locate a bandit camp. Surprisingly, this has worked out for him! Being a leader of the Ordite faction in Cabra's religious civil war for 6 months trained him in insurgency.
 - **Finn:** (Level 2, *Bandit, Servant, Insurgent* S1, D2, C0, I0, W3, CH0 HP 8). The nominal leader of a human/orcish bandit troop that got trapped in Castle Mordha; Eldon rescued the humans before the orcs got hungry, covering their deeds in Mordha Town if they rehabilitated; Finn became Eldon's herald and archer.
 - **Gigglehook** (Level 2, *Orator, Shipwright*, S0, D1, C0, I4, Ch1 HP3) A drunkard, illusionist, and would be ruler, he is known for his mask, cloak, & carousing; His protecting the town of River's End led to a (for the moment) mayoral posting there, which is where he is right now and is included out of completeness.
 - **Gynk** (Level 1, *Pirate, Bandit*, S2, D0, C1, I0, W0, Ch0) an orc from the same bandit troop as Finn, Gynk was hired by Gigglehook rather than turned in, and hides his orcish nature under a mask & cloak. He is Gigglehook's bodyguard.
 - **Blanche Withingworth** (Level 2, *Woodsman, Courier* S0, D0, C1, I2, W1, CH2, HP 8): Of the Shankill Withingworths, Blanche is a bonded courier, which makes her a priestess in the church of Kor. Blanche learned *Masquerade Reel* and *Sculpt Elements* from woodland faerie. Traveling alongside Eldon, Finn, Gigglehook, and Gynk they explored the *Tomb of Saint Festus*, her actions earning her the blessings of the Great Tree Ord (once and again patron of Cabra) and his wife the Lily Queen.

- **Jasper Brightchester** (Level 1, *Guard, Architect*, S1, D0, C1, I0, W1, CH0, HP 5) Once a guard for Kor's temple in the *Keep at Koralgesh*, Jasper was petrified by a medusa during the Keeps final hours. Blanche restored him a century later, and he has sworn to her service as an agent of Kor.
- **Drogo Fernwood** (Level 2, *Guard, Headsman*, S1, D0, C1, I0, W1, Ch0, HP5): guard & executioner at Koralgesh, he was petrified and revived by Blanche (who he always calls *Miss Withingworth*).
- **Remus** (Level 2, *Hermit, Thief-catcher* S2, D1, C1, I1, W0, CH1, HP 6): An animated terra cotta statue of a werewolf who in human form is a brown skinned man covered with scars, and guardian of Oshalla's last shrine (goddess of lycanthropes & abjuration; her werewolves hunt witches, warlocks, and by extension wizards). Meeting Eldon, Finn & Blanch when the former raided Oshalla's shrine to recover the *Arms Argent* (a magical silver sword and shield owned by a knight of Saint Festus and interred there to hinder the goddess), Remus had to follow them when Finn stole Oshalla's holy symbol and was cursed with lycanthropy. Once Finn dragged back to the temple and cured, Oshalla commanded Remus to travel with them to Sangkon Bhet, a ruin in the Lost Lands not far from Koralgesh.
- **Randalf Hollycombe** (Level 1, *Priest, Knight* S1, D0, C1, I0, W0, CH1, HP 6) The third of the revived petrified guards, Randlaf had doctrinal issues with Blanche at first, and struck off on his own until Eldon talked him back. Armed with a sword and shield of Koralgesh and boundless faith in Kor, he is reclaiming Keep's treasures to bring to a temple.
 - **Click-Clack** (Level 1, *Spider, Crab* S2, D0, C1, I0, W0, CH0, HP 6): a giant spider-crab who was made Randalf's mount/companion by Kor.
- **Conrad** (Level 1, *Shipwright, Poet* S1, D0, C1, I0, W1, CH0, HP 3): One of the crew Eldon hired when he purchased the caravel *Princess Andromeda* in Cabra for his trip to Koralgesh in advance of the Keep's secret door opening on the solstice, Conrad was dragged off the ship to ferry the treasure out of the (nearly) cleared dungeon. He is skilled with a lasso.
- **Chandler C. Chandler** (Level 1, *Sailor, Chandler* S1, D0, C1, I0, W0, CH1, HP 6) The second of the crew of the *Princess Andromeda*, Chandler is both sailor and quartermaster of the ship, and is wondering why he got dragged through the jungle into the dungeon!¹

The last time we saw them Eldon, Finn Remus, and Randalf had just killed the medusa they summoned to kill the caterwaul that had attacked them while they were looting the treasury. The battle ended in the music room, and shortly after it ended Blanche, and Conrad came in. Randalf, still prickly about Blanche's doctrinal issues, left with Remus to sort the treasure with Jasper, Drogo, and Chandler. The remaining three picked through the music room for any possible treasure, with Conrad finding a collection of magical harp strings (made of gold, silver, and diamond). "How..." he mused, looking at that last. "It's magic kid, don't stress it," Eldon told him.

The trio continued to explore the keep's uppermost layer, fairly confident that it had been cleared of threats. The door opposite Landeau the traitor-wizard's room (where Eldon got the spell of Medusa Summoning) was sealed with a Wizard Lock, which Blanche undid with her Sculpt Elements spell, reforming the door's wood²; she can sculpt elements with her hands for 30 minutes.

Glancing into the room it is clearly a wizard's workroom, a pentacle and altar/workbench dominating the north half of the room, shelves and tables of alchemical gear to the south where they were; Eldon eagerly entered to plunder it. This produced a flash of light, blinding them as Conner and Blanche followed. From the pentacle stepped militant mirror images of the trio; Finn wisely stayed at the door to guard their backs and take what shots he could manage. The fight is brutal, with mirror Eldon being as hard to defeat as actual Eldon, until Blanch fell to the floor next to the duplicate and sculpted the stone up around its foot, pinning it in place. The end came quickly after that. Conrad's pike had been cleaved in the battle by mirror-Blanche's magic axe (blessed by Ord the Great Tree, patron of soldiers and the hearth, it cleaves wood easily and wood it cuts will always burn quick and clean) so he eagerly used his rope as a lasso instead, showing considerable skill with the weapon.

The room produced less than they hoped, with the stand outs being a highly magical shield that the traitor wizard had been using as a bowl for magical workings (Conrad claimed for a unique Shield and Lasso fighting style) and a tome of alchemical instruction that Eldon, who had long been fascinated by the art (the cult of Molyneaux's banning of alchemy in Cabra when they had control `caused Eldon to fight as fight for the) pocketed it, which would let him learn alchemy without a teacher.

¹ Not for nothing, but writing all these out reminded me why I love the OSR style of play as much more epic story driven styles: The above really does read like Eldon is a Conant style wandering hero with several short stories behind him, and you never know what exactly the next one is going to be about.

² (I take an expansive view of elements so Blanche can reform air, earth, fire, water, wood, metal, or void... we still do not know what that last would mean)

There is a brief interlude here where, warned by Finn, the group surprises a trio of rock baboons that were moving through the dungeon – evidence of entrances to the outside from here – and quickly dispatch them.

Back across the hall was a temple to Kor, illuminated by an intricate stained-glass window of the god's works. Kor, whose symbol is the sun, is the god of the elderly and roads: the roads of your life, the choices you've made, the wisdom you've gained, but also actual physical roads that connect cities and settlements, making trade and communication possible. This includes navigational charts, and it was Kor who made the escape by sea away from the demons armies on the mainland to the safety of the Oileáin Mhóra, the grand isles. When Blanche stood before the window light broke through the perpetual steam from the boiling bay, illuminating her and reaffirming Kor's blessings.

(In Knave you reroll all your hit dice every level and if the number is lower than your current HP you keep those +1, if higher you get the new total. I ruled these sorts of divine blessings let you reroll your hit dice and take the new number if higher, plus a blessing if you have CHA for it. This is Blanche's third experience, the first was after she was wounded by a demon-enscribed smoke rat defending River's End and was saved by immersion in the temple pool of the Lily Queen, giving her a halo visible only to fae that Blanche doesn't know exists! Later she received a blessing of her axe from Ord for using it to cut away the demon inscription that cursed the cutting of the Great Tree growing in Festus' tomb, the knocking down the first domino of Ord's reclaiming Cabra. By the book she shouldn't be able to secure a 3rd ongoing blessing until she raises her CHA to 3+; to give her another ongoing blessing from being touched by Kor she either has to lose the Lily Queen's Crown before she realizes she had it or I hold this in abeyance until she levels up. I prefer the latter because while Blanche has a *civil* status in the Kor's church as a bonded courier she doesn't yet have a *spiritual* connection to him...)

While this is happening, Conrad and Eldon find the temple's notes on shipping through Kor, which listed all the ships and cargo in the bay when the divine strike of volcanic eruption consumed the fallen city to destroy the pirate fleet. These Eldon took, already planning: "we will recover the treasure in those boats!" Conrad "Isn't that in blistering water under floating basalt islands? Finn "Wow, you are new here..."

Once Banche's religious experience ends they head for the treasury to connect the groups. With the entire group finally convened³ we find Chandler has been sorting the coins and gems by value and all nine humans (well, 8 humans and 1 terra cotta stature who assures you that he too consumes food as humans do) pack up everything they can carry in sacks and pouches and crude backpacks⁴ and start their trek out. Alas their path to the elevator from the Keep's 2nd floor to the sub basement where they entered is blocked by an unexpected an inexplicable battle between crab men (some of whom they had fought and killed on their first delve) and fire newts (some of whom they fought and killed in their second delve, a refugee of which is now on the *Princess Andromeda*; from him they learned the Fire Newts are a militaristic race from the Plane of Fire and his unit feel through a door in space into the lava of rivers under the keep's sub-basement.) "Well crap..." Eldon mutters, planning some mad action to distract the two scores of combatants so his company might reach the elevator when Randalf reminds him that he, Jasper, and Drogo know the place well and can get them out.

Taking a side stair to the keep's first floor, Randalf leads them across that level to the elevator, but their path is blocked by one fire newt rear guard. Short work is made of that fellow by the Arms Argent, but Eldon refuses to leave the corpse, wanting the incendiary fire newt gullet, one of which they used previously to breach the cage door to the treasury. Treasures are re-distributed so Eldon can tie off and drag the corpse. The party has no slack now, and combat would spill much coin.

At the elevator they encounter a pair of Dakon, civil and clear spoken gorillas⁵ the party met previously, who are still looking for a chest of gems stolen by thieves who entered the keep from the mountains above. Eldon recalls the pool of seeing in the sub-basement and offers to help the Gorillas just out of kindness: the gorillas seem like good guys. The elevator is too small for all 11 living and one dead body, so Eldon, Finn, the dakons and the fire newt corpse wait while the others descend. The elevator doors open to show a half dozen crab men! When one of the crab men speaks in halting common, Randalf responds in kind⁶, learning that the crab men will let them pass in exchange for silver. Chandler makes the best deal possible, giving up a minimum of their coin to secure passage, learning these crab men are guarding the elevator from fire newt access. When Eldon arrives with a fire newt corpse, his bone fides are assured.

³ The first time we had the full complement of 6 players!

⁴ You'd be amazed at how long it took for proper backpacks as we know them to be made! These are wicker baskets on leather straps, quite fragile.

⁵ Yet more Fiend Folio!

⁶ Chandler: "you don't have to do that; they have problems speaking, not hearing."

Eldon arranges for the group to hold his corpse and much of the treasure as he and Finn lead the Dakon through the sub-basement to the seeing pool they found on their second delve. The whole of the sub basement is much more unstable, with smoke belching from the lava flow in the chasms and dirt rattling from the ceiling. The rest of the company wonders at the wisdom of Eldon's plan but spend the time making common cause with the crab men, who live deep under blistering bay, entering the sub-basement via a water entrance to the west. The group fears that their actions had set the factions on each other but no, the fire newts and the crab men just hate each other⁷. So it goes. Eldon and Finn get the Dakon to the pool, which reveals their chest of gems being carried by the thieves through the jungle! "Not even in dungeon?" One bemoans while the other face palms. "We can give you a hand finding them if you help us get our gold out of the dungeon." Eldon offers.

On their way back to the group all hell breaks loose – the quakes intensify for a moment and a veritable army of fire newts started appearing in the lava chasms! Eldon and company leaped over the chasms while crab men take the rickety bridge to flee back to the water entrance. Eldon orders the rest of the company to escape via the secret entrance while he, Finn, and the Dakon grab as much of the treasure they had put down earlier as they could before the fire newts arrive. The newts, chasing everyone they see to secure the area, burst in and scream bloody murder on seeing the fire newt corpse. About a quarter of Finn & Eldon's loads are abandoned in the escape, with Eldon, muttering 'I don't even know why I still have this' lobs a *Potion of Spines*, acquired from exiled alchemists over a year ago, at the center newt, hoping to slow their rush. The bottle hits him, shatters, and the unprepared newt instantly sprouts dozens of sharp quills, piercing his allies to either side, tripping in shock.

Eldon's player: That's what that does?!

Me: Yeah, what did you think it did?

Eldon's Player: I thought grew *human* spines.

Me: Human's don't have... wait, did you think it made a David Cronenberg body horror moment where you grew lengths of human vertebrae out of your body?!

Eldon's Player: Yeah!

Me: flabbergasted silence, leaving room for a second to burst out laughing before coming back in.

Chandler's player: you know that glass wall doesn't really muffle sound?

Remus' player: You could have used it on the Cabra politicians to end the civil war – they'd all grow spines!

The adventurers run down the half a mile length of corridor but are so weighted down that they can't get far ahead of the stubbily built fire newts. Panic sets in when they hit the entrance chamber and see the ladder back up to the shrine to Kor above. People turn to face the fire newts, trying to buy time for their allies to get up the ladder with the treasure, with Chandler pouring oil across the entrance and Eldon spreading his oft used bent nail caltrops. The fire newts charge in and the first row are discommoded by the crude traps, but more are coming... until Blanche starts whistling.

Her faerie reel forces all of the fire newts to begin dancing, and she keeps it up long enough for everyone except herself, Jasper, Drogo, and the Dakons to have made it up the ladder, with several fire newts being taken down by those who weren't climbing, but the newts are too well armored and experienced to be slaughtered, as a hit that didn't kill would break that one from the spell. Her exhausted breath faltering, the whistling fails; she knows if she orders Jasper and Drogo to cover her climb they will, but she can't bring herself to do it, ordering them to go first while she brandished Ord's axe.

Above, everyone takes stock and realizes that in addition to Blanche & her men, the Dakon were still down there. Looking at one another they drop their treasure (to be guarded by Click-Clack, who was waiting for them) and leap back down into the tunnel, yelling "FOR THE GORILLAS!" The battle is rejoined (as everyone works out the logistics of getting back down).

Blanche's player: Wait, you were willing to let *me* die down there but you rush down to save the gorillas?

Randalf's Player: Gorillas!

The slow speed of reinforcements for the adventurers works against them, and the newts have had time to set a formation. Blanche had been doing her best, but first she lost her Axe of Ord to a skilled disarm and when she switched to her Dagger of Venom that too quickly was knocked to the dirt⁸. She snagged a cleaved spearhead from the ground and lost that as well, but thanks to Kor's recent blessing she was only lightly wounded before her allies reappeared.

In the melee the hirelings and Dakon fled up the ladder, leaving our 6 heroes fighting 6 fire newts (out of the original dungeon), with the sounds of more of them coming down the corridor. This was when we had to stop play for the night. I have NO IDEA how they are gonna live through this. Maybe their story ends here?

⁷ Both the earthquakes and the battle came from Dungeon Shifts on the Knave 'delve event' tables (faction war and walls close in were the prompts). I roll the event die a dozen times before play so I have ideas to weave into play as time passes while staying random. Like the 4 encounters in a row that

were translated into the fire newt horde. I hadn't planned any of this, and was just trying to make the most sense I could of the dice.

⁸ An attack roll of 1 in my Knave rules breaks your normal weapon or disarms a magic weapon for the fight. Blanche's player rolled three 1's in a row.

Stating up regrets 10: Mother Hubbard

This month's entry from Jon Morris' *League of Regrettable Superheroes* may be the one with the smallest number of appearances to date but is absolutely worthy of being included just on her sheer weirdness. Gentles and Ladyfolk, I give you the doyenne of the darkest swamps, the baroness of the border between nursery-tale and night terror, Mother Hubbard, an honest to St. Cuthbert witch: crone-like features, pointy hat, and broomstick! ⁹



Origin? "Remnant of an age long past, the mysterious Mother Hubbard commands the powers of ancient witchcraft to battle the evils of present day." She tells a group of Nazis she's about to incinerate "For long, witchcraft as been the power of evil... but I have determined to use it for good... as you are about to see!"

Across 3 appearances, Mother Hubbard's adventures have a predictable episodic nature: from her house "in an eerie, desolate surrounding" she receives warnings of criminal plotting via pricklings, aches, creaks, and other biological prognosticators. Crystal ball scrying reveals an impending crime. She loads up on her potions, hops on her broomstick, and intervenes to set things right.

The threats change radically between her first & second appearances. Like so many other late 1941 heroes she fights Nazis, but in her second and third appearances she fights... EVIL GNOMES. Evil, Goddam-Voiced-by-Tom-Bosley Gnomes! These veer deep into fairy tale where the gnomes are stealing kids' souls (to power puppet workers) or eyeballs (to replace ogres' eyes that Mother Hubbard popped out when the ogres threatened to eat a baby). If Mother Hubbard had stuck around, she could have been a hit in the 1950s horror comics that incited the Comics Code and then been neutered by the CCA. Eventually she'd have a gig framing post-code horror tales, like Cain & Able or the Three Witches at DC.



So how do we build her in V&V? Easy stuff first: *Vehicle* (broomstick, which is called out as an option in the power) and *Cosmic Awareness*.

For *Vehicle*, V&V is its usual nonspecific self: you have a vehicle that is better than a regular version of its type, please see the half a page of vehicle rules/examples but remember this can be anything. For our purposes I'm going to look up the technical specs for *Airwolf*¹⁰ from the TV show and say her broomstick is that good... without the missiles. This means she can carry other people on it, even if this is never shown in her appearances.

For *Cosmic Awareness*, well, I wrote an [essay about how I would modify this power](#); we can assume she has this version. I hemmed and hawed about including this because her creaking joints and crystal ball just show her this issue's plot... it's no different than the red Bat-phone and a call from Commissioner Gordon. Still, it is iconic to her, and I'll just rule that the GM can use it to feed her information for free at any time.

It's clear that Ol' Mother Hubbard straddled 'the lands we know' and Faerie: never mind the Nazis, the children being predated appear as ordinary, contemporary kids. While Speed Centaur (in DotL 4) is a mythological element out of place in present day, Mother Hubbard fights against Unseelie incursions, strongly suggesting she has *Dimension Travel A*, which is specifically between two dimensions or times at a cost of 4 Fatigue per transition. Alas, *Dimension Travel A* is a weak sauce power. Not Speed Bonus or Water Breathing A¹¹, but unless you add to it it's a tertiary ability at best.

Here, let's play into her being from "an age long past", and say as Fae she's ageless, 650 yrs old, contemporary with Hansel & Gretel. This longevity gives her +12 Charisma and +11 Intelligence, raising each to 22¹². She can use this to skirt the veil, letting her see but not be seen or pass through non-iron solids, but it's 8 fatigue each use for going there & back.

⁹ Mother Hubbard first appeared in Scoop Comics #1, but fittingly her writer and artist are lost to history. She is in the public domain. Her stories are at <https://fourcolorglasses.wordpress.com/2015/10/10/double-double-toil-and-trouble-scoop-comics-1-november-1941/> <https://fourcolorglasses.wordpress.com/2015/10/17/dialogue-in-rhyme-scoop-comics-2-january-1942/>

<https://fourcolorglasses.wordpress.com/2015/11/01/a-grim-fairy-tale-scoop-comics-3-march-1942/>

¹⁰ Of course someone has the tech specs for Airwolf on the net.

¹¹ You can breathe water. That's it. That's the power.

¹² Along with 9 STR, 12 END and 15 AGI, giving her 58 Fatigue and 10 HP.

Now, her magic. In comics there are two types of magic: what *DC Heroes* calls Sorcery where the practitioner can do pretty much everything though not at once, and what *Marvel Super-Heroes* calls Magic, an array of spells with roughly fixed effects. *V&V* leans to 1960-70's Marvel, so *Magical Spells* is more Doctor Strange than Doctor Fate. Mother Hubbard? She's Sorcery all the way: in 18 pages she rusts an Iron Maiden, creates a circle of smoke that blinds and ages those who cross it, summons fist-sized beetles, deflects bullets, paralyzes a group of men, incinerates a house, transforms an axe to a snake, rots out a bridge, frees bound souls, summons earthworms, brews a sleeping potion, knocks eyeballs out of ogre heads, survives boiling water which she explodes on her foes, and animates a tree. There's no limit to her magic, other than her getting very tired in her third tale. *Magical Spells*, as discussed for post-war Madam Satan (DotL 8), gives you one spell and lets you invent more. A poor fit.

So we are building *Magical Spells B* (Sorcery): rather than a list of invented spells, the Sorcerer can try *anything*, with the GM interpreting the attack or defense type, if any, and the damage being 1d12 if it matters. Each use of Sorcery costs 8 Fatigue but also requires an Invention check (but without an Inventing Point spend; Sorcerers can't Invent reliable *Magical Spells A* spells). If you miss the roll the spell still fires, but with an extra Fatigue cost of the difference between the roll and your Invention %. Sorcerers can exhaust themselves if dice luck goes against them. This is unlike any other mechanic in *V&V*, but I think it works. Mother Hubbard has a 66% chance to cast any spell¹³. *Magical Spells B* but may leave you nap mid adventure¹⁴... or kill you. Use with caution!

As for Weaknesses, Mother Hubbard loses her *Magical Spells* when the gnomes steal her hat, but rather than a Weakness this might be her *Magical Spells* being an Item (witches kit). She also has very distinctive features, but unlike other games *V&V* has no Weakness covering that, except maybe Physical Handicap. My general sense is that she doesn't have a game mechanics Weakness.



¹³ including madness like knocking ogres' eyes out of their heads so they lie around on the ground looking like they were still in their head rather than eyeballs. Honestly, this is messed up. I'm not showing you the gnomes *crowbarring kid's eyes out of their heads* out of deference to civilization.

But how do you play it?

For all the insanity, she's a classic golden age spellcaster; it's just they are all male formally dressed stage magicians often appropriating orientalist tropes. She hits all she needs to be a solo hero – she can detect trouble, get to it, and resolve it with her powers – and would honestly make a good young players first PC, since her story beats are plain as day and she can literally try *anything*. If she must work with a team, she's the mystic counterpart to 711 (DotL #2) for showing up at the heroes' base with to let them know things are about to get weird.

The regrettable world.

Well, we all know who rescued Lady Satan and kitted her with magical tools now, right? Right? To not make things too easy I see her and The Eye (DotL #1) not getting along even if they do share the goal of protecting humanity. She'd work with him and his *Regrettables*, but trying to alter the future by meddling across the past is just too abstract for this cynical Fay immortal.



Regretting what I said to you...

Myles agreed with the means of Lady Satan's career-ending injury. It's just a matter of asking "what's the most badass thing she could have done?"

Still, Roger BW points out that she's smart enough to get out before it's too late... except for one last op. I would split the difference and have her go on the one last op having attached a brass and crystal arm to her stump. Badass to the end.

Lisa was wondering if the comics ever addressed how ~~Mother Hubbard trained Lady Satan~~, er, how Lady Satan got her Sorcery. Nope. She just reappeared with it post war. And yes, 'Suicide Daggers' were a death faking tool, not a New Wave band.

¹⁴ For the record, she wasn't safe there. But I love how vital the artwork is and how little attention it pays to panel borders. Yes, the stories involve a lot of description providing action but given the tiny (6 page!) space they had the art feels so damn live.

Under the Giant's Shadow: Clerics

As it should, the cocktail party discussion here in E&A has inspired me to go back to my B/X Retroclone ideas to look at Clerics, potentially my most vexing class. I had an idea while driving the other day that I'm going to flesh out here.

Clerics are people who have dedicated themselves to serving a religion. Given D&D's initial milieu of *Medieval European Fantasy with Magic* the Cleric is built assuming the existence of a centralized religious institution akin to the Catholic Church, although it is (hopefully) malleable enough to accommodate other designs. Characters with a high Favor may have dedicated themselves to a god or saint, but the Cleric has dedicated themselves to a *Religion*, receiving specialized training and tasked with defending the faithful and evangelizing the faith via acts of heroism. Evil clerics will evangelize through blood and steel, forcing their religion on the conquered, not caring that faith doesn't follow.

In *Under the Giant's Shadow (UtGS)* those religions are either the Matriarchy of the Moon – the moon being the gathering place for the gods where they work in concert – or the Brotherhoods of the Stars – as each star is an individual deity around which self-centered cults can form – embodying Law and Chaos, respectively.

Clerics provide their fellow adventurers strategic & tactical support both through direct combat skill and the ability to heal and bolster their allies. Adventuring parties without a Cleric often have to turn back before reaching their objective due to a lack of strategic depth. Clerics are also critical when confronting evil magic, as their acts of faith can directly counter or drive off those effects.

A cleric's prime requisite is Divine Favor. Clerics must choose between three Sects, which based on the setting may be saints, aspects of the divinity, or groups of gods inside a pantheon. While all Clerics share core abilities, each Sect has additional abilities that mirror other classes. Note: humanity's gods *UtGS* are all combinations of human and animal forms (akin to Egyptian depictions)

- **Martial:** mammalian gods are the most combat driven sect. Followers gain the ability to wear heavy armor and wield superior weapons. Secondary requisite is STR.
- **Charismatic:** reptilian gods are the cleverest sect and also hunt monsters. Followers can wear light armor and gain social bonuses. Secondary requisite is CHA.
- **Scholarly:** avian gods are the most erudite sect; they are most often monastics. They cannot wear armor but have access to Arcane magic. Secondary requisite is ERD

Cleric Background Keywords

temple acolyte, traveling exorcist, royal advisor, village pastor, oracle, temple defender, hospitaller, evangelist.

Note on Experience: *UtGS* has lower XP requirements than B/X to drive constrained resources; since GP=XP, and also GP recovered are applied to all and not divided, a group of 5 1st level PCs will level having found 200 GP each; this means they can't immediately purchase maximal gear with their first levels worth of loot. Money matters longer.

Cleric Experience Chart

lvl	XP	HP	Keyword		Scholarly Spells			
			& Faith	Att+	0	1-2	3-4	5-6
1	1,000	7	1	0	1	1		
2	2,000	12	1	1	2	1		
3	4,000	17	1	2	2	1	1	
4	8,000	22	1	2	2	2	1	
5	16,000	27	2	3	2	2	1	1
6	32,000	32	2	4	3	2	2	1
7	64,000	37	2	5	3	3	2	1
8	125,000	42	2	5	3	3	2	2
9	250,000	47	3	6	4	3	3	2

Clerics in General Adventuring:

Clerics are trained healers. Normally when someone is at 0 HP they are incapacitated and must make a Save vs. Death fight's end to be wounded (0 HP, limited movement) rather than dead; an ally aiding them allows two attempts.

- If a Cleric is aiding them both saves are made at +3 (or +1 on d6). If either save is 18+ (or 6), the wounds were superficial, the character is at 1 HP, acting normally.
- This bonus applies to assist an ally suffering from poison. The poisoned party will only suffer the secondary effect. If either save is 18+, the target suffers no effects
- A Cleric's own saves vs. Death are already superior, and an 18+ roll will give the advantages above. If an ally helps them, they still get 2 saves, if that's another Cleric the saves are at +3.

Clerics receive deep training about the divine world

- They can always add their background modifier to non-combat tests concerning gods, demons, and the undead.
 - Charismatic Clerics can add this to attack rolls as well, having been trained in fighting such entities.
- Clerics can make a simple test to detect the presence of gods, demons, and the undead, but they must stop and concentrate to do so.
- The player may define their Cleric's gods 'portfolio', three things that the god is known for, in charge of, or passionate about. (These needn't be thematically linked; mythology is weird.) The Cleric's background keyword will include the god's portfolio.



Image from [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Clerics in Interaction

A Cleric's faith can have a remarkable effect. They...

- Can add use their Cleric background when convincing people to take actions the Cleric *truly believes* are in the person's best interest.
 - Charismatic clerics can add this to all interactions that the cleric truly believes to be in the best interest of the *religion*. This often dovetails with being in the person's best interest, but it doesn't have to.
- Can perform Haruspex or Ophiomancy (reading entrails of sacrifices or watching the movement of snakes), using their acts of faith to divine Rumors. This works the same as standard Rumor collection but using Divine Favor rather than Charisma for the modifier.
- Can, if near a significant gathering place of their religion, apply a 10% reduction to equipment costs.
 - Charismatic clerics may apply this bonus anywhere if they succeed on a complex contested check (14+) to which they can add their modifiers for Charisma and Cleric Keyword.
- May, when recruiting henchmen, apply their Cleric background to the applicant roll¹⁵,
 - Scholarly clerics may add it to the roll, allowing them to find more religious/scholarly individuals, and avoid less savory roguish sorts.
 - Martial clerics may add or subtract it from the roll to move it to the middle for more martial recruits or increase it for more scholarly ones.
 - Charismatic clerics may apply it the modifier upward or downward, as desired, giving them the widest possible range of recruits in play.

Clerics in Domain Play

At 9th level Clerics can clear land and construct a religious stronghold. Doing so will attract 20-200 religious followers, some percentage of which will be men-at-arms (33% for Scholarly and Charismatic sects, 50% for Martial sects). The stronghold earns 1sp per non man-at-arms follower/month.

Clerics in General Combat:

A cleric's capacity in combat is dependent on their sect, but all have some training. Clerics...

- Gain +.75 to attacks for every level attained.
- Once per fight, the cleric can Smite an opponent, doing an extra 1d6 damage, after the attack roll is made.
 - Charismatic Clerics gain their Faith in smites per day vs. gods, demons, and the undead.
- May wear armor based on their sect.
 - Martial Sect Clerics may wear any armor.
 - Charismatic sect clerics may wear light armor.
 - Scholarly clerics may not wear armor.
- May use weapons up to 1d6 damage.

¹⁵ (To explain, when trying to recruit henchmen in an urban area PCs roll 3d6 to see who applies: rolls of >9 (26%) they get someone roguish, on 9-13 (58%) recruits are martial, and on 14+ (16%) applicants are scholarly; Rogues can subtract their

Martial Clerics in Combat

Clerics of the Martial Sects have significant combat skill, letting them mirror some aspects of the Fighter Class. They...

- May use weapons up to 1d10, except that they cannot use 1d8 or greater damage Swords. This is a purely game mechanic contrivance; such swords can be Intelligent, and Intelligent Swords are how Fighters gain magical abilities. In UtGS this is explained as 'ancient agreements made at the dawn of time' or 'the Deep Magic'.
- Have limited Maneuvers, eking out advantages of position and training. Maneuvers available are based on the Clerics unmodified attack roll.
 - On a roll of 1-7 (1-2 on d6), they gain a defensive advantage, picking between.
 - **Rally Henchmen**, preventing any Morale failures for the round. Normally when making attacks for henchmen, all rolls are resolved with a single die [1d6 for standard human men at arms], where the die is applied to Armor Class and if it hits, is the damage done; If circumstances would call for a Morale check due to first ally downed, half allies downed, or a fear effect a roll of 1 on any attack die indicates that henchmen loses morale. I am wondering about a cascade rule where if one henchmen flees any attack rolls of 2 also run. In any event, this defensive Maneuver prevents it.
 - **Scholarly Insight**. For humans and humanoids this will suggest a foe's tactics, morale, motivations, or goals. For monsters, it suggests behaviors, weaknesses, attacks, or defenses.
 - On a roll of 17-20 (6 on d6), they gain a attack advantage based on their weapon array.¹⁶
 - **Weapon and Shield**: The most common choice, you may select from
 - **Shield Bash**: If a hit, your target takes +1d4 damage from being hit with your shield.
 - **Shield Wall**: an adjacent ally uses your Armor Class until your next action.
 - **Shield Charge**: B/X and therefore UtGS, doesn't used grid combat, so you're moving around a lot in 6 second rounds. This assumes you move to strike a new, additional foe in your path with the same attack roll, for 1d6.
 - **One-hand Weapon**: The other option, select from
 - **Harry**: a duel of pressing and giving ground with a like-sized opponent, this can place them in a situationally perilous position or set them up for an ally attack at +2
 - **Opportunity**: Do 1d6 damage to a new foe who is engaging one of your allies (assuming your attack roll beats the targets AC).
 - **Nasty Wound**: If damage from this drops the target to 1/2 their HP or less, their next attack roll includes a Morale check (see above).

background from the roll, Fighters can add or subtract it to drive to the middle. I loved the DMG tables for what applicants apply.)

¹⁶ These arrays are drawn from the AD&D 2E Complete Fighter's Handbook style specializations. Again, I put what I loved in.

Scholarly Clerics and Erudition Spellcasting

Clerics in the Scholarly sects have formal education that includes the erudition-based spellcasting used by magic-users, focusing on abjuration and divination. Spells on the Magic-user list are interchangeable with magic-users. The others draw power from divine intermediaries and require the Faith power to function. The Scholarly cleric keeps a spell book, starting play with 3 zero level and 2 first level spells, and their maximum number of spells per level is based on their erudition, as magic-users. Unlike magic-users, clerics share their spells through their church, and a Cleric can pick one new spell per level attained.

0 level Cleric Spells

Abey Curse

Range: Touch Duration: 24 hours

This spell places any curse into abeyance, giving the victim time free of the enchantment. It can't remove the curse.

1st Level Reverse: Enhance Curse

If someone is already under the effects of a curse, this spell makes it worse! There isn't a save vs. this effect. For one hour, the effects of the curse are increased to 150%.

Abey Poison

Range: Touch Duration: 48 hours

This spell places any poison harming a being into abeyance, given them time to get to a Place of Safety where they might be cured. Cast if the target has failed all other saving throws against the poison, to keep the target up and active, with no change to HP or abilities, until the spell ends. If the target is not yet cured, the poison starts affecting them again.

1st Level Reverse: Venom vs Undead / Demons

Snakes are divine animals inside the human pantheon, bringers of wisdom and defense against the unnatural. This spell turns a vial of water into a magic toxin that acts as a Turn attack at the Caster's level of ability.

Detect Magic

Range: 60' Duration: 2 turns

This spell determines if there has been an enchantment laid upon a person, place, or thing, causing any magic item within 60' to glow. If the caster spends all two turns examining one item, they may Identify it, learning what magical powers it possesses (and its lore if any).

1st Level Reverse: Magic Aura

Rather than detecting if an object has a magic aura, the caster can give an object a false aura of magic (and to glow dimly if the caster prefers). This aura lasts 1 month per caster level, will fool Detect Magic, but not Identify. Unscrupulous Clerics use this to dupe their cult members.

Purify Food and Water

Range: 10' Duration: Permanent

This spell will make spoiled or poisoned food and water usable. It will purify enough food to feed a dozen people one meal, one day's preserved rations for 4 people, or 6 skins of water.

1st Level Reverse: Befoul Food

You can render the same volume of food inconsumable to humans and more attractive to carrion eaters and vermin.

First Level Cleric Spells

Light

Range: 120' Duration: 6 turns per caster level

This spell casts light in a circle, 30' in diameter. It is bright enough to read by, but not equal to full daylight. It may be cast on an object. The **light** may be cast at a creature's eyes. The creature may make a saving throw vs. Spells, but if it fails, the victim will be blinded for the spells' duration. A blinded creature may not attack.

2nd level Reverse: Darkness

Reversal of this spell will create a circle of darkness 30' in diameter. It will block all sight, except that darksight will work within the area. It will cancel a light spell if cast against it and vice versa. If cast at a foe's eyes, it causes blindness until cancelled/the spell ends.

Protection from Evil

Range: 0 (caster only) Duration: 6 turns

This spell circles cleric with a magic barrier that will moves with the caster. Evil is defined as 1) the undead, 2) summoned or created entities, and 3) foes of other religions. Foes from groups 1 & 2 have their melee attacks against the caster blocked. All three groups are at -1 to hit, are unable to charm or curse the caster, and the caster is at a +1 on saving throws vs. other magical effects.

2nd level Reverse: Summon Evil

The reverse of this spell draws 'evil' opponents to them; this triples the rate of wandering monster encounters for the duration, and if a monster occurs the DM should select the ones on the table that best fit the protection from evil criteria as the ones to arrive.

Resist Cold

Range: Touch Duration: 8 hours

For the duration of the spell, the target is immune to regular cold, gains a +3 on saves vs. magical cold, and magical cold does -1 point per die damage (minimum 1 damage)

2nd Level Reverse: Resist Fire

For the duration of the spell, the same applies to fire.

Snake Charm

Range: 0 (caster only) Duration: 2-5 rounds or turns

Snakes are divine animals inside the human pantheon, being the guardians of wisdom and defense against demons. With this spell a cleric may charm 1 level of snakes for every level of the cleric. Thus, a 5th level cleric could charm one 5th level snake, five 1st level snakes or any other combination adding to 5 levels. If used on attacking snakes, the snakes will rear up and sway but will not attack for 2-5 rounds. If cast on passive snakes, the snakes remain charmed for 2-5 turns, and the cleric can perform Ophiomancy in the dungeon, as per Rumors; taking 1 turn to start and then 1 rumor per turn.

2nd level Reverse: Snake Abjuration

If there are snakes present, the caster can call on them to provide the equivalent of a protection from evil 10' radius spell for the duration of the spell; the snakes will form a magical barrier between the caster (and their allies) and Evil threats.

Third Level Cleric Spells

Continual Light

Range: 120' Duration: permanent

This spell creates a globe of light 60' in diameter which will continue to shed light forever (or until it is dispelled). When cast at a creature's eyes, blindness may result

4th level Reversals: Continual Darkness

The reverse of this spell creates a 60' diameter sphere of darkness. Light (even from a light spell) torches and similar objects will not cast light within it, and darksight cannot penetrate it. If cast on a creature's eyes, the creature must save vs. Spells or be blinded until the spell is dispelled. A continual light spell cast on continual darkness will dispel it, and vice versa.

Detect 'Evil'

Range: 60' Duration: 2 turns

This spell can be used to detect 'evil' intentions, or evilly enchanted objects within 60', causing the creatures or objects to glow in the caster's sight. Actual thoughts are not detected; only the "feeling of evil". The qualifiers of 'evil' are the same as those in the 1st level spell "Protection from Evil".

4th level Reversals: Alignment Ward

The reverse of this spell protects 1 target from registering under the "Detect Evil" spell for one day per caster level.

Find Traps

Range: 30' Duration: 1 round

This spell makes a trapped area glow with a dull blue light when the caster approaches within 30'. It reveals where mechanical and magical traps are, but not how to disarm it.

4th level Reversals: Rune Trap

The caster can place a rune onto any space or on any object that has no effect other than convincing people that there is a trap. A Save vs. Spells is needed to overcome the belief that it is trapped. The rune is permanent, taking 10 minutes to cast.

Speak with Animals

Range: 30' per caster level Duration: 6 turns

This spell allows a cleric to talk to any normal or giant form of animal life represented in human mythology. It will not affect intelligent animal races or fantastic creatures. This spell allows the cleric to speak to one type of animal within range. The animal may be talked into doing a favor for the cleric, if reaction so indicates. The favor requested must be understood by the animal and possible for it to do.

4th level Reversal: Invisibility to Animals

The reverse of this spell makes one type of natural animal ignore the caster (and one ally per level) for the spells duration. They won't attack, track, or alert others to the cleric's presence. The caster does have to select the animal type, as per Speak with Animals.

Acts of Faith

Clerics are also able to perform miraculous feats outside of the ken of Erudition. There are no rituals, just the appeal from the cleric to their god. Acts of faith are not predictable or automatic the way "spells" are. They may fail, and that failure may shake the cleric's faith, making it harder to perform the next. or their success may strengthen that faith, making the cleric more likely to succeed again later.

The mechanic is simple: Clerics start a delve with Faith Pool of 10-sided dice: 1 at levels 1-4, 2 at 5-8, and 3 at 9+. These are increased or decreased by their Divine Favor modifier, but the Cleric will always roll at least 1 die.

When attempting an Act of Faith, the cleric rolls their Faith Pool with a target number based on the difficulty of the act attempted. If at least 1 die in the pool equals or exceeds that number, the act succeeds. If ALL the dice rolled equal or exceed that number, the act succeeds, and the cleric adds another die to the Faith Pool (you do not roll for automatic effects, those count all dice in pool as successes). If no dice equal/exceed that number, the act fails, and the cleric loses one die from their pool. If that leaves no dice in the pool, the cleric cannot perform acts of faith until they have reached a Place of Safety and spent time in prayer and recovery.

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

Acts of faith are divided into Devotions, which open up to the cleric at certain levels.

First Level of Devotion: Exorcism

Clerics gain access to this devotion at first level.

The cleric can use faith to drive away the Unnatural: the undead and summoned or created entities (q.v. *protection from evil*). If the roll is successful, each die that succeeded "turns" (drives off) 4 levels of foes (at least one foe is turned). If the exorcism is *automatic* monsters are destroyed, or for summoned foes, sent back to whence they came.

Soul echoes, poltergeists, and other weak, incorporeal undead are level 0 monsters. Skeletons are level 1; zombies and ghosts are level 2, ghouls are level 3; wights (ghosts possessing corpses) are level 4. There are more powerful undead past that, but this will do for now.

Second Level of Devotion: Courage

Clerics gain access to this devotion at second level.

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

2nd level effect: Remove Fear

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

3rd level effect: Aid

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

4th level effect: Bless

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

5th level effect: Cause Fear

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

Third Level of Devotion: Stillness

Clerics gain access to this devotion at third level.

The cleric is able to enter a space of stillness, or expand that to others. This can have some surprising effects; now the cleric can use faith to demonstrably change the natural world.

3rd level effect: Sanctuary

The cleric can eschew attacks to remove themselves from the combat. For each success, the caster can make force an opponent to make a save vs. spells or lose track of the cleric completely; this lasts 10 minutes, and opponents are affected in the order they attack. If the opponents have no other viable targets, the fight ends and the cleric makes a reaction roll; if this opens communication the cleric may do so, or they can exit the scene.

4th level effect: Silence

The cleric can negate noise for 1 turn in a radius of 5' per success on the roll, with a range of up to 10' per success on the roll. The cleric can't take other faith based actions while maintaining the silence, and Erudition-based on spellcasting can't occur inside the space of silence. The maximum duration of the silence is 1 turn, or until the cleric tries some other faith-based effect.

5th level effect: Hold Person

The cleric can force stillness on other people, paralyzing them for the spells duration if they fail a save. This will affect any human, demi-human, or human-like creature but not undead or creatures larger than an ogre. Each success means the cleric can add another target.

6th level effect: Haruspex

The cleric can sacrifice an animal and read the entrails to gather information when not in a Place of Safety. As with Snake Charm (q.v.) the caster can collect Rumors while on a delve, gathering one rumor on a particular topic per success on the die. The answers may well be cryptic or incomplete, but they will give valid information. This can only be performed once a day.

Fourth Level of Devotion: Healing

At this level, the cleric is able to physically close wounds, remove the effects of disease and poison, or even bring back the dead, based on faith alone. If you didn't think Stillness effects were miracles... These are miracles. They also require more difficulty charts I haven't made yet.

4th level effect: Cure Disease

In one round this devotion cures the creature it is cast on of any disease, such as lycanthropy and mummy rot, though magical diseases may require multiple successes. Cure disease will also kill green slime.

5th level effect: Neutralize Poison

This devotion cancels the effects of poison and revives a poisoned character if cast within one turn per success (even if that character was considered dead). It can also target a poison or a poisoned item to make it harmless.

6th level effect: Cure Wounds

This devotion will restore anyone who has taken a serious enough wound to be removed from combat (i.e. reduced to 0 HP) to functionality with a single success – the target is restored to the HP they had at 1st level. For each extra success, the cleric can restore another sorely wounded person, or restore one levels worth of HP to allies within the cleric's reach.

7th level effect: Raise Dead

By means of this devotion the cleric can raise any human, dwarf, halfling, or elf from the dead. With one success the cleric can raise a body up to four days dead. For each level of success past that four days are added to this time. A raised character is at 0 hit point and cannot fight, cast spells, use abilities, carry heavy loads, or move more than half speed, and they heal normally. A raise dead cast against one undead creature will slay it unless it makes its saving throw vs. Spells.

Comments on E&A 9

Due to idiocy on my part the PDF of E&A 9 containing comments on 2/3rds the issue vanished in a motherboard collapse. Will catch up next month.

Goodnight, Speed Centaur, wherever you are.

Firedrake's Hoard

Number 9: by Roger BW

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



What I've been up to

Installing [anubis](https://anubis.techaro.lol/) (https://anubis.techaro.lol/) at work to cut down on the endless scraping attempts. I don't like having to block out non-JavaScript browsers, I often use one myself, but...

Getting ready for the first issue of *Of Dice and Meeples*, my new boardgaming APA. When this *E&A* comes out, you'll have about two weeks left to get your contribution in for the first issue. [Web site here.](https://tekeli.li/of-dice-and-meeples/) (https://tekeli.li/of-dice-and-meeples/)

Recent Games

Amazing Adventures / The Heart¹ of Yhtill:

When last I sent in an *E&A* zine, our heroes were caught between a faceless robed figure and a small expeditionary force of Nazis. We run after the figure into the lost temple; the Nazis are shooting at him but they don't seem to mind hitting us.

Ken: "Warm air masses, such as those we're breathing, will move naturally from an area of higher bullet density to an area of lower. Run!"

There's some gunplay, but it all ends up with erring husband Martin, now possessed by

Alhazred Reborn, opening a secret chamber below the temple. Throne, mummified figure, altar. We shoot Martin a lot; he is supernaturally vital, and manages to trigger whatever it is that releases the yellow gem (this is, apparently, the Heart) from the mummy before he goes down.

Some of the Nazis follow us. Some shoot. Their leader turns out to be Amanda, Martin's wife who had employed us to find him in the first place.



Subhasish Baidya via Pexels

¹My error, it's the *Heart* not the *Mask* as I said last time.

Ken: “I’m sorry, you need to check the contract for the Nazi Surcharge. You now owe me 17 million Reichsmarks.” Random player: “What, \$3.95?”

Given that she’s ordering her minions to “get the gem”, and since something suspiciously shoggothesque² is boiling out of the damaged altar and flooding the room, Ken leaps in to smash the gem with the butt of his pistol. (A long shot, but you never know.) This works, assisted by a judicious Fate Point spend; we get out, and up above the remaining Nazis have been rounded up by the Society of Ormazd (the local secret society that ambushed us a couple of sessions ago).

So that’s that. I enjoyed the adventure, but I still find the system very clumsy, always demanding you find mechanical optimisations rather than, y’know, *play your character*.

The Day After Ragnarok: We get away from Macao, to Shangchuan Island, and rest while we wait for our next connection. (There’s a shrine to St Francis Xavier, who died here, but more interestingly to Don several new sorts of snake to talk to.) We get an offer from a Nationalist Chinese operator to have one of their experts take a look at the Scroll (under our supervision) and share information; given how far we are from truly friendly territory, we go for it. The expert reckons it’s likely to be genuine, and something to do with dominion over nature. The examination is disrupted by a disturbance among the villagers; two 40-foot snakes are heading for the village. (The expert may have summoned them accidentally; he’s looking shifty.) Don faces them down (Animal Empathy, Animal Friend, Diplomacy) while the

others work the Scroll, and a bit of Animal Handling sends them back to sea.

We end up planning to meet the expert back in Australia where this sort of research can be done *a bit more safely*.

But (next session) we have to get past the Japanese destroyers offshore. It looks as though a distraction will be needed, perhaps an attack on Japanese shipping. Or one of those 40-foot sea snakes, which might make a fair old distraction even for a destroyer. But considering various options, going mundane seems like the best bet. While we wait for that to be arranged, the expert pokes the Jade Scroll, and we watch him nervously.

Once the Grumman Goose that’s our next means of transport arrives, we head out near sea level while distractions happen elsewhere, and get back to the Philippines and relative safety. There are foreign agents asking after us even here, but we get official-ish credentials as diplomatic couriers. On the way to the airfield the next day another car gets up suspiciously close; our driver evades enough that the pursuers lose control trying to keep up before anyone opens fire, and we make it back to Sydney.

Next session: we’re going to need some sort of secure store for things like this (rather than leaving it to the academics for whom today’s irreplaceable artefact is tomorrow’s paperweight). For a change, our next mission is *not* a scramble, and we have time for an actual briefing.³ But meanwhile we’re sent off to pick up Professor Cornel Nelson, who’s written things about Aboriginal religion and belief suggesting we could use him, but lives in a small town outside Brisbane and has been hanging up

²Modern spelling checkers are so *limited*.

³The brass are reorganising things. Joy.

his phone when someone says they're from the government. He is at home, and seems happy to take up the job, but something is a bit *off* about him. We leave, but park nearby and sneak back to do some informational magic; he's definitely under a Serpent-tainted magical influence or spirit of some kind. So it looks as if we're going to have to go in and do some field-expedient decontamination.



Public domain

Neutral Currents: We leave Monrovia and make the long crossing to Ascension. The Navy outpost (that someone may still be paying for) hasn't been here for a decade, but there's a Cable and Wireless crew running the radio relays and a detachment of Royal Signals. While we're sorting things out, smoke is spotted on the horizon: a short reconnaissance flight shows it to be the Soviet-flagged⁴ tramp freighter *Omsk*, which *might* be using Ascension as a navigation check point... or might not. We get started on the refuelling, and alert our royal cargo to be ready to lie low and/or leave in a hurry, just in case...

Outgunned / The Medusa Sanction: the one of these that I've been running. A return after a bit of a gap, and I misremembered the rules which didn't help. With a slightly short

⁴We are *technically* not at war with the USSR right now, it's July 1940, but they are a German ally.

session, we spent most of it plummeting from a destroyed aircraft, wrestling for parachutes.

And then the next session I outran what I had loaded into my mind, just as the sample adventure ran into that classic thing that *Gumshoe* deals with, a total lack of linking material if you don't make the roll (or in this case even if you do). I patched over it of course, but not well and it didn't feel good. If the players end up not wanting to return to this system, I really have to blame myself. Getting into act 2 of the adventure is at least freeing things up from the straight series of fights that act 1 was.

Next session after that I *finally* got the rules right. I still like the system but I'm not terribly impressed with the minimalist plotting of the adventure. (And the PDFs have some huge bitmaps as page decoration which makes them very slow to flip pages.)⁵

2300AD / Project Bayern: played with the Sunday group. We caught up on the events that I wrote up last time with Whartson Hall, then went on to a bit of foreshadowing, finding a damaged robotic exploration rover from a civilisation that we'll meet in a future episode.

"No, that's impossible. Anyone with Engineer (Stutterwarp), make a self-control roll not to explain why it's impossible."

Finding the Good in *Traveller: The New Era*

Traveller: The New Era ("TNE" hereafter) came out in 1993 and could loosely be regarded as the third major edition of the rules, after the

⁵And there's some internal error which means that, which I can still view them all right, I can't do the usual thing of stripping out all the images but retaining the text layout.

original Little Black Books (“LBB”, from 1977) and *Mega Traveller* (“MT”, 1987). And it was widely despised, at least by the *Traveller* fans I knew.

The system was changed: MT had canonicalised the Universal Task Profile that I think originated with Digest Group Press, but was otherwise recognisably the same 2d6 + bonuses of the LBBs (though it had shifted armour from “makes you harder to hit-and-damage” to “absorbs some amount of damage”, and in general combat was much more complex). TNE shifted to the GDW House System (first seen in 1990’s second edition of *Twilight: 2000*), which was d20 roll low. That was clearly irksome, because everything with stats had to be re-statted, but it was livable.

More serious, though, was what we would now call metaplot. The LBBs began with no canonical background at all (apart from some assumptions about things like ship ownership), and gradually accrued the Third Imperium over time. There were odd lacunae in the specification which led to the concept of IMTU, or “in my *Traveller* universe”, the answers one had found for those questions in one’s own game. And perhaps because of this, people loved it.

MT had walked out onto thin ice with its civil war plot, progressing gradually over real-time years from the assassination of the Emperor to the general collapse of interstellar trade (in the infamous *Hard Times* supplement/adventure of 1991). But if you wanted to keep on playing *Traveller*, maybe in a notional area with the civil war happening off somewhere else, you basically *could* until *Hard Times* came along, without having to declare a complete split from canon.

But TNE jumped up and down on the ice until it broke. Not only did the Imperium collapse, it was now canonically 70 years later, when the surviving pockets of civilised life were recovered enough to start exploring beyond their local groups again. And the Imperium was categorically 100% *gone*. What’s worse was Virus, which was a sapient computer virus that had been built as a weapon into *every* computer, leading to entire worlds being destroyed when their environmental systems shut down, and “vampire fleets” of autonomous vessels with a variety of goals—and a deliberately less-computer-dependent setup among surviving humanity.⁶



Yihan Wang via Pexels

And that *annoyed* people. I’ve got this perfectly good *Traveller* campaign, they said, I’ve been going along with you until now, but *seventy years*? Everything’s gone? And a complete change of style? No. Later *Traveller* settings either followed the example of **GURPS *Traveller*** (1998) and its “the civil war was just a bad dream, the Third Imperium goes on

⁶Presumably this explained why the various alien races, who had not been having civil wars of their own, hadn’t managed to swoop in and take over. A similar idea was used in the 2003 revival of *Battlestar Galactica*.

forever” background, or used entirely different eras. No mainstream release ever built forward from TNE and, in spite of the extensive list of products released for it, it’s now mostly considered an unpopular dead end.⁷

But I want to look at it from a different angle. It’s not how you want your LBB or MT campaign to end (or to be ended at you). But what does it have to offer in itself, as a campaign disconnected from the classic setting?

For a start, it returns to exploration. LBB *Traveller* encouraged you to create your own worlds, but the Third Imperium setting rapidly got catalogued (1984’s *Atlas of the Imperium* listed basic world data, if not always the names, for *every single system*) and the scope for exploration minimised. Yeah, the Scouts are cool and do spy stuff, but they don’t seem to be finding a whole lot of actual strange new worlds any more.

But the exploration in TNE is not just going off into the unknown, it’s following ancient and misleading guides. After all, the library data of the fallen Imperium are still around; you know what this world was like before the civil war began, you may even have some old reports from during the war, but *now* it might be a ghost world full of loot for the plundering (and Virus-based menace), or it might have survivors, with the traditional planet-of-the-week shenanigans as you meet their weird isolated culture. But now those shenanigans are happening with potential allies who might be persuaded to join your home polity and make a significant contribution to it, which will be dead handy when the next big polity over tries to make a move on you...

⁷Though there is Martin J. Dougherty’s *Traveller 1248* to show one vision of how things might continue, and in theory *Traveller*⁵ might have done more.

On a smaller scale, going aboard a derelict spaceship or otherwise recovering lost items (a) is more rewarding than it was because there’s quite possibly high-tech stuff your home civilisation just can’t make any more, but (b) is way more likely to kill you because Virus.

(Yes, all right, the canonical setting had the PCs based in the Reformation Coalition, already the biggest game in town. I’m much more interested in the tiny one- or two-world statelet that is sending out its first explorers. To me the symbol of this era is the recently-manufactured Close Escort that has an antique scout/courier welded on the front in place of the bridge section that’s in the original design, to use the scout’s better sensors on a more combat-capable ship.)

There are also the Technologically Elevated Dictators, on planets where a small ruling class (or even an individual) has managed to preserve some technology from the general collapse. They might get samey after a while, but it’s an interesting approach and not something one sees in most SF settings (unless they’re the *point* of that setting).

There’s a proper science-fictional hope for better things in the future, rather than the Third Imperium’s stasis (or a traditional fantasy game’s assumption that all the best things were in the past golden age). Yeah, the Imperium messed up. But we’re going to get it *right*.

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?”

I love designing settings. Sometimes I think I love it more than running the games that happen in them.

I'm a big enthusiast for Ken Hite's dictum of "start with the real world". You can get away with much weirder stuff there, because it actually happened and doesn't have to make sense.⁸

For SF settings with FTL I build the FTL mechanism first. That tells me how long trips are; also I now know how good the normal-space drives need to be (to get you between where the adventure happens and where the FTL happens). That in turn gives me some idea of the required technology base. Then do we have FTL communications, or does news only spread as fast as a fast ship? And so on. By the time I've made those relatively few decisions, great chunks of the potential societies in the setting have fallen into place, including how much latitude ship or fleet commanders have for independent action.

I also like Big Puzzles, like (in the WWII game) the way magic and nuclear transitions interact. I started with the basic model (each makes the other one harder and less likely to happen), then started putting numbers on it and working out the observable effects. Then the PCs ran into some of those effects, and started trying to work out what was going on, how they could learn more, and how they could use this to their advantage, and this was an ongoing thread for much of the rest of the campaign.

⁸All right, in the WWII game I gave a particular Gauleiter in Belgium an enthusiasm for the occult, completely invented to make the scenario work, though obviously it was plausible given the general interaction of senior Nazis and particular sorts of occult practice. Some years later I got contacted by his great-nephew who'd been tracing the man's occultism, found my campaign log, and wondered what my sources were...

We Also Heard From

Comments on E&A number 10

Cover: is it just me or are they Up To No Good?

Patrick Riley: Re *St Faustina*, what does the bottom right door button do? Is that the actual opener? (I am perhaps too fond of details in this sort of small practical design.)

My usual tool for this sort of map is Inkscape, but I've seen some very impressive things done with spreadsheets, and now I'd be tempted to do something with Typst—which I've just been using to lay out a re-coloured knitting chart for my wife, and generate a stitch list off the same information.

RYCT Patrick Zoch: there's padding and padding. Often I'm pretty sure I can do a thing in time X, but I know there's a chance something will go wrong, so I don't want to commit to doing it in that time; if I'm forced to commit to a single number I give the estimate for the worst plausible case.

Pedro Panhoca da Silva & Maira

Zucolotto: For those of us who met gamebooks through *Fighting Fantasy* and its imitators, a combat system seems like the standard, and of course it's an easy way to increase play time. But it's not narratively interesting, there's no specific "you failed in this specific way because of a bad decision", you've just run out of hit points (and some of the later *Fighting Fantasy* books clearly assumed that players would simply ignore the result and pretend they won anyway, given the level of challenge involved); I still have a soft spot for the *Falcon* books, where combats are typically resolved with a single skill roll like other sorts of uncertain situation.

Brian Rogers: “Cognac, Armagnac, Burgundy and Beaune, This old man came rolling home.” I’ve tried *Harmonies* on BGA and mildly enjoyed it, but I suspect it would be much more fun with the physical bits. (I’ve not yet met a game I enjoyed *more* on BGA than in reality.)

I’m a big fan of this kind of twist, in this case “someone else has already tried to do this adventure, so while there was a standard challenge here, now some challenges are easier for you and others are harder”.

Is it unreasonable of me to think “put back the two looted statues”? 😊

RYCT Lisa: often in my early gaming career we’d meet *chez* whoever had the most convenient house, but we tried to make sure it was someone else’s job to bring snacks (especially if the host was also GMing). As for attacking the party, I’m generally happy with something ineffective; I can model this as the PC’s internal struggle against whatever’s controlling their will, and in a system that allows degrees of resistance rather than pass/fail that would certainly come into it.

RYCT Mike Carr: I think a lot of game designers don’t realise how quickly an easily passed roll stacks up when you have to pass lots of them. 90% success? Sure. 90% ten times? Now it’s 35%.

RYCT Patrick Riley: cue the apocryphal story about Dustin Hoffman blathering on about the Method and begging Laurence Olivier for tips on staying in character. “Try acting, dear boy.”

RYCTM Ken’s feeling was that as long as the wife keeps paying, the investigation will continue. (I mean we’re fighting an ancient evil now, which pays very poorly, and bottles of Old

Empire aren’t free.) See above for the conclusion of this adventure.

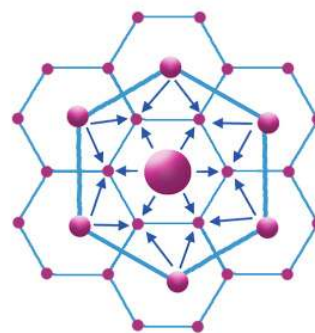
Re The Face, my ancient *Champions* reflexes want to stat that up as some kind of flash or presence attack.

Matt Stevens: re ability scores: I remember when stat lists in new games got longer in the late 1980s, then mostly shorter again; sometimes they substitute for skill lists (you’re a dextrous guy, you can do all Dextrous Things), sometimes they provide a default (add your Dex and Acrobatics), sometimes a skill is binary (roll Dex, or if you have Acrobatics Dex + 2) and so on...

RYCTM sure, running a game can be hard, but I’ve never known a shortage of people willing to do it and able to do it competently.

RYCT Jim Vassilakos: well that’s the trick isn’t it? If any given being is participating in society, it’s probably not OK to march into their home and kill them. The smartly-run empire will employ its dragons as tax collectors...

Pum: I think it’s important to know *why* a city is there: market for the local farmers, sea port, highest navigable point on the river, frontier fort, etc. That’ll change what happens there and give it a distinct flavour, rather than just another “city encounter zone”.



Wikipedia user Laotseuphilo

I have a notion for re-casting the Terribly Serious World of Darkness into the low-stakes but very earnest struggle for dominance of one little town with nothing much worth controlling. Prince of High Wycombe, if you will. (I gather that [Bloodsuckers](https://vortiwife.itch.io/bloodsuckers) (https://vortiwife.itch.io/bloodsuckers) can be used for something like this already.)

Myles Corcoran: It's not even that the AI companies want the chips, particularly. It's just a good old-fashioned cornering of the market, with fake money.

I made a great error with *Quacks*: I bought the Big Box edition. Which is actually the right size for all the bits I have (I've 3d-printed bits trays for each sort of token, and I have the lovely BGG resin tokens rather than cardboard) but makes it too big to throw in my bag and take to a game session. Same with *Star Realms*.

I haven't played *Vaesen* but I have played *Alien*, which as you suggest uses a similar mechanic. It's fine if you *want* to play people who can't really handle it, degenerating into pointless squabbling well before the monsters eat them, and I'll accept that that's basically what Cameron did in his Vietnam-in-space film, but that's not the only sort of game I want to play. (Also I feel there are really only two distinct stories to be told in that universe, and they're called *Alien* and *Aliens*. Either the protagonists don't know they're there, or they do know but largely get beaten anyway.)

RYCTM: yes, that session of *2300AD* was a definite dividing line between players who see "ultra-dense stellar-mass object" and immediately jump to "Chandrasekhar Limit" and those who don't. I think the primary author may have been pushed for time; there are bits

that work very well and others where the research clearly hasn't been done.

I agree, I admire a great deal of Greg's work and vision, but hard numbers were not his strong point.

John Redden: Good fortune with the surgery!

In the anime series *Girls und Panzer*, in which stylised tank warfare is a martial art for young ladies, each school/town appears to be based on the deck of an aircraft carrier. It is never made clear why (perhaps the manga explains, but I doubt it).

Clark B. Timmins: I'm always a fan of that sort of detail. "Aha, this mark is from the Age of..."



Pixabay on Pexels

Erica Frank: I think the style of *Call of Cthulhu* (and the many, many other Lovecraft-related or -adjacent horror games) varies a lot with the group. I've found it a solid place to look for non-powergamer players, in spite of early zoo-dungeon adventures like *Black Devil Mountain*.

The impression that I'm getting from hearing other people talk about *Brindlewood Bay* is that the less you like mystery stories and the process of deduction, the dual approach of reading the

story and playing the game with the author, the more you'll get out of it. I *do* like mystery stories, see my blog linked at top of zine, and I like to think I'm a fairly decent GM of investigative games, and this isn't a style that would work for me. (For clarity, I'm not saying either of these approaches is better than the other.)

V. I. Warshawski is Sara Paretsky's series heroine (books starting with 1982's *Indemnity Only*); Mma Precious Ramotswe is the heroine of Alexander McCall's *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* (name of series and 1998 first book).

Ah, one of my irks with mystery shows, the interviewee who asks "am I a suspect?" and nobody ever answers them "everyone who could physically have done it is a suspect at this stage sir; we're talking to you mostly to see if we can rule you out".

Sounds as though you're running *BB* in your style rather than rigorously as written, and in my experience no matter how amazing the game that's the best way to run it.

Michael Cule: Shades of Asterix, "we're going to the circus!"

Which causes my mind to wander... I think many of my role-playing defaults may have been inspired by reading a lot of Asterix a few years before I started gaming. A small party, with a job to do, but never taking anything too seriously...

Dylan Capel: I suspect caravan size depends on hazard level. The traditional fantasy caravan is going to get attacked by bandits, and several merchants can pool their resources and hire some competent fighters who can defend all of them, whereas one merchant on their own may not have the spare money for one. Of course in



Emil Engelmann, 1889

reality once the chance of attack rises above "very small" the merchants often just don't go there if there's somewhere else they can go instead.

Gabriel Roark: Fascinating to see how much page count *Barrows & Borderlands* takes up, when the OD&D *Men & Magic* is 36 pages, *Monsters & Treasure* 42, *The Underground & Wilderness Adventures* 38, 116 pages total (including covers), which I assume would be roughly cognate with your books 1-4 in terms of subjects covered.

Lisa Padol: I am reminded of the story Andrew Offutt (Kentucky) told of being called by Robert Asprin (Michigan) in the middle of the night, in the *Thieves' World* days. Along the lines of "HiAndy, Tempusisintrouble,

yougottahelp gethimout!” (pause) (pause)
“Hiiii, Booob.”

I hear a lot of good things about *Frieren* and I’ve started to watch it. Also I have watched and enjoyed *Jack of All Trades*, *Party of None*; I gather from a spoilery summary on Wikipedia that (in the original light novels) there is a specific reason why the party dumped him even though he was clearly carrying them, and this may be explored in the second season.

I bow to your research on *Call of Cthulhu*. “Typically about 1-2 things per year” clearly isn’t enough to provide material for constant play the way the big dungeon games do, but it’s certainly more than I had been aware of.

RYCT Brian Rogers: there’s now a free [Jazz Age conversion guide](https://cthulhureborn.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/conversion-guide-coc-to-cthulhu-eternal-jazz-age-version.pdf) (https://cthulhureborn.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/conversion-guide-coc-to-cthulhu-eternal-jazz-age-version.pdf) for *Cthulhu Eternal* which among other things explicitly lays out how Credit Rating type rolls can be handled there: a test against your Permanent Resources level for raw wealth, against a Community Bond for societal influence, or against Social Etiquette for good manners. (They wanted to release specific conversion notes for older adventures, but Chaosium hit them with copyright strikes just for mentioning the titles.)

Of course **GURPS** does much of this with Savoir-Faire, of which there is a potentially limitless array of specialisations, though (High Society) and (Servant) are the ones that see most use in my games.

RYCTM: well, the only mention of Yhtill was in the name of the specific artifact.

Oh, I remember *Book of the Estate*. That was the point at which I found myself thinking “you

didn’t playtest this, did you, you just stuck on some numbers that seemed right”.

After I have been repeatedly frustrated by their lack, it has become a rule that any game I’m writing up for other people to run *must* have a timeline of what has gone before if it’s even slightly relevant.

RYCT Patrick Zoch, ah, we’ll have a good crop of Garamond this year.

RYCT Joshua Kronengold: I can see the commercial appeal in saying “go and (pay to) watch X first, you’ll enjoy Y more” (at least while the property is popular enough that it won’t put people off). My preference is more for separate spinoffs in different directions: want the war story? Watch *Rogue One*. Want the resistance story? Watch *Andor*. And so on, and the link back is that if you want to know more about this, you can see that series, but you don’t need to have seen it to make sense of everything else. Otherwise you lose the less dedicated viewers, and even the people prepared to watch everything gradually burn out (see the superhero film boom and bust).

Re IgTheme: ah, the Monster That Shows The Author’s Neuroses!

Avram Grumer: I know people who use genAI to resolve boardgame rules arguments at the table. This seems to me much closer to an appeal to dice, whatever random answer comes up we’ll take it because at least it wasn’t said by someone at the table who might be biasing the decision in favour of their own position, than to an attempt actually to find the answer.

RYCTM RMCT Lisa: where graphviz fails IMO is in producing a map that you can then pull about and tweak—even its SVG output has no concept of “this line is anchored to these two

nodes”. There’s dia, which does do that, but won’t give you an initial layout, Ooh, I should write a converter!

RYCTM RMCT Joshua: I admit this is something of a blind spot for me. I don’t insist that every game mechanic represent a specific physical thing, but I do prefer the vast majority of the rules to be that way rather than abstracted—and I prefer structure to emerge from character play rather than be imposed by the system or the GM. (But Joshua explained this further in his zine in #10 and I think I’ll shut up now.)

Patrick Zoch: I’m reminded of the occasional anime phenomenon in which someone’s soul can be punched entirely out of their body.

Re sampling food and drink: the yogsothoth.com players were notorious for having long digressions whenever in-character shopping or food were mentioned.



Valeria Boltneva on Pexels

A rule of thumb I’ve used over the years: any fight where one side calls itself “loyalist” is going to be a nasty fight.

RYCT John Redden and initiative: *Genesys* uses what I think could be called “modified popcorn”. Rolls at the start of combat establish

an order between PCs and NPCs (as it might be P, P, N, N, P, N, N, N), then each time a PC comes up the players collectively decide who on their side (who hasn’t yet had a turn this round) goes next, and similarly for the GM and NPCs. This definitely needs a scratchpad, at least if you’re me, but it does mean that Fast Guy can benefit the whole party by letting a heavy hitter go first.

RYCTM and level-gaining behaviour: well, I assumed you wanted a fairly abstracted approach, and it seemed to make more sense than “you pay the guild your training fees”. As I see it if you’re using class and level you’re already insisting on a certain amount of standardised behaviour.

RYCTM and character motivation: OK, **SPOILER** here for *Horror on the Orient Express*.

In this campaign, the party is expected to go off across Europe chasing the pieces of a magical artefact. They do this at the request of someone they barely know, who makes a frankly flimsy case; but the *players* have presumably read the title and have some idea that if they don’t go they won’t get to play the campaign. When the sudden but inevitable betrayal happens, an NPC laughs at them for being so gullible. No, they were dragged along by the Plot. But how do you reconcile that with good in-character play? Unless the PCs *are* all quite gullible, it would be entirely reasonable for some of them to object to this mad plan...

RYCT Michael Cule: “Well, you’re all going on a pilgrimage to Canterbury...”

Brian Christopher Misiaszek: Absent cats. (Raises glass.)

I particularly like the furnishing of the Leopard Man Cult temple, and how it's clearly been improvised from what was locally available.

I'm also fond of the narrative economy of the corroded suitcase: reveal the money *and* the strange chemical.

Joshua Kronengold: glad things are going well on the medical front.

RYCT Brian Rogers: the *Traveller* space merchant crew canonically needs Pilot, Navigation, Engineering, Steward and Medic (the latter two if you have passengers), and maybe Gunner though often they can double up with Steward. But apart from that Gunner-Steward combination you don't really want people doing more than one of those things at once, so having multiply-skilled characters doesn't help much.

RYCT Lisa Padol: a technique used in gold mining is to mix the ore with mercury; the gold forms an amalgam, which can be extracted, and you can then evaporate the mercury off it to get the gold. (Yes, this is of course vastly polluting and bad for the workers.)

Of course sorting coinage would seem like a suitable task for various sorts of conjured servitor.

RYCT Myles Corcoran: in my limited experience of playing *Unknown Armies 3e* the great virtue of this system was that you were always aware of giving something up when you improved the other thing. If you want a real *gain*, well, that's what your magic is for. This cannot possibly go wrong.

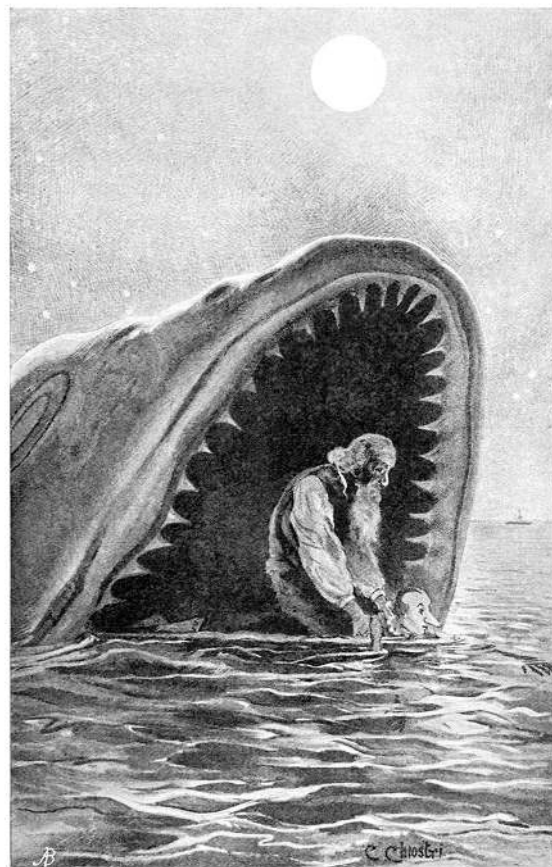
RYCTM: the other thing about doing a capture in game is that rigging a fight to end in a capture feels, to me at least, unfair—even in a game where the GM explicitly has total power.

(Or as someone on the tekeli.li forum said recently in the context of that *Orient Express* thing I mentioned earlier, “if you know the outcome you must have, don't play it out”.)

Jim Vassilakos: RYCT Michael Cule: it is a house rule of mine that corpsing the GM (i.e. making me helpless with laughter) gets an in-game reward, like a bonus character point in *GURPS*.

Timothy Collinson: Yeah, sorry, I don't really like having unobscured email addresses in public view. Contacted now.

** FIN **



Carlo Chiostrri, 1902

Twisting the Rope #11

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Coming Like a Ghost Town

I was up to Dublin this month to visit family and my trip coincided with a big demo and road-blocking protest from hauliers and agricultural contractors protesting the increasing prices of diesel fuel. The centre of Dublin was blocked by 18-wheelers and tractors, as the protesters tried to force the government into negotiations and promises of a cut of the duty on fuel. The protest lasted several days, with blockades of ports and fuel depots leading to petrol and diesel shortages across the country. Eventually it was resolved, once the Gardai (Irish police force) got the go-ahead to intervene and forcibly remove vehicles. The government did announce some cost-of-living support for fuel costs, which are hitting those people with oil-fired central heating just as badly as the hauliers and agricultural contractors, but with the situation in Iran it's likely prices will rise further.

The sun has finally shown its face in Cork of late, and the cats are demanding that the back door remain open during daylight hours so they can come and go as they please. The sunshine has not put an end to the rain however, and the back door stays an obstacle to feline emancipation to the moment.

Sam has been feeling unwell recently, with unidentified abdominal cramps and pains. Our GP didn't find anything and sent Sam to A&E (ER for the North Americans), where she had to wait the best part of eight hours before being discharged home with a script for buscopan, a pain killer, and 'come back if it gets worse.' We're still none the wiser to the root cause.

Mutterings - First Among Meeples

I was re-elected unopposed to the chairperson position in the staff boardgaming club. Now I can begin my reign of terror!

The other members of the committee were also re-elected unopposed and without complaint so I can only assume we're all doing a marvellous job, or the roles are sufficiently boring that no one else wants to take one on.

One of our players has not had her contract renewed by the university (boo!) but hopes to remain in Cork and to participate in our regular sessions of boardgames and rpgs. I hope she does as she's a great addition to our roleplaying sessions and good company at boardgame and rpg meet-ups alike.

This is one of the elements of university employed life I greatly dislike. So many post-docs and technical assistants live precariously on limited term contracts, or worse, hourly pay, and universities, mine included, rely on a regular turnover of them to keep teaching and lab demonstrations running while perfectly aware that most of these temporary employees will never get a permanent post in the institution, all the while accepting more post-grads to feed the system.

A Mausritter Campaign

This is the continuing write-up of the Mausritter campaign started in July 2024. A band of brave mice work to defend their home, explore their world and become the heroes of Oak Home, their mouse town at the centre of the map.

The characters are:

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

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

Gwedolene, an ale-brewer, sometimes accompanied by Victor, a drunken porter-mouse, played by Kate.

Odette Snow, a foreign mouse and dam builder, played by Alai MacErc.

Ambrose, a scrawny wireworker, singed with electrical burns, played by Peter.

With worries about the strange ring the mice retrieved during the investigation of the murder of Pepper Chit, they planned a trip to visit Magnolia, a mouse wizard of some fame, who lived in a tree a few days' travel south of Oak Home. Before they departed, Ambrose argued with Odette about the ring. Ambrose wanted to lock the ring away in a box, and eventually persuaded Odette to agree to this, so long as Odette retained the key to the lock. Ambrose considered building a trap into the box, but decided against it. CanCan packed a hacksaw, just in case.

The group travelled along the river south to a convenient crossing spot, and once across and dried off set out south towards Magnolia's tree. On the way they came across a small group of dunnocks pecking at a sack at the side of the path. The small, brown birds flew up to the branches of a nearby tree to observe as the mice approached.



Miss Clutterbuck, Sky's sparrow mount, passed some remark about her country cousins, but luckily too quietly to be heard.

Gwen examined the sack of seeds and read the name printed on the outside. "Blossom and Whiteberry - Purveyors of Fine Seeds." Ambrose looked about and noticed cart tracks on the path leading in the same direction the mice were heading. Sky called up to the dunnocks and asked if they saw where the sack came from. The dunnocks were keen to have the sack opened, and bargained with Sky until she relented and split the sack, and poured seeds onto the path.

The dunnocks then told her they had seen two mice, with a beetle-drawn cart, heading along this path about a day ago. The birds had only just discovered the sack of seeds which must have fallen off the back of the cart.

Ambrose stuffed his pouch with a handful of seeds before the mice left the dunnocks to their feast and continued along the path.

About an hour later the group drew near the Ghost Beech, a pale tree standing alone in a meadow. From a distance, they could see a cart halted at the foot of the tree. Two mice lay motionless in the cart, slumped forward over the reins.

Unsure of what was going on, Gwen approached the tree slowly, and suddenly found herself woozy and faint. She staggered back and lay down to clear her head. Some enchantment was present, no doubt, and the mice discussed¹ how to tackle the situation. Sky pressed on with her plan over the objections of the other mice, and tied a rope to herself, with a long, loose end tied to a fishhook. Hook in hand she took off, sprinted towards the cart and just managed to slip the fishhook into the jerkin of one of the cart-mice before she fainted, overcome by the sleeping enchantment.

The rest of the mice bent their backs and pulled on the rope. They dragged Sky and the first cart-mouse away from the tree beyond where Gwen first felt woozy, and laid them out in such comfort as the meadow grass allowed.

Odette then volunteered to repeat the trick Sky demonstrated, and the rope and hook were duly transferred to the white-furred mouse. Odette ran to the cart and hooked the second comatose mouse. She turned and waved, then promptly fell over fast asleep.

CanCan led the retrieval and dragged Odette and the other mouse out to safety. She saw to laying them out to snooze beside Sky and the first cart-mouse. As CanCan saw to the sleeping mice, Ambrose and Gwen discussed stealing back the key to the box with the ring from Odette. Their deliberations took too long for, as Ambrose tried to sneak Odette's key from around her neck, the sleeping mouse roused and caught Ambrose mid-pilfer. Words were exchanged and Ambrose's ears were burning when Odette finished giving him a piece of her mind.

CanCan paid the arguing mice no mind, and her attention was caught by an apparition across the meadow beyond the pale beech tree. Another mouse, transparent and hazy,

¹ Well, bickered more like.

stood watching the mice from Oak Home. As CanCan rose from her sleeping charges to call out, the ghostly figure faded from sight.

Sky sat up briefly. “Did you see that too?” she asked, and fell straight back to sleep.

Gwen grew nervous when CanCan described what she had seen, and the brewer mouse paced around the pale tree at the perimeter of the sleeping effect. She uncovered 4 small, white stones, nestled in the grass, and placed at the cardinal points around the tree. On picking one up, she immediately fell asleep.

CanCan rushed over and dragged the fallen mouse away from the circle, but Gwen remained soundly asleep despite CanCan’s efforts. The white stone remained clutched in her hand, unnoticed.

Gwen then woke and saw she was surrounded by many ghostly mice. They led her into the forest nearby the Ghost Beech, but drifted away swiftly once she could no longer look back and see the clearing. She followed their flitting shapes between the trees, becoming more and more disorientated. Overhead the trees were bare of leaves and the winter stars dotted the darkest velvet-blue sky. She shivered, the warmth of the mid-afternoon sun left behind at the clearing with all the rest.

She at last spied a blue light shining ahead and approached it. She found a large, luminescent blue mushroom twice her height. The ghost mice all knelt about the mushroom, the blue light passing through their faded bodies unhindered.

A figure stepped out from behind the mushroom. Tall and pale as the moon, the new arrival looked worryingly like Winter Ash, the elven witch the mice had overcome in the Temple of the Moon not long before.

This elf, for elf he was, introduced himself as Whitethorn Ash, and assured Gwen that only “part of you has gone for a walk in the winter wood.” The male elf sought news of his sister, Winter Ash, and interrogated, albeit politely, Gwen for what she knew of the missing elf witch. Gwen related her tale of the Temple of the Moon and the manifestation of the Moon Goddess, carefully leaving out the fate of his sister slain by a man-frog’s sword.

Apparently satisfied, Whitethorn Ash banished the ghostly host and the mushroom with a gesture and Gwen woke suddenly, back lying in the grass with CanCan fussing over her. The white stone blackened in her hand and rolled onto the turf with a thud.

Some experimentation revealed that the sleeping enchantment on the beech tree had faded, all the white stones were blackened, and the other sleeping mice began to wake. Ambrose fetched the cart and the somewhat drowsy beetle away from the tree back to the group. With some alarm he noticed the dry bones of two mice, overgrown with grass, as he tugged the beetle into motion.

The Oak Home mice bundled Blossom and Whiteberry, the assumed purveyors of fine seeds, onto the back of their cart, and made for Shattered Oak to get the rescued mice to

a civilised outpost. At the oak, Ambrose's queries about the mouse skeletons was answered by Captain Holly, who identified them as Jake and Suzette, a couple eloped from Stumpville last spring. All assembled asked for the departed to be welcomed into an afterlife of plenty, free of predators, with plenty of beer, and raise a toast to the dead and the living.

They spent the night at Shattered Oak. In the morning, Captain Holly gifted the Oak Home crew several syrup-coated acorns and provided them with solid directions to Magnolia's tree-top home. The group set off once more, in a reflective mood.

Comments on E&A #10

General comments: Lots to get through last issue, so once again apologies if I've missed something in the skimming.

Brian Rogers: Good luck breaking in your new boss. I've played and enjoyed *Harmonies* but I cannot seem to win.

I beamed with pride to see you use 'flaggerbastard' in your Denizens footnote. It will catch on, I'm sure of it. I loved the dragon-express for mail and transport too. I liked your clever use of a will and inherited trouble as a hook to the next adventure. It reads like a Call of Cthulhu cross-over with a distant uncle passing trouble to the investigators only with more loot. I look forward to your reveal of the cursed crown.

RYCT me getting to play (as opposed to GM) in *Vaesen*: We're three sessions in now, and having a great time. The core mechanic of a pool of d6s with success on a 6 is, as predicted, unreliable at medium sized pools, but that suits the horror tone in the end.

RYCT Patrick Riley about method actors: I'm put in mind of Robert Downey Jr's character in *Tropic Thunder*, who doesn't break character until the DVD commentary track is complete. Of course, there's also Laurence Olivier's advice to Dustin Hoffman: "My dear boy, why don't you try acting?"

V&V 2.1 is a clear improvement over the 1st edition, though both have the same great feel of 'make it up at the table' for the powers.

Matt Stevens: *What's New with Phil and Dixie?* does hold up well, and I return to the well once every couple of years for a re-read.

I'm glad you clarified your comment to Patrick Riley comparing the *D&D* core stats to African national borders, though I've known some players over the years who would certainly consider a biff on the nose for someone changing their beloved attribute names.

PUM (Paul Holman): I read about your terrible news on Facebook, Paul, and I'm so sorry for your loss. Please take care of yourself. Grief can be overpowering.

RYCT Matt Stevens about US politics: Politics, mass media and all sorts of other US cultural exports dominate the Anglosphere on-line. We have a cost of fuel protest in Ireland currently, with agricultural contractors and hauliers blocking ports, fuel depots and the centre of Dublin and other cities. Whatever their legitimate grievances, there's a

hell of a lot of far-right talking points² from British and US outlets coming up in the vox pops and interviews with the protesters. Phrases like “asylum seekers of military age” are an instant dog whistle, for example. We don’t have anything resembling the concept of “military age” in Ireland. Hiberno-English speakers say “adult.”

LOL at “... we’re more like Hot Fuzz vs What We Do In The Shadows.”

John Redden: Good luck with the heart surgery and best wishes for a speedy, full recovery.

Elf (Erica Frank): Good luck with the *Brindlewood Bay* game and climbing back on the GMing horse.

The *Neopets* RPG Kickstarter sounds like a classic Kickstarter RPG that overpromised and then failed utterly to match expectations. Looking at Geekify’s other projects I wouldn’t think they were a good choice to kickstart a whole TTRPG at all.

Your recounting of the Head of Vecna story made me laugh again, as I did when I first encountered it decades back. The Head of Vecna and the story of the Dread Gazebo are now told to new generations of gamers and their fame/infamy spreads.

Dylan Capel: I agree with your opening comment. The carelessness and callousness of adults is moral bankruptcy of a level no better than “the strong take and the weak suffer.”

Re *Questworlds* being dense and a poor introduction to the system: Agreed. All of the iterations of the game (*Hero Wars*, *HeroQuest* and now *Questworlds*) could do with a *Basic Roleplaying*-style 12–16 page rules intro, with examples.

RYCT me re *Mausritter* and *Kriegsmesser*: I would likely be happy with something as simple as MAR Barker’s *Perfected* rules³ or the FKR⁴ approach of rolling opposed dice (d100 or 2d6, respectively) and working out the fiction that follows in a high-trust set-up, so sub-systems rarely get the play time the designer might have hoped for at my table. As it is I’m okay with, and my players like roll vs. attribute with a few extras like damage & HPs to move things along.

Roger BW: I expected the wrecked spaceship in the Bayern write-up to be Vilani but I realised that I don’t know if *2300AD* has any connection to the later *Traveller* Imperium setting anymore. Then I saw your recent blog post and understood the origin of the wrecked ship.

RYCT Lisa Padol: As Nabu, Lord of Order, puts it in one of the *Doctor Fate* comics, “you are quite attractive for a stinking bag of mostly water.”

² And some home-grown, unfortunately.

³ PERFECTED - *We both roll dice.*

If you roll high, your view of reality prevails.

If I roll high, my view of reality prevails.

If we're close, we negotiate.

⁴ Free Kriegspiel Renaissance/Revolution/Rules.

RYCT Patrick Riley on *Outgunned* heroes being Young or Old: *Vaesen* has something similar, with young, middle-aged, and old age groups granting more or fewer attribute points and skills points running fewer to more with increasing age. It's not quite as hardcore as fewer hit points/health though.

RYCT to Michael Cule *Transhuman Space*'s eidolons: "AIs who think as much like a specific individual as can be managed from analysing their public records. Nobody seems to have come up with a reason why this is worthwhile." Well, Meta patented the process to build AI-driven bots to post like a deceased person⁵, using their social media corpus as the learning text, and, horribly in my opinion, people are creating AI-avatars of dead loved ones⁶ from voice and video recordings, and the deceased written records, to provide a simulacrum of the dead. If AI-psychosis is a real problem, talking to fake versions of your dead mum or dad, or perhaps worse a dead child, isn't going to help LLM users' mental health.

Lisa Padol: RYCT Brian Rogers on the Silver Anniversary edition of *Everway*: Exactly right. It's really a coffee-table edition and the original release is perfectly serviceable. I do like the new Fortune Deck, but I found the layout garish and too much like 'cool' 90's lifestyle magazines.

Re *Mythic Bastionland*: What I find appealing about the design is the blending of that OSR staple — the hex crawl — with the evocative descriptions of omens, seers and knights, to breathe a mythic feel into the land the player knights' explore. It feels very Arthurian Wasteland to me, particularly when combined with the slow erosion of the characters' stats as they suffer setbacks. The differences between the knight archetypes also help differentiate between the PCs, which sometimes felt harder to do in *Pendragon*, for example.

The core combat mechanic from *Into the Odd* works well too, with the feats and gambits introducing just enough tactical play to avoid the egg timer effect of seeing who wears down their opponent's hit points first.

To hark back to Roger_BW's issues with *Pendragon*, *Mythic Bastionland* restricts itself to the mythic quest and does that part well. The cognitive dissonance of Mallorian knights contrasted with spouses dying in child birth and horses dropping like flies is missing and deliberately so.

I'd also say that the layout and graphic design of the book along with the singular artist's vision does a lot to set the mood of the game.

Re *Unknown Armies* 3rd Edition: I get annoyed by games that spread character creation over different sections of a single book, let alone across two or more books, so that's definitely a strike against it in my view. I'm surprised by the comment in the review you linked to calling the tone of the writing condescending and pretentious. I've read a lot of Greg Stolze's work over the years and might occasionally agree that he can be pretentious, he's usually not a condescending writer. Casual and conversational, yes. Sometimes too much in love with his own cleverness, maybe, but not condescending.

⁵ <https://www.businessinsider.com/meta-granted-patent-for-ai-llm-bot-dead-paused-accounts-2026-2>

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c93wjywwz5p5o>

On the upside, *Unknown Armies* 3rd edition did away with the horrible puke-yellow cover elements of the 2nd edition.

RYCT to Patrick Riley re rolls with (dis)advantage: I like the mechanic for a single die roll like a d20. I'm oddly uncomfortable with the d100 implementation where you roll 2d10s for the 10s place and one for the second digit. I prefer a flip-flop (chapeau, Greg Stolze) on d100 for an advantage, or a straight +/- modifier to the target number. I don't like any die substitution tricks with a pool of dice, or, say, a 3d6 bell curve total.

RYCT Patrick Zoch: I love the image of the Dreamland Times growing its fonts on trees.

RYCT Joshua Kronengold re Marvel and Star Wars films and shows leaning too heavily on other releases: That's a peeve of mine, and I feel it stems from the endless ouroboros of remakes and reboots in visual media. A new show wouldn't require the knowledge of what came before, but many studios are shy of taking a risk on something new when more Marvel or more Star Wars is bound to sell.

Re the Strange School PBEM: Definitely worse without you as GM, but that is as much a reflection of you as GM as it is of the pros and cons of GMed vs GM-less approaches. That said, with personalities like Josh, Chris, you and myself, it might have been a case of too many GMs spoiling the campaign broth.

Avram Grumer: Kieron Gillan's blog posts about games always make me want to run whatever it is he's enthusing about. I'm considering *Mythic Bastionland* for my next campaign whenever the *Mausritter* game concludes.

Re "Diagesis": Bravo! Encore!

Re MCU taming down the Marvel comics weirdness: I fully agree that it's a shame. I've been an X-Men fan for 40+ years now, and none of the cinematic outings comes close to the *telenovela* complexity and batshit weirdness that define the X-Men for me. I'm not holding out much hope that Disney/Marvel Studios will do a better job with the X-Men now they've got them back under creative control either.

Brian Misiaszek: Again, I'm very sorry for your loss, made only harder coming too soon after Sadie's death. Zoe was a beautiful looking cat.

I applaud your choice of the *Mausritter* boxed set. "Honey in the Rafters" is a nice adventure module, and there's something delightful about a proper boxed game with rules booklets and other bits and pieces. It reminds me of youthful gaming discoveries!

Congratulations to Lauren on her place at York University's law school. A quick check in Google Maps shows me it's about an hour's drive from your place, so she shouldn't be a stranger. The scholarship offer from Western must have soothed her ego indeed.

Your details of the Mazorra sewage management would apply to another Miles. IIRC Miles Vorkosigan in Lois McMaster Bujold's Vorkosigan Saga was something of a drains aficionado.

Joshua Kronengold: I'm glad to hear that your second endoscopy removed that polyp⁷ and things are looking better. Good also to hear that you were able to attend and enjoy Intercon.

Re separating coins in a hoard in *D&D*: Get the wizard to summon an unseen servant and tell it to chuck all the copper coins in a corner. Or, if the coins are of different diameters, some clever PC will have a plank with grooves and slots of various sizes to roll the coins down into receptacles. Your coins in oil or similar viscous liquid appeals to the physicist in me best of all.

Thanks for the example from *Unknown Armies* 3rd edition. If I read your explanation right, Dodge and Fitness are opposed values, with one increasing making the other decrease automatically. Greg Stolze used a similar idea in *A Dirty World*, his film noir/detective RPG, but there the paired qualities felt more appropriate, much like the opposed personality traits in *Pendragon*. I can't really square Dodge and Fitness as a trade off one for the other.

RYCT Patrick Riley re the *AD&D* druid's shapechange: The only PC in many high school campaigns that was a druid perma-died as a result of his druidic shapechange power. He changed into something small to get through a narrow tunnel into a treasure room, leaving the rest of the party behind. Delighted with his first pick of the loot, he was surprised by the guardian of the treasure and slain in his human form. None of the other PCs could reach him to get the body out, and they never found another route to that secret room. I don't think the party even considered resurrection or a wish to get him back, which speaks to the teenage mentality of our group. It's no Head of Vecna, but I still get a smile out of it.

RYCT Avram Grumer re popcorn reading: I don't have a first usage of the phrase but it does seem to be everywhere in teaching literacy/fluency circles, and deprecated for both teaching literacy and fluency. In keeping with inspiration from movie snacks, you could call it "pick-n-mix" initiative.

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⁷ I manfully refrain from jokes about Elder Things and the shoggoth in your bowels.

BUGBEARS & BALLYHOO #49

April 19, 2026, for Ever & Anon #11

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Primary Game System Keywords: The Arduin Grimoire, Barrows & Borderlands

Secondary Game System Keywords: Advanced D&D (1e), Basic D&D (B/X), Lamentations of the Flame Princess

In this Issue

Hello, E&Aers! I am starting this early (just after submitting B&B #48, actually) in hopes of keeping pace with writing, reading, & life. One thing that I was able to do while traveling for work in mid-March was a nearly complete read-through of Barrows & Borderlands. If I hold onto my thoughts & impressions of the game, I should be set for the multi-installment review that I have planned. As for the rag before you now, you will find:

- Yet Another Look at Arduin's Portal to Adventure
- Comments on E&A #10
- Bonus Natter

YET ANOTHER LOOK AT ARDUIN'S PORTAL TO ADVENTURE

Bugbears & Ballyhoo #48 (E&A #10) continued my review of Arduin's Portal to Adventure, by Emperors Choice Games (Empcho). It dug into the *Barrows & Borderlands Box Set, Limited Edition* (by Matthew Tapp), beginning with a survey of the box set & ending with a description of the physical characteristics of the first volume of Barrows & Borderlands, *Men & Mutants*. This, I will attend to the gaming content of Men & Magic, but first, a note about the art. Concerning the box's cover art, I hypothesized that the name of the piece was "Darkstorm," drawn by "LC," which I thought might be a stylized signature for Len Kane. I happened to look at the PDF version of M&M after submitting lastish & spotted this attribution on the title page: 'Art by Laura "Dark Storm" Church & Michio Okamura are copyright©, and used with permission from Emperors Choice Games and Miniatures Corp.' So, LC & Darkstorm are one person & is the box cover artist. The back-inside cover art that I took as Greg Espinoza's work is by Michio Okamura. I can see it now, but Okamura's Arduinian art style is seldom so comic book in layout, whereas Espinoza's is. Going forward, I will compare the paper publications to their PDF counterparts & note any differences.

Tapp summarizes M&M's contents in an index. The book is divided into the following sections:

- **Introduction**
- **Recommended Equipment for Play**
- Common Game Terms
- Lore
- Humans & Demi-Human Lore
- Deities of Firnum
- Calendar of Firnum
- **Languages**
- **Creating a Character**
- **Race Details, Ability Score Modifiers**
- **Class & Level**
- Birthsigns & Background
- Social Class
- **NPCs, Alignment**
- Optional Ability Scores
- Radiation
- **Equipment**
- **Combat**
- Death & Healing, Critical Hits
- Poison
- Grappling
- **Beyond 10th Level**
- Dueling
- OGL

As a point of interest, bold-text contents in the dot list above indicate common or similar subdivisions in *Original Dungeons & Dragons, Book I: Men & Magic*. *Men & Mutants* covers much the same topical ground, and in a similar order, to OD&D's *Men & Magic*. Compared with OD&D, *Men & Mutants* possesses more explicit world or campaign. *Men & Mutants* also covers topics that OD&D either does not treat or handles in *Book III: The Underworld & Wilderness Adventures*.

At its core, *Barrows & Borderlands* is an OD&D variant, as the index suggests. The first three divisions of *Men & Mutants* (Introduction, Recommended Equipment for Play, & Common Game Terms) cover familiar ground to any reader of RPGs. Recommended Equipment for Play is almost identical to OD&D's corresponding text in *Men & Magic*. Common Game Terms, spanning two pages, is a welcome addition for the newcomer & the terms selected are such that the mode of play for B&B is presaged just by reading this section.

Men & Mutants continues with explicit setting material in the next five sections of text (Lore, Humans & Demi-Human Lore, Deities of Firnum, Calendar of Firnum, & Languages). The principal setting of Barrows & Borderlands is the world of Firnum, a flat-rock piece of shattered Earth that survived the Dynaco Company's disastrous activation of the ancient Starfall Device. Although a few great empires arose from the ashes of apocalypse, most of Trapp's campaign takes place in the contested but uncontrollable Borderlands between nations. "Humans & Demi-humans" describes familiar & not-so-familiar fantasy/science-fantasy races. Among the familiar, Men & Mutants has pure-strain humans, kobolds, dwarves, halfings, mutants, & fairies. Races peculiar to this setting or that are not typically used for PCs in other RPGs include Starborn (angelic-like beings born in space), greenskulls (radioactive undead), & mycelians (alien humanoid fungi). Deities of Firnum provides thumbnail sketches of 15 common deities. The setting has a unique calendar & list of 16 languages.

Pages 24–39 detail character creation (chargen). Volume I helpfully provides a one-page, ten-step summary of chargen on the first page of this section. B&B characters have seven core abilities: Strength, Intelligence, Wisdom, Dexterity (Dex), Constitution, Charisma, & Radiation Resist. Optional ability scores may be determined for Comeliness & Luck, too. Ability scores are determined by rolling 3d6 down the line in order. Ability scores are followed by determining the race & class of the new character. After noting racial & class abilities, roll hit points. Choose an alignment that describes the character's outlook on law, chaos, neutrality, & morality. Determine Psychic Potential, name the character, roll their birthsign, & answer the prompts on page 37. Record starting equipment & purchase any additional equipment you might desire.

The seven core ability scores represent the character's potential in a manner that is effectively identical to any iterative of D&D or other like RPGs. Radiation Resist measures the character's natural defense against radiation. Comeliness is what it says on the tin, whereas Luck influences critical attacks & location of treasure.

Tapp does suggest some alternative rolling schemes for ability scores, including the ever-popular 4d6, drop lowest & arrange to taste. The rules give half a page on ability tests, spanning simple roll-under d20 tests, fixed thresholds for success, & rolling a variable number of d6s according to difficulty.

As far as standard playable races in this game, B&B offers many of the recognizable D&D racial tropes while putting its own stamp on them. I especially like the special abilities for humans because it links them to their setting lore as the most ambitious & hardy intelligent taxon on Firnum without resorting to level caps for other races. B&B represents these qualities by having human hit points (hp) rolled with the best of two dice & allowing human-only parties to act first when tied for initiative with non-humans. Fairies replace elves & resemble the fae of older Earth folklore: they take extra damage from iron weapons, can fly for short periods, & can change size from about 1 foot to 6 feet tall.

Ability score modifiers are similar in scale to iterations of Basic D&D, mostly ranging from –3 to +3. Scores of 9–12 are considered average & impose no modifiers. Ability scores modify the same sorts of tasks as most D&D editions, although B&B takes a cue from 5e

in that non-average Dex scores not only affect the ability to hit with ranged attacks but also the damage of successful hits.

Men & Mutants describes seven character classes (Fighting-Man, Magic-User, Cleric, Half-Caster, Thief, Gamma, & Psychic) in terms of hit dice (HD), minimum starting hp, save bonus(es), score to hit Armor Class (AC) 0 (THACO), prime requisite, & other class abilities. HD range from d4 to d8, resembling Basic D&D. Minimum hp is a nice addition for players, guaranteeing at least 2, 4, or 8 hp, depending upon class. Saves are like the original five saving throws from D&D except renamed as Death, Breath, Paralysis, Device, & Sorcery. Each class receives a +2 bonus to two of the saves. B&B uses descending armor class like pre-3e D&D, so THACO is the score needed on a d20 to hit AC 0. All classes start with a THACO of 19 but the poor magic-user, who is stuck with 20. Each class also has a prime requisite (half-casters & psychics choose from among two or three) that influences experience points (XP) earned during gameplay along a range of -10% to +10%. Each class has its own rate of level progression, as with older editions of D&D.

Here, I will note some of the differences in how B&B handles familiar classes & summarize classes unique to this game. The **fighting-man** is standard fare, although fighters may choose a single weapon type at Level 1 to master, gaining +1 to hit & damage, as well as extra attacks if the mastered weapon is used in melee. New weapon masteries may be selected at levels 4 & 8.

Magic-users differ from those of most iterations of D&D—but resemble the Arduin Grimoire's magic system—in that magic-users can miscast their spells, which can result in injuries or disfigurement. They do not automatically learn new spells upon gaining a new level. They must study under a master or locate arcane grimoires.

Clerics gain their special abilities through devotion to a deity or other cosmic force. Clerics can cast spells & turn away the undead. Unlike standard treatments of clerics, the B&B variety begins play, like magic-users, with three spells. Clerics may learn additional spells by studying under priests of their faith or finding holy books out in the world.

The **half-caster** is a spellsworn, proficient in martial & magical arts. Half-casters gain weapon mastery as a fighting-man, but only at levels 1 & 8. They also do not gain as many attacks per round with weapon mastery. Half-casters begin with only one spell at first level & their caster level does not improve on a 1:1 basis with experience level the way that magic-users & clerics do.

Psychics are feared for wielding strange mental powers. The class begins play with four Psyche Points that the player assigns to one or more psionic disciplines.

Thieves are the skill monkeys of B&B. In the mode of Basic D&D (Basic/Expert) & Lamentations of the Flame Princess (LotFP), thief skills are rated 1–6 & success of use is determined by roll-under checks on 1d6. I think that LotFP is a strong influence on the skill selection for the thief class & the suite of abilities is broad: architecture, back stab, bushcraft, climb sheer surfaces, decipher languages, remove traps, hear noises, hide in shadows/move silently, open locks, pick pockets, read scroll, use wands, & piloting.

The **gamma** is a character who has embraced the mutations bestowed upon them by radiation, sorcery, or alien manipulation. Beginning gammas have 1d6+1 mutations, which are rolled on 1d100 & encompass beneficial & baneful characteristics.

In Firnum, the stars hold power over the destiny of all beings. B&B represents this by having players roll a d20 to determine sign & d2 to determine whether the aspect is ascendent or descendent. Regardless of aspect, each sign grants the character a +1 bonus to a discrete ability, such as AC or Radiation Resist.

Character prompts & social class are similar to a host of RPGs. B&B does not provide many rules concerning either phenomenon. One's social class, forex, might indicate that your PC comes from a family of animal trainers. Your referee will probably regard your PC as proficient in working with one or more animals.

The optional ability scores of Comeliness & Luck are used more for flavor than mechanical boon or bane. Comeliness is simply a numeric shorthand for how a character's appearance. Scores of 7-12 are average, three is "hideous," & 18 puts one in the category of "muse."

In addition to increasing a character's odds of finding treasure, Luck scores of 17 or 18 provide a chance for the character to instantly kill their foe.

Radiation Resist represents a character's hardiness against radiation damage & mutation. When an exposure occurs, the referee compares the Radiation Resist scores of exposed characters to the Radiation Intensity on a table. The table provides the amount of damage taken.

~~~Intermission~~~

I am going to pause this review of Men & Mutants here because this zine is on page 5 already & I haven't yet started comments. B&B Vol. 1 review to be continued nextish.

### COMMENTS ON E&A #10

- Quasipseudoludognostication #10 (Patrick Riley)
- Twisting the Rope #10 (Myles Corcoran)
- Reddened Stars No. 9 (John Redden)
- Notes on Elaria Construction Materials and Marks (Clark B. Timmins)
- Shiny Math Rocks #6 (Elf)
- Attacks of Opportunity 9 (Dylan Capel)
- Firedrake's Hoard No. 8 (Roger BW)
- An Unlooked For Zine #9 (Lisa Padol)
- Going to be Ad-Libbed #8 (Avram Grumer)
- The Dragon's Beard 95 (Patrick Zoch)
- Accidental Recall #9 (Joshua Kronengold)

**Quasipseudoludognostication #10 (Patrick Riley):** I found your puzzle doors & the rest of your dungeon inspiring. I hope to use something like these in a future game, perhaps of Troika!

**Twisting the Rope #10 (Myles Corcoran):** You get top marks for referencing the Cure's song, "How Beautiful You Are". It's funny to me that Robert Smith has remarked to interviewers that the French get the Cure more than their own Brits. Given Smith's taste in literature (the present song referencing Charles Baudelaire's, "The Eyes of the Poor"), I would guess that he might get the French more than he gets the Brits. Of course there is "Charlotte Sometimes," so maybe I need to spend an afternoon listening to my Cure collection & ruminate on this. Thanks, Myles!

**Reddened Stars No. 9 (John Redden):** I look forward to your next health report, earnestly hoping for success & full recovery.

I like your Faux Island (attractive illustration) & your approach to identifying where locations of interest to the PCs were located. Did you slap this map on the table when players started asking where things were (or perhaps display the map from the get-go) or did you use it behind the DM screen as a reference when fielding questions? Normally, I am a hide-the-map referee until the PCs have explored a place & the players mapped it. When the PCs in our Temple of Elemental Evil campaign (Advanced D&D) first went to Verbobonc (VBB, seat of the viscounty), I broke with my own tradition: I took the Sanctuary map from Chaosium's *Thieves World* box set on the table & pointed out the major landmarks. I found that this approach increased player engagement & it made in-world sense because most or all the PCs had previously been to VBB.

Back to Faux Island, what were your sources of inspiration for this settlement? *Waterworld*? Living on the island change that witnessed the Pearl Harbor attack? Some other third thing? What are the linked circles between what I take to be the residential & commercial sectors of Faux Island? When you write that the ocean drives the island, do you mean powering its functions or can Faux Island also travel?

RYCTM about fireballs, air sharks, & confined (stony!) spaces: Yes, fireballs & lightning bolts must be used carefully indoors. Two sessions ago, the Frog Leg Gang raided the hideout of a powerful magic-user on a lower level of the Temple of Elemental Evil (sit back and marvel at the ridiculous genitive clause that you just read). In the hideout, the PCs found what they thought was the magic-user's workshop, a mere 10-foot-by-10-foot, appropriately furnished room. They used a 10-foot pole to open a chest, which was trapped & released a roughly 5-foot-square cloud of poison gas. Gobi the deep gnome illusionist/thief, beguiled by his possession of a *ring of elemental control (air)*, used it to cast *gust of wind* to disperse the poison gas cloud. Alas, Gobi's player had not read the spell description carefully & did not anticipate that the gust of wind's forcefulness would cause the cloud to rebound off the nearby back wall toward the entrance to the room. Gobi had to save versus poison or die...and failed. Happily for him, Gobi's quick-thinking mates managed to save him.

**Notes on Elaria Construction Materials and Marks (Clark B. Timmins):** RYCTM about iterations of Arduin produced by others, I also enjoy the Hargrave volumes best. Hargrave wrote the *Arduin Adventure*, which I do not love but also have not given it much of a chance yet. *The Compleat Arduin* is great as a detailed supplement for the Hargrave grimoires, although I do not care for the combat system. I have only read the chargen rules in *Arduin Eternal* (Monty St. John's ruleset) & reserve my opinion until I give the volume a further read. I think we should return to this topic after I get to the Arduin material in the Portal to Adventure. I have not played *Swords & Dragons* yet.

Your series on Elaria, especially construction materials, makes my archaeologist heart sing! How many pages of Elarian culture have you written? Is any of the material that you've shared in E&A player-facing (I guess if they read E&A, it is)?

**Shiny Math Rocks #6 (Elf):** RYCT Joshua on respect for the dead resulting alternatives to hacking apart the undead, this is something that I have been thinking about, too. I can sometimes get caught up in Advanced D&D's cosmology & run all religions as systems that are in synch with said cosmology, but who says that humans, demihumans, humanoids, & monsters optimize their traditions with that reality? I'm glad you two corresponded about this.

**Attacks of Opportunity 9 (Dylan Capel):** RYCT about *Dragon* 138's treatment of the Black Plague, your point about gameable content is fair play, although you also correctly point out that such articles were possibly a boon to some readers, drawing as it did from multiple sources in the pre-internet days. Your question, "what use is historical information in a world of manifest gods, magical healing and sometimes brutally rational and modern thinking?" is interesting. Pretty early in our AD&D Temple of Elemental Evil campaign, the player who runs a cleric (John) & a paladin (Jack) of St. Cuthbert expressed interest in building a hospital in the "village" (it is actually a hamlet) of Hommlet, the party's adopted home base. In addition to Jack & John, the party had a third healer, a cleric of Zodal named Amelie. Three other clerical types resided in Hommlet, all capable of casting multiple healing or curative spells. As both simulation experiment & non-combat roleplaying opportunity, I listed all the hamlet's occupants (including the PCs) & rolled to see how many folks contracted disease or parasites. I am happy to write more on this if you or others are interested, but the tl;dw (too long; didn't write) is that the three NPC healers were more than adequate to treat the diseases & parasites that cropped up that month. I would not describe the frequency of disease that month as plague-scale, to be fair. Still, this datum goes to your point about the stabilizing (in this case) effects of supernatural abilities in RPGs.

**Firedrake's Hoard No. 8 (Roger BW):** You have my gratitude for presenting your general theory of the undead. This is very useful & I will enjoy thinking about the degree to which it meshes with AD&D's cosmology (through the Greyhawk-tuah lens).

**An Unlooked For Zine #9 (Lisa Padol):** The Arduin Portal to Adventure is lovely indeed. I have not seen *Yuri on Ice*; I will search it out!

**Going to be Ad-Libbed #8 (Avram Grumer):** Love the “War” reference—it’s good for a chuckle!

**The Dragon’s Beard 95 (Patrick Zoch):** RYCTM on rules in AD&D, I share your experience of variability & seasoned reconsideration of particular rules. I read with interest your reply to Roger BW about downtime activities earning a PC XP if appropriate to one’s class (or some similar characteristic). This is actually quite an old concept in RPGs. I think that David Arneson started it, or at least published it, first in his *First Fantasy Campaign* (1980, if memory serves).

**Accidental Recall #9 (Joshua Kronengold):** I am happy to hear that the stomach polyp is sorted.

### BONUS NATTER

This month, Celeste & I celebrated our 28<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary—the first one that we’ve properly acknowledged since Emma’s death. We went ice skating because it is our favorite thing to do & we enjoy being around the youngins. For those of you who might be dealing with grief right now (or will be in future, which is probably most people), if nobody has ever told you this, take your time grieving & work at understanding it with a professional or a wise person that you know & trust. Nobody’s grief timeline is the same (forex, Celeste & I let four anniversaries go by before celebrating this one), which is an awareness that a grieving person must also cultivate regarding family & friends that share in your suffering. If you put in the grief work, a complete life is still there to be enjoyed.

Also in skating news, our class had a pleasant surprise. For the final four weeks of class, we’ve had a substitute coach, who is none other than Coach Julia Durkee. Celeste & I have followed her YouTube channel since we started skating & joined her online instructional club a couple of months ago. Her videos prepared us well for Learn to Skate classes & Julia is very good at providing individualized pointers, even in a group setting. Our current class will wrap up about the time this zine burns your eyeballs & I am getting promoted to the Gamma/Delta course (the fourth & fifth courses in this curriculum). Oh! On Easter weekend, Celeste & I drove to Oakland and skated at the Oakland Ice Center, Alysia Liu’s home rink 😊. Bye for now!

# The PHOENIX NEST

**BUILDING MY LEGACY: More on the Six Gods**

## **THE FATHER**

*You, who are on the road*

*Must have a code you try to live by*

*And so become yourself*

*Because the past is just a goodbye*

*... Teach your children well*

*Their father's hell did slowly go by*

*Feed them on your dreams*

*The one they pick's the one you'll know by*

*... Don't you ever ask them why*

*If they told you, you would cry*

*So just look at them and sigh*

*And know they love you<sup>1</sup>*

The Father is the god who embodies the mature male, one who has sired children and looks after them. He is the framer of laws and the founder of societies. He was the one who chose the first King of The City and who deposed the last one.

He favours those who take responsibility, who plan ahead, who tell the truth and who try to live up to their best selves.

He is the patron of lawmakers and judges, of rulers of all sorts, of builders.

He despises those who run from responsibility, who take no thought for the morrow, who lie and take the easy course.

APPROPRIATE RELIGIOUS DISADVANTAGES

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<sup>1</sup> Written by Graham Nash and performed by Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dQQaUnSmJr8>

**A zine for EVER & ANON 10 by  
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Code of Honor (Professional) (Followers of Father do their job properly both ethically and competently)

Honest. (Followers of Father follow the laws.)

Sense of Duty: The City.

## **THE MOTHER**

*No, I would not give you false hope*

*On this strange and mournful day*

*But the mother and child reunion*

*Is only a motion away<sup>2</sup>*

The Mother is the woman of childbearing years who has children and still raises them no matter how old they have grown.

She favours those who give and love, who give their children a family that they can grow in, like plants climbing a frame, that supports them but does not bind them down.

She gives practical advice and love. She favours mothers, healers and teachers.

She despises those who harm those weaker than them, those who cripple future generations by their decisions now.

She does not store deep wisdom, at least that humans can access. But if you want to know what to do with 6kg of bananas or how to get blood stains out of laundry she has the answer.

APPROPRIATE RELIGIOUS DISADVANTAGES

Charitable (Followers of Mother aid the needy)

Pacifism (Self Defence Only)

Selfless. Sense of Duty: The City.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Simon

## **THE WAY OF THE WORLD: PENULTIMATELY**

I finally decided, midafternoon on the second day of this year's Eastercon that my con-going days were coming to an end.

Mostly it was the ache in my hips and my back brought on by just walking around the con, pulling myself up out of the too low chairs that for some reason hotel chains always scatter about the place, feeling fresh pain every time. Partly it was the memory of how hard it had been to drag myself and my suitcase up the line to Birmingham, the last fifteen minutes being the worst: the cumulative pains of the trip hit me as I walked from the station to the hotel.

But I think the deciding moment was realising that afternoon that when I had arrived the previous evening and had found a perch in the bar near some people who knew me and had been introduced to a nice German femme fan<sup>3</sup> as the Vogon Guard and some one had asked me how I had got the part. And I just replied "Oh, I don't remember: I got it through Professional Casting Report I suppose..."

And that wasn't right. I got the part through writing to Ken Campbell and getting involved in the Rainbow Production of THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY. I have a whole spiel about the weirdness of Ken and the weirdness of that production and the furious good luck that one of the people working on the stage show was also working on the TV show and recommended me..

When my brain finally dragged that memory out of storage almost a full day after I needed it, I decided that if I couldn't even remember my own legend it was time to call it a day.

I was also going full Grumpy Old Git and sounding more conservative than I am but the earnest politics and pontificating of the young people got on my tits and the prevalence of the 'like' hiccup in their speech raised my blood

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<sup>3</sup> The Plain People of E&A: You're not old enough to use that sort of historical fan jargon

pressure. There were good moments (an excellent panel on Worldbuilding and Religion) but also some naff moments. The fact that I found it hard to hear anything that was being said in the bar cut into serious socialising which didn't help either.

I have one more con booked: STABCON in the summer. I'll do that and then I'm sticking nearer home from now on. Perhaps I'll try to expand my on-line gaming to make up for the things I won't be doing again.

I'm sad: I've been going to cons since the 1979 Worldcon in Brighton. I had already found one day games meets in London by then and I found STABCON in Manchester shortly after that. This has been part of my life for a long time. But when it starts to be more pain than pleasure it's time to stop.

The Weight Loss Injections may be reaching a dosage were there is an actual effect. We shall see.

## **CUNNING PLANS AND OVER-REACHING AMBITIONS**

Monday nights have been a little intermittent recently, with health issues cutting into our chances of meeting.

Wednesday nights have suffered a loss. As some of you will know, Pum's wife died unexpectedly and he is quite shattered. We carry on without him and hope to see him when he can bear to see us again.

The monthly TRAVELLER 2300 game is moving towards its conclusion. I think my own personality (which is perhaps over cautious) is overwhelming the fact that my character is a bold, brave, First In Scout. The things you learn about yourself, eh? I wonder what we will do when it wraps.

## GLAMOUR DAYS AND NIGHTS

Player Characters:

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

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

Drak as JARATHIR another YT initiate with a Big Sword.

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

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

Non Player Characters In this Episode

VISHI: A High Llama rider and a slave in Vostor's family since he was five. The Wise Servant to Vostor's Bombastic Warrior.

SENATOR GEILBONUS SPEAKER OF THE IMPERIAL SENATE: Vengeful Uncle of SENATOR PAULUS LONGVALE the former Master of Circuses.

SENATOR FALERIUS AGGARIUS Their landlord and (increasingly) Patron.  
FALERIA AGGARIA, the Senator's daughter

SENATOR JAXARTE WHYDED An Architect.

GREAT SISTER: Lunar goddess and sibling to the Emperor.

SOR-ETTE A beautiful Healer and Do Gooder.

ORSORKHON, Grand Master of the Cenobites

THE KEEPER OF THE HIDEOUS ZOO

## A MAHOUT

BEAT-POT AELWRIN. Lunar Hero, Emperor's Bodyguard and compulsive Chef.

Soldiers including the CO and Adjutant of the Fourth Pelandan Foot.

## BUREAUCRACY, POLITICS AND THINGS THAT COME FROM THE SKIES <sup>4</sup>

*GM: Any questions before we start? I do not have the secret of the universe with me this week. Sorry.*

Alan pointed out something I had been getting wrong about Illumination. The Rules as Written meant that anyone with a Moon Rune rating had the skill at a base level. I told the players to alter their character sheets where needed. (This really needs to go into the RQG character creation process.)

I indulged in a bit of theological speculation (*GRAHAM: Heretic!*) about there being other paths to Illumination that were based off Storm or Fire but in the current age it was mostly via the Moon.

*GM: (On being asked what date it was in the campaign) I will work this out really, really soon I promise.*

We picked up the narrative on the middle of the afternoon of the same day after the Emperor's decision when the court was dispersing and the Imperial retinue was heading up to the Inner City.

*GRAHAM: Because somebody's just been given A Job.*

*GM: And you've been instructed to help him.*

The aged Senator (Paulus Longvale's uncle) came up to the Senator they were now

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<sup>4</sup> For 17 09 25

working for and snarled "This isn't over!" before stalking away in a dramatic fashion.

A splendiferous looking court official came up and informed their Senator that he was "Commanded to the Imperial Presence."

He handed over control of the situation to his daughter including control of the troop.

**FALERIA:** Well, this is very ingenious of Moonson.

**JARATHIR:** He is a genius!

**FALERIA:** This is going to keep us busy. Formally, this is an honour. Practically, it's a nightmare. We have less than a week to get everything together and put on a decent show for the Emperor.

**JARATHIR:** It's not like he's doing it all on his own. There's an office...

**VOSTOR:** They've made a lot of plans already.

**ESHAN:** We'll just have to get to the plans before...

**FALERIA:** Yes! Well done! Somebody is thinking clearly!

**JARATHIR:** Why would they destroy...

**ESHAN:** Because they're loyal to the previous Senator.

**KEANUS:** If they're loyal to the previous Senator...

**VOSTOR:** They may not know he's fired yet. Let's get there first.

Faleria agreed but pointed out that they didn't have authorisation yet.

**JARATHIR:** You may not have noticed but we're quite good at getting into places and we have a piece of paper!

**ESHAN:** It says people should help us in the course of our investigations.

Faleria turned to Ureus the Valued (the trollkin rent collector) and told him to let her father

know where they were going and that they were going Right Now!

All of them but Keanus made a successful check on their Movement Rune. That unfortunate found himself short of breath and rather than delaying the others let them go on ahead.

**KEANUS:** I've done a lot of praying this morning...

**VOSTOR:** It's the knees...<sup>5</sup>

They got to the office of the Master of Circuses and in the corridor outside there was A Long Line Of People with bundles and papers. Including Senator Jaxarte Whyded the Architect they had met during their previous visit.

**SENATOR WHYDED:** Ah hello you fellows. I'm afraid he's busy at the moment.

**FALERIA:** (*Whispers to Eshan*): Assert your authority.

**ESHAN:** We're here on a mission from the Emperor.

The Dread Name had its effect.

**SENATOR WHYDED:** The Emperor? I...I...uh The Emperor?

**VOSTOR:** Could you just step out of the way please?

They got to the front of the line where there was a secretary. She wore the colours of a Civil Service slave and is looking a little alarmed as they approached. From behind the shut door they heard thumping and muttering.

**JARATHIR:** Out of curiosity who is in the office at the moment?

**SECRETARY:** The Master of Circuses' staff. His personal staff.

**JARATHIR:** We're just going to step in and have a word with them.

A critical Intimidation roll just when it was

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<sup>5</sup> Often a cry from the GM when he tries to rise from the gaming table GM: (Keanus) is too close to Death at this moment.

needed. The entire chamber fell silent at his ringing tones.

**SECRETARY:** The door is open.

**JARATHIR** Thank you so much.<sup>6</sup>

Through the door and a large number of men in tunics and sandals and slave collars.

*GM: Civil servants are all somebody's slave.*

**JARATHIR** Kindly stop what you are doing. Now.

Some were arguing about scrolls. Some were arguing about leather folders containing documents. A number of them were looking at the soldiers with alarm.

Vostor realised that though everyone in the room were slaves there were two groups of slaves having a disagreement. One group wore a red Imperial identification disc and the other group was wearing a green leather identification disk and were therefore privately owned.

Eshan went around the mass of slaves and began looking through the doors that led to inner rooms.

**RANDOM SLAVE:** Hey you can't go in there! Those are the Master's private quarters.

**SANDENE:** And you can leave now. We are here on behalf of the Emperor.

**ANOTHER RANDOM SLAVE:** We work for the Master of Circuses!

**VOSTOR:** Not any more.

An explanation followed and Eshan noted that one of the ones with the green collar was looking furtive and guilty.

**ESHAN:** You! Come over here.

**GUILTY LOOKING SLAVE:** Sir, I am not *your* servant. Though you are obviously an officer and a freeman and I um...

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<sup>6</sup> **GRAHAM:** (AS PUNCH) *That's the way to do it!*

<sup>7</sup> *GM: The carpet in these offices are red or black or occasionally purple and gold.*

**ESHAN:** You know something already....

**GLS:** I know lots of things sir.

**ESHAN** About the change of Master of Circuses.

**A RED COLLAR SLAVE:** He was the one who came in and told us we had to clear out all the documents.

**JARATHIR** Really? Interesting.

**VOSTOR:** Are you attempting to disrupt the ceremony that is going to happen in the immediate future? And are therefore being disloyal to the Emperor.

**GLS:** I am merely retrieving my master's personal documents..

**JARATHIR** Lovely carpet in here: shame if it got ruined.<sup>7</sup>

Eshan intervened to point out that documents stamped with the seal of the Master of Circuses belonged to the office and should stay and any stamped with his private seal were the Senator's private property.

*GM: And without a warrant you shouldn't look at them.*

**JARATHIR** Except to check for the seal.

**SANDENE** And to check he's not be misusing his personal seal for business use.<sup>8</sup>

*GM: How many of you can read?*

Everyone except the officer said they had no knowledge of their letters at all though Jarathir was in fact lying about that for role-playing reasons that still baffle the GM.

At that point their Patron the Senator arrived at the door of the office, looking triumphant (and slightly flushed at having run all the way) waving a document authorising him to take over as Master of the Circuses and the badge of office.

**SENATOR:** Your master is no longer Master of The Circuses. Would all of my Senatorial

<sup>8</sup> . You can tell Martin used to be a copper

colleague's personal staff move over *there* please and would you all put down on pain of punishment the documents so that we may examine them.

The troop kept a stern eye on the slaves as they shifted to different sides of the room. Keanus came in, panting and gasping as they began a search of the room for documents. He had exchanged words with the Senator along the way about how his daughter had gone on ahead without instructions to do so.

**KEANUS** She's impetuous that girl.

**SENATOR:** She's also going to inherit my Senatorial title. I suppose I should get used to this. Or somebody should get used to it. I won't be around at the time.

The search proceeded. Vostor found a folder that didn't have either the Senator's personal seal or the Master's seal. It had the sign of the Crimson Bat.

**GLS:** Sir! Those are sacred documents!

Vostor handed them to the Senator with a bland smile. That worthy looked at the folder with distaste and said that considering how broadly 'the current Chief Feeder of the Bat' was interpreting the laws he was going to let the folder pass unexamined. He handed it to the Guilty Looking Slave and advised him to head for his master's mansion. The Senatorial slaves were hustled out of the chamber with a hearty "Good day! Good day!"

**FALERIA:** It's moments like this, Father...

**SENATOR:** Yes, yes, I know. I never liked it. We don't have many personal slaves ourselves.

**VOSTOR:** Slaves cost money.

**JARATHIR** I think this is a choice thing. It's not like they couldn't afford them.

**SENATOR:** None the less

He went to the door and announced to the waiting crowd that he was now the Master of Circuses and that they would have to (kindly) give him at least the afternoon to get up to date with the business of the office. He gave the Architect a nod and said he would see his

Senatorial colleague now and the rest would have to wait for the morning.

**JARATHIR** Normal service will be resumed as soon as possible.

**SENATOR:** If you wish you may leave a note with my new Secretary (*a nod to the Gorgon of the outer office*) stating who you are and what your business may be. I think that's the best I can do for you. Good day, good day. (*Turning to the inner office*) Now then ladies and gentleman... Ah, no. What's the correct way of addressing civil service slaves?

**JARATHIR** Staff?

**SENATOR:** Staff. I wish you to get these papers sorted into some sort of order. Those of you who have specialised knowledge of these matters bring it to my attention.

He set the troop to keeping an eye of the Staff and turned to speak to the Architect.

**KEANUS** They don't know we can't read or write.

**JARATHIR** Sush.

**SENATOR WHYDED:** What happened? The first thing I heard was my friend was in court prosecuting a group of people who invaded his home and chopped his arm off.

**JARATHIR** He abducted the Senator's daughter. Probably to feed her to the Bat.

**SENATOR WHYDED:** Oh.

**JARATHIR** We asked him to return her. There was a mild fracas.

**VOSTOR:** Which he started.

**SENATOR WHYDED:** During which he suffered the loss of an arm?

**VOSTOR:** He was lucky. I could have hit him somewhere else.

The Architect took a step away from Vostor and sat down hard.

**SENATOR WHYDED:** I had suspected. But I told myself it was nonsense. I mean *somebody* had to be the Bat-Man but... He seemed so.

**JARATHIR** Had you known the Senator long?

**SENATOR WHYDED:** Oh, we were at school together.

**JARATHIR** Do you have any insight as to why....?

**SENATOR WHYDED:** He has never been entirely open since his parents died and since the Assassin was taken by the Cenobites, by the cult of Danfive Xaron. Who knows where that person is now? They build up a new identity for you. A new name. A new appearance.

JARATHIR Very few people survive the induction.

**SENATOR WHYDED:** We believe he is still alive but.... That doesn't help. He has tried to get information about where [the assassin] is now. [There was]: another criminal called Vinval Jotoran. He was inducted into the cult and eventually released under licence and then vanished. [The cult] are still trying to find him: he is an escaped felon... He was the only path to Josephus Valindrus. And now he is lost and it prayed on my friend's mind. I think that might explain why he chose to take this extreme path. He was going around killing people, kidnapping them...

**JARATHIR** Those he viewed as enemies of the State. You can't fault his loyalty though you might question his methods.

**SENATOR WHYDED:** I don't know what the Emperor will do to or for him but you're not supposed to raise food for the Bat in Lunar lands. We are supposed to be protected except under the most dire circumstances.

**JARATHIR** It is not for us to wonder what the Emperor wishes.

The Architect then went and talked to the Master of the Circuses. He had been instructed to create a plywood and canvas version of the proposed war memorial to be carried in the parade.

He was told to come back the next day with more detailed drawings for a final decision.

The Senator put the huge pile of paper to one side and said: "Right. We need some sort of wild animal show. It has been proposed: it's not been put together finally. Go to the Zoo one of you and see what they have got and get any ideas

they may have about where we can find something suitable."

**JARATHIR** Visually impressive but not dangerous to the crowds. Oh, sounds like I just volunteered. (*Chorus of Well done*)

**SENATOR:** One of you, probably the officer, should go and see the Fourth Pelandan Foot.<sup>9</sup> Their commanding officer, without any authority, (it says here) closed the gates in West Glamour and when those rioting cavalrymen we passed through attacked the West Gate turned them away, subdued them and broke up the incident. So they are getting a battle credit for their banner and the person who did has been promoted and will receive the same honour as you lot will be getting.

**JARATHIR** Got away with it is another way of thinking of this.

**SENATOR:** Go and have a word with them, my dear young chap. Somebody needs to go and speak to Beat-Pot Aelwrin of the Imperial Bodyguard. He has (it says here) "security concerns" about the idea of the Emperor attending a parade in the lower City. Go and reassure him one of you. And can one of you contact Great Sister. I had the impression she looked on you favourably. I need somebody to come in and take the place of the units I'm going to take from the streets for the day of the parade. To cover public safety and policing and what have you. She has an entire Army at her capital.

Sandene being a soldier and a woman was given that last job.

**SENATOR:** There's plenty more to do. So off with you! Off with you!

Vostor was sent off to deal with Beat Pot Aelwrin. ('Because it was funny' seemed to be the leading sentiment.) Jarathir took Keanus with him to visit the Zoo on the grounds that the Humakti's Truth Rune abilities might be useful.

They got given authorisations in the name of the Master of Circuses and hustled off.

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<sup>9</sup> Eshan had never heard of this unit but knew that Pelanda wasn't noted for its military fervour

They wondered what they might find at the Zoo.

*DRAK: Here is a shrew...*

*GRAHAM: 'Tha's no ordinary rabbit...*

At the Hideous Zoo their documentation got them through to speak to the Keeper who sighed heavily. He had been approached, he said, and he had rattled his brain but he didn't think he had anything suitable to parade around the streets "This the Hideous Zoo. This is the zoo of all the hideous wonders that the Empire has collected. There are some who are sentient beings and really ought not to be here and there are some who are mostly Chaotic and require very careful handling. They have *appetites!*"

**JARATHIR** Small children running out into the parade sort of thing...

When they enquired if any of the sentient inhabitants might be willing to behave for a day out in the City, he told them most of them had good reasons to resent being locked up. "The most reasonable one is that Wyrms over there." They looked over and saw a Blue Wyrms who was wearing glasses and reading a bound leather book. This was a guest appearance by a character from one of the first Gloranthan supplements.

He did have a suggestion.

"I happen to know that the Grand Master of the Cenobites, Orsorkhon has elephants. He confiscated them from a Senator who had used unauthorised funds."

**JARATHIR** He has impounded elephants.

**ZOOKEEPER:** He's taking good care of them. He's had some of our people out to look at them. He is not cruel. To animals.

**JARATHIR** And an elephant is an impressive creature?

**ZOOKEEPER:** Have you ever seen an elephant? No? Go and have a look at the elephants. Then go and have a word with the Master of the Cenobites.

So they went and Saw The Elephant

**JARATHIR** Oh my goodness! That's big!

A chap came up who smelled strongly of elephant dung.<sup>10</sup>

**KEANUS** You look after the elephants I imagine.

**ELEPHANT KEEPER:** That is my privilege.

**JARATHIR** How they with crowds and cheering?

**EK:** Well, this lot were war elephants. There are different kinds of elephants. Transport Elephants. Wild Elephants.

**JARATHIR** These aren't going to react to large numbers of people cheering as a challenge?

**EK:** I wouldn't have thought so. Ask the chap over there with a turban on.

**JARATHIR** Is that the thing around his waist or the thing on his head.

This second chap who spoke slightly halting and accented Lunar assured them that these were good beasts.

**MAHOUT:** They are very calm, very philosophical. It is difficult to rouse them sometimes to attack the enemy. There is one thing that I know of that they are afraid of. Mice. Little squeaky things.

**JARATHIR** We will make sure not to put any Mouse Legions either side of the Elephants.

**MAHOUT:** The Emperor has Mouse legions?

Jarathir (technically a Truth Cultist) admitted the Mouse Legions were purely hypothetical. The Mahut said he would need a rehearsal to get the elephants used to the experience. They had some war gear to decorate the beasts.

Meanwhile at the office of Great Sister...

**GREAT SISTER:** Come in soldier. Sit down. How may I assist you.

**SANDENE** The new Master of Circuses has asked me to beg a favour. In order to do the

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<sup>10</sup> A subliminal reference to the old joke. "What and leave show business?"

parade, he needs to take some of the units that protect the city to be in the parade. He wondered if you could be so kind for the day to replace the ones he has taken and make sure the city is safe.

**GREAT SISTER:** I am not opposed to this in principle. I would not wish to withdraw my entire Army from where it is. But I can bring in enough units and they are used to constabulary duties. If he could send a formal request and indicate the numbers and types of units he would wish for the day I'm sure my people can move in and now the camp grounds to the West of the City are vacant plant themselves down there for the day and perhaps the day after. This is perfectly acceptable: it is a reasonable request. I'm not even going to insist my brother the Emperor has to confirm it. I'm sure this is something he would want me to do.

As the relieved soldier expressed her thanks and stood to go the GM asked for an "Insight (Human-ish)" roll. Something flickered across her face. She seemed to be thinking of this as an opportunity.

*DRAK: A chance to overthrow the Emperor?*

For some reason *at that very moment* Drak's phone played the opening organ notes of Bach's Toccata And Fugue in D minor<sup>11</sup>. There was applause from the players for the timing of this.

Beat-Pot Aelwrin was originally a Pentan nomad and was captured by the Empire in one of the campaigns to suppress and contain those tribes. He was enslaved and became a kitchen worker, cook and scullion in the Imperial kitchens. He triggered a slave revolt and was defeated in the field by Jar-Eel the Razoress who undertook the task of reforming him and persuading him to not only convert to the Lunar religion but to become a noted Hero of the Goddess and her own personal toy-boy.

He had been a General and was now head of the Emperor's Bodyguard.

**VOSTOR:** 'Allo. Yer Generalship.

**BEAT-POT:** *(As he tosses a salad in a mixture of anchovy and Pelorian dressing)* Who are you and what are you doing here?

**VOSTOR:** I've been sent by the new Head of the Circuses

**BEAT-POT:** Oh yes? I heard there had been a change

**VOSTOR:** Yeah. The other one...

**BEAT-POT:** Do you really want to express a negative opinion of a Senator in the presence of one of your military superiors? *(He reached into an oven and brought out some baked rolls)*

**VOSTOR:** Umm. Anyway, I've been sent here to reassure you that Emperor will be all right being in a parade around the lower city.

**BEAT-POT:** Uh-huh? Did you draw straws or was it just nobody else wanted the job?

**VOSTOR:** I was ordered to do it.

**BEAT-POT:** Right. Well, my concerns are that there has been an outbreak of excessive Dart Wars amongst the nobility and somebody is always thinking about assassinating the Emperor. My primary concern is that he will face some sort of assassination attempt and there has been a major disaster in the Army. Even the Emperor... I mean the Emperor has acknowledged as much. And so if there is a security issue, I need to know about it and I need to know about it soon. Have I communicated clearly? Have I expressed my concerns.

**VOSTOR:** *(Staring ahead)* I have been sent to reassure you that everything will fine sir!

The General closed his eyes and rested his head on the counter and carefully put down the meat cleaver he had just picked up.

**BEAT-POT:** Explain to him that I would require a positive security assessment from whoever has authority to do a sweep of discontents and malcontents. I would like very much for there to be a crackdown upon White Moonies and other suspect persons before I even consider letting the Emperor attend this parade.

**VOSTOR:** We found the Bat-Man, you know that don't you?

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<sup>11</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y3AiGw8mkq0>

**BEAT-POT:** I'm not sure he counts as a malcontent.

**VOSTOR:** What was the last Master of Circuses doing about the malcontents and the White Moonies?

**BEAT-POT:** As far as I know, nothing.

*ALAN: Sacrificing them one by one to the Bat.*

*GM: Says a voice in your ear.*

*GRAHAM: I'm not sure that counts as a crackdown.*

*DRAK: He was very tough on individual crime.*

*GM: The causes of crime not so much.*

Beat-Pot let Vostor take his terms back to the Master of Circuses. "Here, have a roll and some of this paté." With red onion, a slice of tomato and some black pudding. "Send my staff in for the lunchtime briefing."

Eshan meanwhile arrived at the encampment of the Fourth Pelandan Foot. He looked at the flags outside and realised he had seen that flag recently. He got shown into the presence of the Commanding Officer, Ilaro.

**CO:** Well, I am of course very pleased with the notice of the Emperor. I'm getting my men practiced on the old marching to and fro. There's going to be a rehearsal? That's just fine. Umm, now I'm putting most of the responsibility on my new adjutant. I haven't had an adjutant for a while since the slightly disastrous campaign... Never mind that. We have redeemed ourselves. Let me introduce you to the hero of the hour, the person who was actually in charge at that gate. This is Kentarch (*a rank equivalent to Captain which made him superior to Eshan*) Annstad.

When Eshan last saw the person who came in just then, he was one rank below him. This was the chap who tried to tell him there was a curfew and that they couldn't escort the Senator back to his country estate. He was at that time an elderly-for-his-rank sub-lieutenant (or whatever the Lunar equivalent would be) who had (Eshan suspected due to the worn patterns on his

uniform) just been demoted.

**CO:** Ah you know each other!

**ANNSTAD:** Yes, sir. Ah....

As Annstad assured his CO that there would be no problem liaising with the Master of Circuses, Eshan could see he was sweating and clearly worried about something.

*GM: After all, you've just come here with the authority of the Master of Circuses...*

**ANNSTAD:** (*Once they were alone*) I trust there's no hard feelings about that little...

**ESHAN:** You were doing what you thought your job was. I was doing what I thought my job was.

**ANNSTAD:** Well, it's very nice of you to put it that way. Well, all I can say is the lads and lasses will be ready. I'm not saying how smooth we're going to be. We've got a subvention<sup>12</sup> for some fresh armour and fresh regalia. Give me a couple of days and they won't disgrace the flag.

**ESHAN:** If you have any problems, send a message to the office of the Master of Circuses. Somebody will hopefully be able to iron out any problems.

**ANNSTAD:** Thank you. I'm glad you're taking it that way. It's a little awkward: I'm suddenly elevated in a way I'm not used to. But I'm getting used to the experience. (*He braces to salute and then remembers*) Oh, you're supposed to salute me. (*Eshan does so crisply*)

Eshan left no wiser about what the newly minted Kentarch was twitchy about.

The Grand Master of the Cenobites was a skull faced, bony fingered person with a sepulchral voice who looked Jarathir's body as if wondering how much flesh could be stripped off before the screaming started. His Office was decorated with highly elaborate torture instruments and pictures depicting punishments and religious mysteries of the Cult of Danfive Xaron;

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<sup>12</sup> TPPoE&A: Oooh, nice bit of atmospheric vocab there. ME: Yeah. I wonder where I got it from.

**GMoC:** Yes?

**JARATHIR:** *(To himself):* That person's turned inside out. I didn't know you could do that.

**GMoC:** The interesting part is putting them back together again.

**JARATHIR;** We have a request from the Master of Circuses. I'm sounding out whether you would accept it. We understand that you are the current owner of a small troop of war elephants.

**GMoC:** Not so much the owner as the custodian. They are in the care of my people.

**JARATHIR** It is the will of the Emperor that this march include some of the military might of the Empire in the form of mighty beasts. The head of the Horrible Zoo strongly recommends that his horrible beasts not be allowed out into the streets...

**GMoC:** I would agree with that. Except for the entertainment value. Or for the punishment of sinners.

**JARATHIR** Indeed. If we could arrange that only sinners were in the streets then it would be a very different march.<sup>13</sup> Would it be possible to have the loan of the elephants for a rehearsal and the march itself. It would reflect well on the Master of Circuses and of course on yourself.

**GMoC:** Glory is a fool's ambition. Only a fool wishes more than to serve. But...

**JARATHIR** And it would please the Emperor.

**GMoC:** Very well, for the Emperor. Let us know when the rehearsals will be and ensure the care of and supplies for the elephants.

As the sun was setting over the city, the entire company met at the Master of Circuses office.

**SENATOR:** Have words with the security and intelligence people tomorrow. I really don't like ordering a sweep up of...

**VOSTOR:** Rebels, malcontents and White Moonies.

**SENATOR:** Yeah. That's going to cause...

**VOSTOR:** More malcontention? *(Sic)*

**SENATOR:** Blood in the streets I think.

**JARATHIR** If we are looking for assurance on security, my Lord Senator, rather than you performing the sweep perhaps if we ask Phranastes... He kind of owes us a favour. An assurance from him and he wouldn't lie about it.

**SENATOR:** He is one who has gone through the cult of Danfive Xaron and has survived. He volunteered. He stepped forward and said "I am a sinner, reform me."

**JARATHIR** The Empire has room for true believers of all sorts.

**VOSTOR:** I believe it's dinner time.

**SENATOR:** I'll tell you what it is. It's time for you to escort my daughter...

**FALERIA:** Father?

**SENATOR:** No, my dear, I'm going to be sleeping here. I have plenty of work to do. You go home...

**JARATHIR** Is your security here enough? We have heard that there are heightened amounts of Dart Wars

**VOSTOR:** Of Dart Wars, malcontents and White Moonies.

**JARATHIR** And we know there is at least one person who would like your time as Master of Circuses to be a short one.

**VOSTOR:** There's at least one of use will be awake all night anyway. *And* Sandene.

**SENATOR:** I will accept a bodyguard. And if one more of you wishes to stay that will be fine. My daughter is going back to our estate. To sleep.

Sniggers from the players here. Possibly centring around Eshan's infatuation with Faleria.

I hadn't planned to split the party here but decided to roll with it. I rolled the Senator's Insight Human (which failed) and then his Tactics (Military) which also failed. He had No Clue about the subtext here. So he allowed Eshan to decide on the distribution of the troop. Which ended up with Sandene and Vostor staying with the Senator.

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<sup>13</sup> The GMoC opened his mouth to interject but thought better of it. It was probably something about everybody being a sinner.

**JARATHIR** I'll tell Vishi where to bring your porridge.

(There was a delicate cough.)

**FALERIA:** Vishi is already here. I asked him to bring round your other equipment. There's a truck outside with your armour and weapons on it.

**VISHI:** Sir, do wish me to attend on you, go back to the insula or go with your comrades?

The Senator, appealed to, said he would keep Vishi to hand and see if he was as good at breakfast as claimed

The officer and the rest escorted the Senator's coach back to his estate outside the walls where the staff had everything, including a hot meal and baths, ready for them. (Someone must have been sending notes back and forth.)

**FALERIA:** You're allowed to have a bath more than once a year, you know. We have a boiler and even a hypocaust.

*GRAHAM: So, the Senator's daughter wants all three of you to take a bath?*

There was a bath house with separate male and female quarters. Eshan and Jarathir were outside guarding Keanus and Faleria in their separate baths. Both of them spotted something fly across the Moon. Large and winged. Jarathir asked his hawk familiar to cast Farsee on him. With the magical 'zoom' he looked again and saw the scales on the wings as the thing came down towards him. He had seen a Wyrms at the Zoo earlier in the day. He thought it was the same Wyrms.

*DRAK: Do I know anything about Wyrms?*

*GM: They're intelligent, they have magic, they fly.*

**JARATHIR** Wyrms incoming!

Eshan and Jarathir readied weapons and magic. Eshan struck it the chest to little effect. Jarathir struck it in the abdomen which it felt! The Wyrms cried out (in Draconic) and died.

**FALERIA:** (*Emerging in a bathrobe*) What's going on? Oh! My father has enemies in high places.

**JARATHIR** This is from the zoo. I saw this particular beast there myself. Today.

**FALERIA:** Oh dear. Poor creature. Would one of you be willing to go into the city on an errand. To bring back a healer. From the temple of Erisa.<sup>14</sup>

**JARATHIR** Ummm, yes ma'am.

At which point Keanus emerged from the bathhouse looking refreshed but puzzled. And then startled on spotting the dead Wyrms.

**KEANUS** I miss all the fun.

*DRAK: I will jog back into town. Yomp even.*

At the office they had eaten and the Senator decided that he wasn't capable of working any further that night. (Vishi had ordered food in and tasted each dish before serving.)

There was a luxurious appointed bedroom. Sandene had surveyed the alternatives and found somewhere where the Senator could sleep behind heavy shutters in comparative safety.

Vostor resolved to stay awake all night by sheer willpower. Both of them managed to notice the intrusion of the assassins when they arrived as something went 'clatter, clatter, clatter' on the roof tiles. Vostor cast Bladesharp and Sandene moved into the Senator's sleeping chamber. He readied his own spells and prepared to cast Protection on the Senator.

Vostor had heard someone make a three point contact with the roof He heard a strange sort of speech, like rocks banging together. Ah! He had heard gargoyles before.

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<sup>14</sup> Who is the Lunar and Solar version of Chalana Arroy, the Healer goddess of the Lightbringers.

Though it is not generally known they are the same deity.

That was the end of his good luck because there was a creaking, cracking sound and a hole appeared in the ceiling.

*DRAK: Vandalism! And on a government building!*

A stone face peered down and further creaking in the ceiling.

Vostor shot a Disrupt up at the beastie since he couldn't reach with his sword.

More holes appeared and Vostor got a javelin thrown at him which he knocked to one side. The removal of tiles and ripping of plaster had now revealed that there were three of them and they were readying to fly down. Vostor gave them another Disrupt.

*GM: It will require a Scan roll to tell you which one you attacked before.*

*GRAHAM: Like I care!*

*DRAK: You're saying 'all gargoyles look alike to us'?*

*PUM: A bit racist.*

Sandene took a ready stance between the Senator and the doorway. Vostor moved towards the doorway but failed to get out of the way of the second javelin and it went into his left leg. He rejoiced that he had put his armour on earlier. The GM did not rejoice when it turned out he hadn't entered the details of armour points or hit points properly on his character points.

Sandene provided backup (with Disrupt spells) as Vostor laid about him with his sword at the Gargoyles. One died quickly, a second died when he tried to fly over Vostor's head and somehow managed to smack his face into the doorway. The third died when his left wing was amputated.

*GRAHAM: Did any of them survive for interrogation.*

*GM No!*

*MARTIN: Not unless you are good at repointing.*

*DRAK: Do you have combat plasterer?*

(Now who's being racist?)

The Senator was still fast asleep and snoring.

**VISHI:** *(Emerging from under the desk where he had taken refuge)* Two questions, sir. Do you want me to get somebody to repair the roof or can it wait until dawn. And do you want me to get someone to take away the very heavy corpses? This would wake up the Senator.

The weather being currently dry Vostor put it all off until dawn.

Meanwhile, at the Temple of Erisa, Jarathir did his best to charm the priestesses into coming out in the middle of the night. Augmented by his Honour this got a senior priestess out of her bed.

**SENIOR PRIESTESS:** I'm glad to see such a strong young man taking care of me.

She had to be persuaded to resurrect the Wyrms pointing out that this was a hostile Wyrms that they had killed.

**FALERIA:** I need to get its evidence.

There was a brief discussion as to whether the spell would work on a non-human but the elderly lady didn't even break into a sweat.

**FALERIA:** We have weapons at your throat. Please do not be alarmed.

There was a negotiation at the end of which the Wyrms had agreed to turn State's Evidence and inform on the people who sent him. He described the Chairman of the Senate to a tee. "An old human without any hair on its head. Pink and sunburned."

**WYRM:** If my freedom can be bought with my evidence, I will gladly give it.

**JARATHIR** I take it that was promised for your attack?

**WYRM:** No, I was just promised the chance to leave.

Vostor carefully bandaged his leg ensuring enough blood was on the cloth to cover up the fact he has a Chaotic Regeneration ability.

The events of that night had political implications that the party firmly decided were Above Their Pay Grade.

**SENATOR:** (On waking up and having the situation explained to him) Hmm, I wonder how they got through the Skyguard.

**VOSTOR:** The what?

**SENATOR:** The Empire's capital has precautions against aerial attacks.

**VOSTOR:** The Man-Bat's been flying around for ages.

**SENATOR:** A very good point. He must have suborned the Skyguard.

**VOSTOR:** Vishi was enquiring about the possibility of making some sort of fountain with this lot...

**VISHI** (*Immediately behind him: Frostily*)  
Your porridge sir.

The Wyrms were left at the estate hiding out at one of the barns.

When Vostor got back to the Insula he went to see his girlfriend. She had been crying. "Sit down. My grandfather... Call him that. That's what he has been to me. He has explained everything and he has gone back into hiding. I know where he's hiding but I can't get there. I'd ask you just to keep any mention of him out of your conversation. Especially your conversation with the uh Supervisor. There would be trouble. I let myself the last time I saw you."

**VOSTOR:** I didn't think of it that way.

**HER:** I'm sure. But I have (*gulp*) made promises to another and I just got tired of waiting. I thank you for your gift and for the other gifts you gave me. It must not continue. The risks are far too high. Let it be let us just have one happy memory.

She went to the door with him, kissed him and went back inside. Vostor spotted a young man at the stairs, glaring at him. He wore the robes of a university student. Perhaps the robes of a magical student. He looked like he was considering disembowelling Vostor but thought it might be a bad idea to try.

*DRAK: If he is actually a magician looks can kill.*

NEXT TIME: More politics and perhaps the fate of the White Moonies.

## DISTRACTIONS

The GM forgetting the full name of the Zoo. Being unable to find the name of the Grand Master of the Cenobites. Confusing the word 'Foot' for 'Front' in the title of the Pelandan unit.

## COMMENTARIAT ON E&A 9 POSTPONED FROM LAST TIME

I not only failed to update the issue number in the colophon but I misspelled AEGIS. Such is human frailty!

### **BRIAN ROGERS: RYCT PATRICK**

**RILEY:** The "Technology is the Tool Of The Wyrms" stuff in WEREWOLF and its echoes in MAGE were one of the reasons I despaired of the WoD.

**CHRYSALISM & FELCITY:** Welcome! Put your feet up! // Tulpas eh? Hmm.<sup>15</sup>

**JOHN REDDEN:** Good wishes recovering from your surgical hybridization// I like the individualised Tarot deck.. // **RYCT Me:** I hadn't even connected Ice Axes with the Icebreaker. My subconscious is not answering queries about this.

**LISA PADOL: : RYCT Me:** I didn't do Roger the dirty deliberately! I was focused on getting the best person for the hardest character to play and the most important for the success of the scenario. //

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<sup>15</sup> TPPoE&A (Whistle nonchalantly and shuffle off backstage)

**MATT STEVENS: Re 'NO POLITICS':** I think it behoves us all to keep our own political views to a minimum but it also behoves us to make it clear where we stand if the topic comes up. My currently running campaigns have pretty obvious political themes (The opportunities and dangers of living in a time of radical change for the LICTORS campaign and fighting against a smug and entrenched establishment in the AEGIS: THE INSTITUTE campaign.) both of which have some echoes of the current world situation and how I feel about it. I hope I have filed the serial numbers off both sufficiently to give pleasure to my players and to you lot if I ever write them up. **RYCT Me:** Keir Starmer is currently under simultaneous attack from the remnant Tories (who don't believe anyone but them can ever run the country properly), the Left who pretend that they thought he would solve all the country's problems and who don't like some of the decisions he has made (especially with regard to benefits and trans issues: I have sympathy with their views here but never had the hope they claim has been shattered) and Reform because they will attack anyone with half a brain. The poor fellow emits a counter-charisma field and has made at least one very bad mistake. (The Mandelson appointment.) But he has juggled the ego of Donald Trump far longer than anyone thought possible and been firm when the time to break with the Orange One came. And above all I don't want a leadership contest in a summer which may be exciting enough to threaten a world war. I certainly don't see any better alternatives.

**ROGER B\_W:** I understand the need for functional maps of where things are but I also want more than a list of street names and businesses. To feel real a town or city has to have history to have depth and that means buildings that have seen a number of uses in their lives. I know of no easy way to accomplish that other than to use real cities. (SIGH) Just look at High Wycombe if you don't believe me. Just walking from my flat to the High Street will take you past places with echoes from the middle ages to last week.

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<sup>16</sup> At this point I cheated by looking ahead to Issue 10. Ah, right. Good. Phew!

**MARK A. WILSON: Re: BARON MUNCHAUSEN:** My part was purely to propose a structure for a radio version (which never came to anything) which somehow kickstarted James' mysterious brains to produce a new edition. I also submitted some story prompts which ended up in the final product. I still feel ridiculously proud about my involvement.

**JIM ECKMAN: RYCT Me:** "There may be better systems out there, I'm just not aware of them." If BUSHIDO is what fits in your mind comfortably, then that's what you should use.

**JOSHUA KRONENGOLD:** Aieeee! The medical emergencies.... Best wishes for a full recovery and accurate diagnosis. <sup>16</sup> **RYCT Me:** I had more problems with the new version of OTE than I did with the new UA. I think UA has increased the level of buy-in needed but I would still be interested to run it with a suitable group. (I think maybe one member of my two groups would be interested). But OTE took away a simple and fun system that I could hold in my head and replaced it with something that looks too jelly-like for me to even try to pick up.

**BRIAN CHRISTOPHER MISIASZEK: RYCT ME:** Man, there's little more to say. It was my first DnD game and I never played with Fanglord again. There was a ghostly ice-breaker going eternally round a ring corridor floored in ice. No explanation just the panicked hurry to get out of its way.

**JIM VASSILAKOS:** Captain Plankwell puts the boot in! Will his increasing psionic confidence go before a terrible fall? //

**TIMOTHY COLLINSON: Re Your Last Word:** At the end of a session, whether or not I felt good about it (and most of the time I do) I will still be thinking about what happened and what I have to do next for an hour or so after getting home. I write down notes for the start of the next session, the things I need to resolve, the

possible ways the plot will go. Do that first and save it and I don't have the struggle to get my mind back into the game when I come to write the outline for the next session.

## COMMENTARIAT ON E&A 10

**BRIAN ROGERS: RYCT Roger B\_W:** See back in the 1930s in England they saw the US divorce laws as a wilderness of 'anything goes'. See A P Herbert's Misleading Cases for accounts of the really bizarre stuff that divorce laws with huge concerns for 'morality' required.

**MATT STEVENS: Re Arneson's Stats:** Yeah, CUNNING for Clerics is odd. It's something I associate with Rogues and Witches. "Cunning Man" for a male witch was common at one point in history. Perhaps you could have a system where Cunning is an opposed stat with Wisdom or Humility. One is for the Cardinals the other for the humble parish priests. The Higher the one the lower the other. RYCT BRIAN ROGERS: Ah! *That's* what 'rizz' means is it? I wish the young people wouldn't come up with neologisms without checking with me first.

**JOHN REDDEN:** One hopes that your heart surgery went ~~swimmingly~~ optimally.

**CLARK B. TIMMINS:** I love your schema for the various ages of the city I often wish I could come up with something better than just harumphing and saying: "You can tell this building's foundations date back to the third expansion."

**ELF: Re BRINDLEWOOD BAY and Romance:** I found the GM's balancing act for BB to be even harder than normal. The problem with TTRPGs of Romance is a I think a problem with Gamers and Gamer culture. We aren't good at high emotion. Dammit I found myself tearing up at a request from the GM (Roger B\_W) for a burial custom for the Scouts in

TRAVELLER. I could come up with the idea (a recital of Robert Louis Stevenson's REQUIEM<sup>17</sup>) but I couldn't manage to say the words. Re Neopets: A Crass Question: What happened to the half-a-million dollars?

**ROGER B\_W:** Your model of undead fell apart for me when it came to the idea of giving the Zombie instructions. Something has to be doing the hard work of interpreting all those air vibrations and putting them into the alleged mind of the bound monster. If a mere enchantment could do that you'd use it for something better than moaning and shambling. I think the presence of a soul/mind in some form is needed for even the lowliest undead. // RYCT Me: I have read ACTS OF GOD: I think you recommended it to me.// If I have reinvented SG:U can it be without the annoying scientist?

**LISA PADOL: RYCT Me:** The empty parade ground was due to the Nomad Auxiliary Cavalry who misbehaved during the riots following the Dragonrise being sent Back To The Front. // You call the Senior NCO by her proper title because to do otherwise would be against 'Good military order and Discipline'. Which she is fed up at having to get involved in again but Duty Calls.// The Moon was an egg in KILL THE MOON, a Peter Capaldi episode.

**JIM VASSILAKOS:** I feel very flattered. Thank you. RYCT Me: XP for zingers? Have you read my write-ups? Only for exceptional creativity or they would advance like express trains. **T COLLINSON:** While I would like a glimpse at your preparation, it sounds like a lot more preparation than I could do

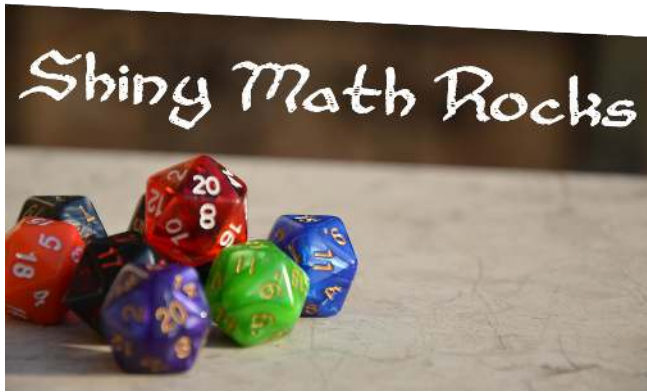
## MY FINAL WORD FOR THIS ISSUE:

**Coward or Cowed: In heraldry, an animal with its tail between its legs**

**Take good care of yourselves and each other you group of discharged Service veterans trying to make it in your rickety and aged starship, you.**

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<sup>17</sup> <https://poets.org/poem/requiem>



## SMR Issue #7 for E&A #11, May 2026

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

### I'm running games!

I finished running an actual full mystery in Brindlewood<sup>1</sup> Bay. The Mavens investigated the death of Lan Furen from *The Untamed* (here named Wan Huina because I was not dealing with “actually a third of the people involved in this don't have names, just titles”; I made up several names).

The game was set in its normal place (a seaside resort-ish town in Massachusetts), with the notion that the Lan sect moved “Cloud Haven” to the US about 15 years ago.

The players tried really hard to find a theory that meant she wasn't dead, and couldn't quite convince themselves it was true.

Instead, they kept going back to the guy she killed and was forcibly imprisoned over (herein named Lan Zemin) – and they decided their evidence pointed at him not being dead at all. And when she discovered this, and revealed it to someone else (her doctor), he killed her for it.

....I don't think I've ever seen “She was framed for a murder that didn't happen” in fanfic, so, yay for RPGs coming up with new story ideas.

This coming week will kick off the next mystery... maybe. We're down a couple of players, and while it can run with 2, it seems rough to shift from 4 to 2. But one of the players says his wife is interested. I do plan to write up both “Lost in the Clouds” and the new one, “Rain Dropped,” as playable mysteries, and post them on [itch.io](https://itch.io), but it may be a while before I have the time.

My current notes on Lost in the Clouds include a lot of extraneous info like a timeline and notes about

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canon events that wouldn't be relevant to people who don't know the original setting. I probably need to run it past other people who don't know it, to see if it's complete enough or too incoherent for someone who hasn't seen *The Untamed*.

I tend to think the published adventures are too sparse. I understand that this is to allow the GM to put their own spin on it, and let the players be involved in the worldbuilding. I find, instead, it's a mass of “what, I just... make up stuff?” (Players make up stuff is fine. Me-the-GM making up stuff is annoying. I'm already keeping track of too many details. I want the adventure module ones written down in advance.) For this one, with a web of relationships and complex history in the background, I will need more space than the standard 1-2 pages of brief notes & a clue list.

I'm also running, or rather starting to run, a Fate Accelerated superheroes game. I'm cribbing heavily from [Sunset City Heroes](#) for game structure and powers concepts. (SCH is a shared setting with a GM pool; it's one of the best Fate-supers settings I've seen. They have an extensive wiki, and a thorough document about FAE stunts with explanations. I played a lot in SCH a few years ago.) However, our game is set in 2014, and super-powers (or powers at all) only started showing up a couple of years ago. Currently they're at roughly 1 in 10,000 people, but most of them are minor or small powers. Like *My Hero Academia's* “quirks,” people have one power, something that just showed up spontaneously (and sometimes people are born with them, but those are

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<sup>1</sup> Is this where I mention that I am damned annoyed that Word changed its default keys for optional hyphens and nonbreaking hyphens? Also, apparently nonbreaking hyphens will convert to PDF as a different character than a regular hyphen, which sucks.

So instead of using “nonbreaking hyphen,” I need to use “no-width nonbreaking space” before & after the hyphen or en-dash. Bleh.)

all infants right now), although “one power” can be something like “fire creation and manipulation” – can have a broad range of applications.

Powers seem to be getting stronger over time, but again, “time” here is pretty short, so it’s possible they’re not so much “growing” as “manifesting over several months.” Nobody knows why there are powers now or why some people get them and others don’t. Also, there are not yet specific legal changes related to them, although a few police & other gov’t orgs have started hiring people with powers as specialists.

There’s a congressional committee. The players will meet it next week.

I’m down to only 2 gaming days a week, which is something of a relief. I played a one-shot (well, two-shot) game of *Thirsty Sword Lesbians*, and that was delightful, although I can tell it needs a solid premise (this was one from the book) and a GM who knows the system well enough to push people into making connections with each other. I was the newcomer in an existing group, although the game itself was a fresh start for everyone.

We played [Les Violettes Dangereuses](#), a futuristic dystopian setting where the characters all worked in a jazz club. It was strong on webs of relationships and machinations, and weak on science. (How do the floating cities stay in the sky? LOOK JUST GO WITH IT. YOU HAVE MAGIC SWORDS.)

## Neopets TTRPG

I didn’t make enough progress on the Neopets TTRPG to submit it to the “Go Weave a Basket” jam. Once the official game was cancelled, I started to worry about things like trademark and art, and wasn’t sure if I should use the normal names or come up with parody names for all the species and locations. And I have no art skills.

## Trans Rights Idaho Bundle

The “[TTRPGs for Trans Rights in Idaho](#)” charity bundle is live at [itch.io](#) until the end of April. It has 511 games and a minimum donation of \$5. (Note: Purchase will auto-set to a \$25 cost; you have to adjust it to the amount you want.) Over 300 of them are new to this bundle (or at least, new among the bundles I have, and I have 84 other bundles.)

I continue to be amazed at the diversity and creativity in the indie TTRPG scene. ...Not all the games are *good*, but they’re all fascinating.

There are games – TTRPGs, card games, dice games, board games, writing games, board games,

story-telling games. (I haven’t finished looking through this set and don’t know which types of games are in this bundle.) There are poems and stories and comics and personal manifestos. There are game settings and classes and species for use in TTRPGs. There are earnest-but-terrible 5e adventures. There are things I’m pretty sure are mindfulness exercises labeled as solo TTRPGs. There are nigh-incomprehensible (both text and font choices) Mork Borg...somethings. Supplements. Maybe. There are games about vampires, about space, about the fae, about found family. There are rough frameworks that could be turned into games but are missing structural details that are obviously still in the creator’s head. There are “adventures” with lavish introductions and descriptions of an NPC or two, and then a brief list (roll-a-d6) of what actually happens.

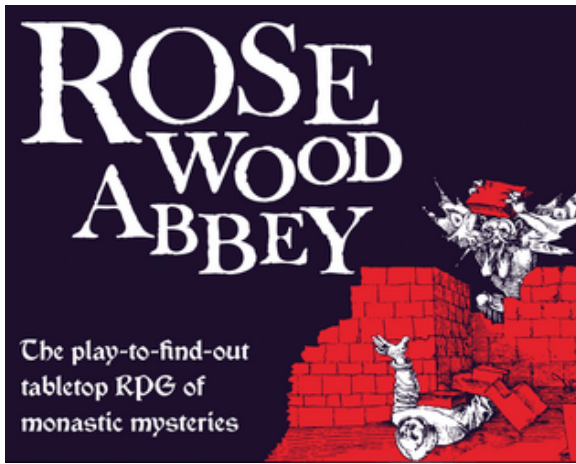
And there are items that are obviously gaming-related but are very hard to describe. I heartily recommend buying the cheap game bundles, not because “it will make your games better,” but because it’s a fascinating study in the modern gaming community.

It may also make your games better. But for \$5, sometimes as much as \$15... it’s enough that there’s at least an hour or two’s entertainment just in boggling over what’s there. And sometimes there’s an absolute gem that will give you something new to try or change the way you think about gaming.

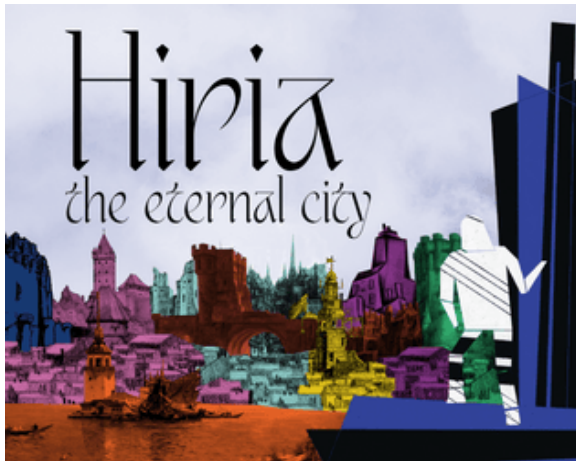
Interesting games/items from this bundle include:



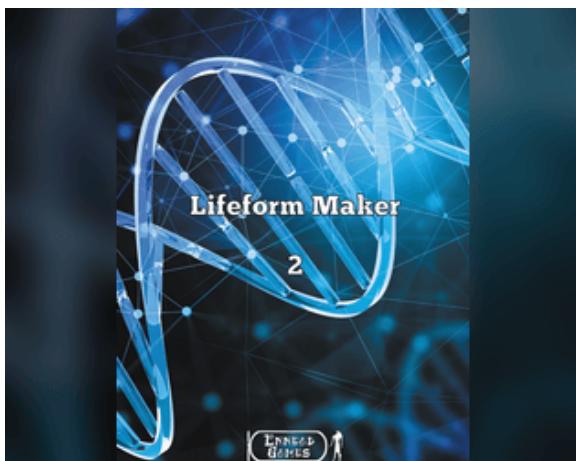
[Bump in the Dark](#) has been in 9 previous bundles, a *Forged-in-the-Dark* game for monster-hunting instead of heists. I don’t know that I’ll ever play it (horror & monster-hunting aren’t really my thing) but it looks solid. If *Monster of the Week* doesn’t have the social complexity you’re looking for, this might.



[Rosewood Abby](#) (in a lot of previous bundles): A Carved by Brindlewood game in a Cadfael-esque setting. Medieval monks solving murder mysteries and discovering rumors of miracles or heresies.



[Hiria: The Eternal City](#) is a solo journaling game that's been in a few bundles. You're hunting someone in a city that shifts between universes. It needs 2d4, 1d8, 1d20, and 4 meeples for the tracking sheet, plus whatever you use for journaling. Looks fun; I'll have to try this one.



[Lifeform Maker 2](#) has not been in any previous bundles. It's a 94-page PDF with tables for randomly generating creatures. It uses a d20 and d100; it's got a

nice range of abilities and descriptions, but it's lacking anything like a character/info-tracking sheet.



[Swamptown](#) is a TTRPG setting that hasn't been in any previous bundles. It's 2 pages: a basic map (visible on the itch page) and 5 adventure settings with 3 prompts/options for each. Nothing special, but the kind of resource it's nice to have to throw into a game on short notice.



The [Lyric Game Manifesto - Essay](#) is, as it says, a manifesto in the shape of a (solo journaling) game. It's been in several previous bundles. It's a reasonable introduction to lyric games, but not worth picking up on its own. (Unless you already know you love lyric games. Even then, though... The bundle is \$5 and the game is \$20 on its own. Don't buy this separately.)



[Side Quest 1 + 2](#) is a pair of system-neutral supplements. The first is an adventure; the second is a potion shop. I would not likely use these as written, but they might inspire something similar.



## THE BASICS

### A SUPERHERO RPG

[The Basics: A Superhero RPG](#), also new to this bundle, is a 2-page RPG with a handful of extras (Heroes & Villains of Majestic City, a Goons list, character sheet, GM tips, and a starting adventure). It uses 1d20 and 5d6. (The rules say 2d20 would be useful but at a quick glance, I don't see anything that requires rolling 2 of them.) The four stats (Physical/Mental/Social/Mystic) are randomly rolled, and activating powers in stressful situations takes a roll.

### Solo Play: Cage of Sand, part 4

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

### Cast of Characters

Protagonist: **Anni Joutsen**, embroidery artist

1. **Anton Kumala (3 of Wands)**, a wealthy merchant, waiting for his ship to come in
2. **Sir Godfrey of the Ocean (Knight of Cups)**, a knight looking for smugglers and tax evasion
3. **Barigrotir "Bari" Bristlegrog (the Emperor)**, a dwarf judging the contest & selecting artisans

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

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

### First Loop

Anni and all 10 of the above characters were killed, many in gruesome ways. Anni then woke up in her cottage the day of festival's start, with a weird memory of a conversation with the Duchess (whom she is certain she's never met), and an uneasy feeling that she has done the sewing on these sleeves before.

### Second Loop

#### *Act 1: Awakening*

Awakes from a vague nightmare to the sound of a goat outside her window. Finds the set of sleeves she'd set out the night before, ready to have their cuffs sewn on. It bothers her; she was sure she'd done that already. She does it (again) and then replaces the dead flowers in the vase with fresh ones.

#### *Act 2: Interactions (New)*

3 minor and 2 major interactions with 1 character card & 1 other card each. "Minor" interactions reveal small details about the character and/or world. "Major" interactions have a key based on the suit, and "reveal important information, expose weaknesses or change the nature of the relationships between characters."

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

#### **Minor 1: The Empress (Duchess Maritha of Heliot) è 10 of Cups (family, happiness, harmony)**

As Anni is setting up her table, there's a commotion at the end of the row – the Duchess herself is in town! And is walking this way! A guard stands nearby

but doesn't interfere with her walking, and her daughter darts back and forth between the tables and then back to her mother's side. Anni smiles at her antics, enough that she doesn't realize how close the Duchess has gotten until she's addressed.

"She's quite energetic," the Duchess says.

"Y-your Grace!" Anni stammers out, and falls into a deep curtsey.

"Now, none of that," she says. "I can see that you are also an artist, and women of art should be friendly with each other. Have you children of your own?"

"Your Grace, I do not," Anni admits, hoping this does not anger the duchess.

"Ah. That can be... lonely."

"It can, but I find ways to pass the hours," she says, gesturing at her wares.

The duchess picks up one of her pieces, a runner for a mantle with embroidery of vines and grapes and other fruits, one Anni had made in the hopes that someone wanted a decoration for their harvest festival.

"This one – how much?" Anni tells her, and the duchess hands over coins without haggling at all. "I will place it, hmmm, in the solarium, I think. It may inspire the ladies of my household to finer stitches, and while it might look nice in a dining room, it is, I think, too fine to place in easy reach of sticky fingers." And with that, she reaches down and takes her daughter's hand, and nods farewell.

Anni bows low as she leaves. *The Duchess*, she thinks. *I met the Duchess, and she liked my work!*

**Minor 2: Six of Wands (Lady Linyive the Widow) è The Heirophant (Tradition, convention, teaching)**

[This is interesting. We haven't directly met her before, and the Heirophant is one of my trouble cards; I always have difficulty figuring out how to interpret it.]

Of course Anni recognizes Lady Linyive; she rode the horse that opened the faire, and the Mayor welcomed her to Baysheer and thanked her for her tireless work in keeping their town safe from the goblin hordes. Also, while elves and their kin aren't unknown in Baysheer, they are rare enough to be memorable and easily recognized.

Anni's not really ready to speak to yet another celebrity, but at least Lady Linyive can't directly lay claim to her life. The Lady is higher rank than her, but she doesn't own the property where her house resides. Anni bows anyway.

"Welcome to the faire, Lady Linyive."

She makes a small noise in response, not unfriendly, perhaps distracted, as she looks over Anni's display. "You made these?"

"Yes, milady. I have more, if you should wish—"

"I do not wish to see more," she said. Anni freezes, and Linyive looks up at her. "Oh! No, I don't mean to be rude. These are excellently done, but I am not looking to buy." She shifts, looking back down at the table.

Anni is confused, and speaks slowly. "You are welcome, of course, to enjoy the sight of them..."

"Not that, either," she says, and then sighs. "I am making a muddle of this. I am looking for a teacher."

"A teacher of... embroidery?" Anni ventures.

"Yes! Or rather, of some womanly art; I have been told that it is unseemly for a woman to go off hunting goblins alone, and I should 'settle myself' and 'take up some artistic skill' – I am not sure I have the temperament for it, but these are lovely. I could enjoy learning how these are made even if my hands are never patient enough to make them myself."

"But—you are a ranger, known for your woodcraft skills and your, your fighting talents—"

Linyive nods. "Yes, and widowed. Again. And some of them—" she waves vaguely in the direction of the hall where the Magistrate holds court "—believe I should now be settling down, as is proper for a widow. I have no interest in spending the rest of my days curled up by a fire with a needle, but I admit a rest would be nice."

"I... am willing to teach, but if you have not much practice..."

"None!" she cheerfully replies. "I can repair ripped clothing, badly, just well enough for it to survive back to a city, and then I hire it fixed."

"...Then it might take some time to learn..."

"Surely not more than a couple of decades?" she says.

"Decades?" Anni chokes out.

"I am half-elven," Linyive replies. "I have time to learn. Your skills are very strong, and you have a wide range of styles. The only question I have is whether you have the patience to teach a clumsy beginner who doesn't know how to behave like a lady."

"I... would be willing to try," she says. Linyive seems friendly and honest, if a bit crude, and she deserves better than ~~being stabbed from behind~~—(where did that thought come from?) than having the old men who run the town pester her for being too good at something they wish a man were doing instead.

They chat a bit more, and work out a lesson schedule and payment.

**Minor 3: 5 of Swords (Vamirelion) è Ten of Wands (burden, overextension, stress)**

By late afternoon, Anni's business is doing well; she's made some sales and has arranged some future work. She's starting to pack up when she sees the elven swordsman. She's never met him directly, although of course she knows who he is. But she has no need of sword training, and his woodcarvings are far too expensive for her. He's laden down with them: A basket on his back with several carvings, a bag over each arm, and a box in his arms as he moves slowly through the street.

She is distracted, looking at him, and doesn't notice the three large men surrounding her until it's too late to duck aside. She starts to call for help, but one of them puts his hand over her mouth and presses her against a wall; the other two make comments about their plans for her – a pretty lady, all alone, must be wanting some company, and so on. She tries to break free but is no match for them.

She hears a crash and clatter, and suddenly one of the men is yanked away from her. Vamirelion appears in his place, and he kicks the man holding her at the knee, and it buckles and he falls. The third starts to lurch toward her, but the elf holds a dagger to his face, and he flinches back and runs away. He turns to stand with his back to her, a blade in each hand, watching the three stumble away quickly, before turning back to her.

"M'lady," he says, and steps back with a slight bow.

"I'm not a lady," she mumbles, still trying to process what happened. And then she looks back to the street – "Your carvings!" He must have dropped the box and both bags, and some of his carvings have spilled out into the street, broken; a few have been grabbed by quick-fingered opportunists who have run off with them.

"No matter," he says. "They are objects; their purpose is to enhance lives. They have no value if lives are lost for their protection."

"Some would say they are worth more than lives – that art can last for hundreds of years, but lives are short."

"All the more precious, then. I can always carve more wood, and the pieces that are broken do not mind their fate. But I think you would not be so easily resigned to the future, had those men not been stopped."

"I... would not, and I thank you." She bows, a bit shaky.

"No, no – do not bow to me for a moment's aid."

"But – you've lost so many pieces for the contest!"

He shakes his head. "If the prince, or his bride, appreciate my carvings and would like them in their home, that is good. If I have lost the one piece they might have treasured," he shrugs, "then in twenty years, or fifty, another prince will be marrying, and I will have new carvings to show."

She boggles at that for a bit – the perspective of someone who can outlive entire cities is so alien to her – and then she shakes it off and starts packing her supplies away. He offers to help, and she accepts; they visit the tavern and chat for a while, until she feels stable enough to go home.

**Major 1: Knight of Pentacles (Sir Godfrey of the Ocean) è Two of Swords (stalemate, avoidance, decisions): an unreasonable request for your help**

He knocks on her door a few minutes after Vamirelion has walked her home. He wants to hire her to alter his clothing, to reinforce the seams on his shirt and trousers – and he wants it done tonight. He has had a premonition, of sorts, and believes that stronger clothing will help him survive the danger he believes is coming.

It is ridiculous. She has had a long day already, and has suffered an attack, and she is very busy with other orders. It doesn't matter that he can pay; she needs her sleep, and to be alert and rested in the morning so she can set up her spot in the contestants' pavilion.

He offers her increased pay, protection of her wares, help with setup (which he would not provide, but he has pages)... in the end, she agrees to reinforce the shirt but not the trousers. She has mended clothing for shirtless men before (although usually not alone at home), but she draws the line at him removing his pants and standing around in his smallclothes while she works. He grudgingly accepts, and she works an annoying amount into the night. (She makes him agree to buy new candles for her as well.)

**Major 2: 4 of Swords (Stregori Zrin) è Four of Pents (control, isolation, security): the character gives your Avatar a gift, or your Avatar gives them a gift**

The next morning, as she's walking to the pavilion, she's approached by a mage. He politely introduces himself – "Stregori Zrin, Master of Magics," and takes off his hat to bow deeply. Anni isn't sure how to take this.

"Young lady," he says, "strange energies are afoot in this town. Strange energies indeed. And I believe they have touched your life, and perhaps not for the better."

She thinks back to the encounter yesterday, and to the nightmare she woke up from, and nods slowly.

He gives her an amulet – a strange symbol with a clear-dome yellow crystal in the center, and a row of tiny gems spaced around the outside, like a clock. He tells her it will warm in the presence of troublesome energies, and will absorb some of them. And if nothing comes of it, she is welcome to keep it or sell it at the end of the festival. But he'd very much appreciate it if she wore it until then.

It's very pretty. It's no hardship to agree to wear it.

[Can you tell it was getting late when I wrote that? If I write this all up as a story someday, that part will be somewhat expanded.]

*INCITING INCIDENT (same in every loop:  
The opening of the contestants' displays in the main pavilion.)*

*Next time: Second Loop, Act 3: The Turn*

"The Turn" means "find six bodies" in groups of 1-3, and draw a card for each discovery, using the key to sort out extra details.

- **Swords:** the killer leaves obvious signs of the cause or time of death.
- **Wands:** the time or cause of death or the identity of the victim(s) is hidden.
- **Cups:** another character reacts strangely to the murder.
- **Pentacles:** something has been stolen from or left with the victim(s).
- **Major Arcana:** the murder is unusually gruesome, showy or ritualistic

## IgTheme: 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?*

I love worldbuilding. I love worldbuilding substantially more than I love GMing, and I am taking up GMing in part to inflict my worldbuilding on players. I want to write up Ur (the world of Glitch) for possibly several systems – I've enjoyed writing it for Wanderhome and would love to continue, and I'd be happy to write it up as a fantasy setting for Fate Core or Accelerated.

I have run across quite a few games that have complex settings without much coherence in the worldbuilding. (See aforementioned TSL setting & floating cities.) That works fine for a short game where you're focused on the action rather than the broader situation; it's got problems for campaigns.

D&D... doesn't have coherent worldbuilding. What it has is a base framework of "mythic fantasy" strongly crossed with Tolkien's Middle Earth, and 50 years of bits-and-pieces that are well-known enough that too many people have convinced themselves that there's an actual structure to the gameworld. (Gameworlds. Whatever.)

Any attempt to figure out where the supply lines are in a (WotC-canon) D&D world is doomed. There aren't any. The gov't structure is also missing – there are kingdoms, and maybe city-states, and such, but the military structure is a mish-mash of "fantasy" and "historical fragments" and "how white male wargamers in the 60s thought military orgs worked."

Add in the ridiculous amount of gold, and... look, D&D is for crawling through dungeons and killing dragons; it is very much not designed for unionizing the peasant hordes.

The problem is, even if you can figure out a cohesive socio-economic structure and setting details, good worldbuilding is *wordy*. Explaining a government, economic system, geological influences on both of those, history of wars & major conflicts, cultural groups, and so on... doesn't fit in a 50-page rulebook. And it's hard to get anyone to actually read TTRPG materials these days. ("What's good worldbuilding" is not directly related to the issue of "only the GM reads the rulebooks" but there's definitely a connection.)

There's a lot of licensed TTRPGs set in worlds the players (presumably) already know and love. And sure, plenty of those are thin on worldbuilding, but at least it's a known paucity of detail. If you're playing *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, you probably aren't concerned with the contracts that protect the trade routes that make sure iron gets to wherever it is you want to buy a sword.

Back to the actual IgTopic: I don't expect gameworlds to come with complete dossiers on history, geography, cultural nuances, family trees of the five major noble houses, etc. I don't expect scifi settings to explain warp drives or tell me how the economy is different because of teleport tech. I don't expect fantasy settings to delve into how magic affects ordinary people's lives.

(I did eventually realize that the more *common* magic is, the less disruptive it is to the generic middle-ages-Europe-esque D&D-ish setting. Because if you have 1 healer for every 100,000 people, kings will fight wars for access to that person. If there's a healer in every village... you get less death from dysentery, but the other political issues can stick around.)

I don't care how much detail there is in the world. I care that the GM and/or other players can address questions when they arise, and don't fall back

on “it’s just like Fantasy Europe” (or TV series of choice) “except the PCs and their direct enemies have these Special Abilities.”

If there’s magic, I want to see hints of a world that’s been shaped by magic, and doesn’t look like the one in my history books. If there’s interplanetary travel and we’re mining the asteroids, I want to know how the spacer lifestyle is different from planetbound life. If there’s warp gates between universes, I want something better than the DC Universe’s “um... the superheroes manage that stuff, and apparently are deeply dedicated to not letting any of it change our world, not even for the better.”

I want to be able to believe this story takes place in a world that’s not mine, not that our party has been isekai-dropped into a renfair-cosplay version of modern earth. I want to see people who have different values, places that were designed for different purposes, histories that put the lies and biases on different topics.

Good worldbuilding, for me, doesn’t mean *complete*. It means *different*. And so many games don’t bother with that.

## Comments on E&A #10

Every issue, I have to look for the IgTheme; its normal location apparently is a spot that doesn’t stick in my head. Maybe it could be posted at the E&A website? Might give newer people an easy focus point to write about when joining.

### Back to Brazilian Gamebooks, Pt 9 – Pedro Panhoca da Silva & Maria Zucolotto

RYCT Joshau Kronengold & Brian Christopher Misiaszek: The “Choose Your Own Adventure” (and Pick-a-Path, I believe, outside the US) books were aimed at roughly 8-10 year olds, and they had any number of bad endings.

Visual novels often advertise themselves as having a number of good & bad endings, especially the dating-sim ones.

I keep wanting to like visual novels and they mostly don’t click for me. Something about the standard interface bugs me, and many of them are designed without any text in the UI – so I’m stuck trying to figure out “which of these little glyphs means save-and-close; which means exit-without-saving; which means write-over-the-previous-save and which puts it in a new spot?” More than once, I have deleted all my progress by guessing wrong.

## De Ludis Elficis Fictis – Pum

RYCTM: I’m building in Access because (1) I have Access and (2) I have some training in Access. (Err. About 3 weeks of training, over 20 years ago. Which is still more than I have with SQLite.) I gather that one of the SQL variants would work just fine – except I don’t have a good UI that would help me get it set up. I don’t have Python on my computer; I gather that Python is often unfriendly with Windows, and my attempts to install it have failed. (I gather there are instructions for that. They were more complicated than I cared to deal with.)

The current plan is “build database in Access; export to... something else, probably SQL-ish flavored, and hand that over to Actual Databasy People for troubleshooting, and then get one of them to help me write scripts to update it as needed.”

Because I keep getting more bundles. And I’m realizing the big bottleneck is not likely “set up database” (that’s a timesuck, but once it’s done, yay) or even “set up reports” so I can easily filter/export lists of particular types of games (again, timesuck, with a bit more attention on the database structure), but – “Import new games, with the caveat that sometimes half the items in a bundle are already in my collection, so I need to mark them as *In This New Bundle* but otherwise leave the details.”

Oh, except that also: Sometimes the title of the game changes. Like, it’ll change from “Awesome Game” to “Awesome Game (Classic Edition)” because the author came out with the paid version. Or the author name will change – either because they went from their legal name to a game-company name, or vice versa, or their gender changed. Or the game description will change.

So I need a method (scripts? Maybe this is done with scripts?) that will let me:

- Add new items with lots of data (categories, description, URL, # of players, etc.),
- Add existing items to this bundle list, with new info “part of this bundle” and “order listed in the bundle,” but other details unchanged,
- Add existing items with changed details, AND update the older details for those items

The info I need for the items is not available through the API, even if I knew how to gather it from that. The API will only gather info the author has submitted, and they’re tagged inconsistently and sometimes wrong. (Or. Wrong for my purposes. I suppose technically any PDF is a “book,” but I am not happy with TTRPG supplements being categorized as “books.”) (I also have fiction & nonfic books in the

collection.) (And art packs. And music. And cross-stitch patterns.)

I have 14 categories, although I think I can shave off one or two by combining some of the art categories. I am not an art person. I have art-assets-for-video-games, art-for-ttrpgs, and art-for-looking-at. (That latter is under “literature.” I cannot tell you how annoyed I am that “literature” is not limited to Fiction and Nonfiction.) Right now, coloring books are under “other” because they don’t quite fit any of the art categories I’m using, but maybe I need to talk to an art person to figure out better sorting methods.

### Cowman Baloney Face #6 – Matt Stevens

Re: Appearance stats – Champions (now Hero System) has a “Comeliness” stat; it’s a point-buy like the reset of the system. Almost everyone had a 10 COM (the starting level); super-sexy characters had an 18 (the break-points mostly ended on 3 or 8 because of the way rounding worked); mildly sexy NPCs had a COM of 13, and people trying to squeeze out just a few more points dropped their COM to 8. The only times it went lower than that was PCs who were total monsters.

RYCTM: Okay, I broke down and paid the whole dollar for *We Are But Worms*. This falls in the category of “lyric games” – a type of poetry or philosophical statement in the shape of a ttrpg.

In this case, in the shape of a parody of a ttrpg.

It is indeed one word. It is not worth the dollar, other than I was briefly entertained. (I will not be posting the word in a public-access document but I can be asked on Discord.)

Your other comments reminded me of the ShortestStory.com bit: [Octopus Facts](#)



Re: D&D stat names, and why to change them: Because D&D has way too much market dominance, and we need new players to know there are other

types of TTRPGs. And they’re less likely to believe that if 2/3 of the games they encounter are using D&D terminology. I don’t care if a game is just using “Brawn, Agility, Wit, Sagacity, Fortitude, Charm” – but if they’re rewriting all six, they might actually come up with a slightly different approach, different scope of skills and abilities under each. Even if they don’t rework the meanings, it won’t reinforce the notion that D&D is the core of TTRPGs and all other games are somehow derivative of it.

### Twisting the Rope #10 – Myles Corcoran

RYCTM: There is no decent tool on itch to organize one’s purchases. Even claiming them so they show up in your library is a hassle. (I have a browser plugin for that, that I have to run when I get a new bundle.) The tool at [RandomBundleGame.com](#) shows that it’s possible to make a better setup, but there’s no personalized version of that.

I must have the digital *Art of Glitch*, since I have the paper version; I’ll need to poke through my archives and figure out where I put it. But yeah, no high-res map anywhere.

I wonder if I could try to contact people who worked on Glitch and ask them for one.

Tiny Speck went on to become Slack, and put Glitch in the public domain, and gave the Glitch.com URL to an open source gaming developer thing, yay. And then, years later, Slack-the-software was sold to Salesforce; the quality and support have not improved since then.

I love your alternate Everway deck idea.

### Reddened Stars #9 – John Redden

RYCTM, Database things: I looked briefly at MongoDB and Redis, and realized I don’t speak enough database to understand the differences. I’m probably doing something SQL-ish. Access is theoretically SQL (or SQLite; I am, again, blurry on the distinction) (I do not need it explained; it’s been explained before and it’s just got nothing in my head to stick to yet), although Access’s version of SQL is, of course, a bit unique.

The functions I need should not be complex; should be do-able in any database language. (Would, perhaps, be better in not-Access, which does not allow a time field that’s not tied to a date. It’s frustrating to realize that if I put in minutes-and-seconds for the albums, they will have a secret date attached to them, even if they’re only showing time.)

But before I get to the details of database issues, I need a better setup structure – I need to finalize my

main categories and sort out what data fields I'm going to need for each of them.

Categories: I have a list of over 18,000 items. Maybe a quarter are repeats, items in more than one bundle. I've marked those in 14 different categories, like "video game" or "ttrpg" or "literature."

TTRPGs need to indicate how many players, whether they need a GM, what dice or other randomizers are needed, what game system they use (Fate, PbTA, Firelights, etc.) Video games need a type (platformer, shooter, visual novel, etc.) and OS (Windows, Mac, Linux, Android, etc.) Literature needs to note fiction, nonfic, poetry, etc. along with format – text, art, comic, video, etc. The Music category needs to indicate how many tracks and the total time. And so on.

I have rough notes for all of those but not a complete/final list. I should have a better understanding of the structure I want before I start importing data, so I don't wind up needing to manually make adjustments on thousands of items.

### Notes on Elaria Construction Materials and Marks – Clark B. Timmins

More database notes: I tried the "import Excel sheet to Access." Yes, it works; it won't give me what I need. (Or, maybe I can use that as a starting point, but my Excel sheet is deliberately messy in ways that work well in Excel and cause problems in Access.)

Many, many people don't care for Access. Hell, I don't care for Access; I just happen to have a bit of familiarity with it, and no familiarity with anything else, and some have limitations I don't want.

Had a friend who started to build me a database in some cloud-based thing – but it didn't allow emojis in the fields. Some of the game titles & descriptions have emojis.

### Attacks of Opportunity #9 – Dylan Capel

I would allow the Bundle Browser to suffice if it had all my games. It doesn't; I've bought quite a few bundles it doesn't include – notably, all 6 of the "Solo But Not Alone" collections. Since it doesn't cover many of my games and it doesn't sort the way I want (there is no "show me all the solo TTRPGs" because they're tagged in many different ways), I started looking at database design.

### Firedrake's Hoard #8 – Roger Bell\_West

I might be interested in *Of Dice and Meeples*; there are some board and card games in my endless bundle-game collections. There's also a lot of "solo TTRPGs" that are basically weird solitaire card games. [Carta](#)

[games](#) involve making a "map" of cards, and rather straddle the line between TTRPG and boardgame.

For the database, I'm planning on one field of "GM Required" Y/N, and another "GM Optional" Y/N. Some would be N/N – not required, not optional; there is no GM in this game. There would presumably be no Y/Y games, but I can't swear to that because there are indeed games intended to be read & appreciated but not played.

### An Unlooked For Zine #9 – Lisa Padol

The main fields in my bundle-games spreadsheet are:

- BundleID
- Title
- Sort-title (A/An/The moved to end, emojis removed or spelled out, bizarre spellings normalized, etc. "2ECONDS TO STARLIVHT becomes "Seconds to Starlivht" in the sort field.)
- Creator
- Primary Category, e.g. TTRPG, TTRPG adventure, Video game, etc.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> category, e.g. Visual Novel, nonfiction, solo game, etc.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> category – still sorting this one out. Visual novels have "dating sim" and "kinetic" here. Literature has text/comic/art.
- Description – grabbed from Itch or another source. Sticking with Itch's 120 character limit.
- Item URL
- Creator URL
- TTRPG\_System
- Notes (currently, copyright & a few other details go here)

There are actually a few more columns that will evaporate when it folds into a database – the order in the bundle, number of the bundle itself, etc. – that are just there for easy sorting purposes.

I'd be happy to throw you the spreadsheet of some of the bundles, or all that I have, if that's useful. I haven't gotten as far as anything like personal notes. (The "notes" field includes things like "no longer at itch" or "[Olivia Hill rule.](#)")

### Going to be Ad-Libbed #8 – Avram Grumer

RYCT Jim Eckman – I've read the Primer for Old School Gaming, and noticed that, regardless of how well it describes "OSR," it is a very accurate description of "Games Elf does not want to play, ever, even for a single session." I am very not-fond of "your ability to escape the trap is based on your personal skill at persuading the GM that your plan is a good one, not anything on your character sheet." I don't like "eh rules, more like guidelines... whatever the GM

says goes, so you can ignore the rulebook.” And that’s aside from the lesser preferences of non-randomized characters with meaningful development, rather than “5 minutes of prep because you may be rolling up characters three times tonight.”

### Accidental Recall #9 – Joshua Kronengold

RYCTM: Neopets did not release any earlier info that what they were doing was a bad D&D5e reskin. They wouldn’t have gotten nearly as much support on Kickstarter for that. I suspect that what they wanted/intended was a detailed, complex 5e spinoff, something that used the core system but really tried to reshape it for Neopets – but they didn’t have a coherent plan for that, and *nobody on their core team was a TTRPG designer* (and maybe not even player), and after some initial notes about “what to do about classes?” (remove them; include various professions-with-skill-packs instead that anyone can grab), they ran out of time. There’s a blog post somewhere by one of the artists involved, that said basically they let everyone do their own thing (with occasional yelling from the top) without any coherent direction or plan to bring all the disparate parts together.

Re: GMless games – BOB games seem, for the most part, to work just as well with a GM as “regular” games, with a fairly high level of player agency, similar to Fate. *Dialect*, OTOH, often has a facilitator but they are not a GM; the game structure doesn’t let them make decisions/create details more than the other players.

I’ve looked at Microscope, and it does seem to be GMless. (Similar to *i’m sorry did you say street magic* and other worldbuilding games.) (I’m going to need to figure out how to add that as a category in the database/spreadsheet) – That’s not bad, but it seems to have less “have adventures with friends” than the BOB games.

### Others

RAEBNC. And I always feel a bit guilty about that.

## Gaming News

[Lou Zocchi has died](#)



From the Reddit link:

*The inventor of the 100-sided die has passed away. He was 91.*

*Distributor, Publisher, Designer, and Maker of Dice. He was elected to the Charles Roberts Awards Hall of Fame way back in 1986.*

# Attacks of Opportunity

Issue 10, Dylan Capel

Time really seems to have flown by this month so a small offering this month.

## Megadungeon month

I have been reading through *Stonehell* and *Halls of Arden Vul*. I like the design in the former but the story around it doesn't really make much sense so at the moment it is more like inspiration than something that will go direct to table. The latter has quite a lot of deep background and factions so I haven't actually got to the dungeon part yet. I appreciate that having a good history allows you to build up all these strands for players to pull on but as a reader it can feel like a lot of work.

I've also been interested in what constitutes a megadungeon; size naturally but there are also other conventions like factions and a nearby settlement. *Stonehell* barely references the area it is located in and is very internally focused.

As I was reading through the things I already have what I hadn't appreciated was that this month was *Megadungeon Month* with a bunch of fundraisers coming round for megadungeon products and therefore what I thought was attention bias in various social media and newsletter posts was actually part of a bigger marketing campaign.

Kieran Gillen and DDR launched the *Metadungeon* which is a dungeon where each level is an era and style of dungeon roleplaying. I think that is maybe a bit too clever for me and I still haven't read my *DIE* RPG book so I think I can skip this for now.

Goodman Games has *Castle Whiterock* which I had been interested in after reading one of the precursor scenarios (if this dungeon has not been explored before then how does the party become the first people to enter?). In the interim though I read a blog post by Moreau Vazh which pointed out that Goodman keep making mistakes in a way that suggests that they're not really that interested in learning but more feel regret when people are hurt by their actions.

I still might be interested in this setting but I don't need to go out of my way to support and again I have some of their reprinted classics that I haven't really made much use of.

Monte Cook Games (MCG) has *Jewel in the Sky* a floating megadungeon that can be used for sci-fi or fantasy purposes. One thing I immediately liked about this was that they think that the dungeon has that is valuable is the material that allows it to float. It has inherent value, nice! It is also quite clear why it has been difficult to access. I also got the impression that while there are other groups exploring and living in the megadungeon the thing is so huge that the group can explore part that is unique and undisturbed because there are lots of places like that (*Vast in the Dark* also has the idea that there are simply lots of large megastructures).

This one I almost felt I did want to back but I haven't really enjoyed the PDF layouts that I have previously had from MCG (*Poltus* felt hard to read and use for example) and I'm not sure I want another big book. I ended up thinking that I was fine for this to make its way into general circulation and reconsider whether I wanted to use it then.

Overall I ended up deciding to focus on what I already have but clearly there is going to be a lot more megadungeon on the back of fulfilling and discussing these projects as the year goes on.

# Salute 2026

Salute is London's big wargaming festival, it is insanely popular and felt way too much at times. The Kitbash Korner of independent modellers remains the real highlight.

There were two indie wargames that really interested me this time *Aetherpunk28* and *Necropolis28*. The former had a delightful A6 zine to promote the rules set. I really enjoyed the game *Tactical Breach Wizards* so the premise of wizards with guns was a winner for me.

One of the appeals of the *Necropolis* game (beyond the fact that the demo games had some very nice painting schemes in the minis) is that all the participants are dead so the usual concerns about violence and death in wargaming are not an issue. A dead universe seems like the logical conclusion of the "everything is war" pitch of things like *Warhammer 40K*.

*Trench Crusade* seemed very popular but there seemed to be only one box of squad miniatures that everyone was promoting. There was also a set of *Sniper Priests* that looked very cool. I will admit that I haven't given time to reading the *Trench Crusade* book so I should try and do that next month.

## Reading

I picked up Modiphuis's *Wasteland Wanderer* at *Salute*. This is the solo *Fallout* game they've just released. I previously tried their *Captain's Log* game (solo *Star Trek*) but didn't really feel comfortable with the background material. *Fallout* on the other hand is much less demanding on the lore front and the basic concept of the Vault, the Wasteland and the character that moves between them is much easier to grasp (for me). I'm quite enjoying it so far and the random tables have so far managed to create a suitable level of inspiration but I haven't really created a proper character yet.

### Interesting rule ideas

*Wasteland Wanderer* is one of those games that associates skills with equipment so that you either get gear to actually do the skill (avoiding having to remember to spend money in another game sub-system) or a quirky knick-knack (like drugs!) for skills that don't really require equipment.

At *Salute* I also picked up *Wayworn* and in its section on patrons (god-like beings) you can choose whether your patron grants a bonus to interacting with foes, yourself or your allies. This is a simple way of describing the usual mix of pantheon portfolios while adding a Gloranthan style way of portraying a god with different attributes such as avenging or defending.

*Into the Jungle* is an *Into the Odd* (ITO) hack that has a bit of a controversial pitch (fantasy adventuring in cinematic Vietnam War) but does have quite a nice way of handling weapon proficiencies. Instead of granting bonuses or artificially preventing use of a weapon, a character instead rolls the minimum damage for the weapon (in the ITO case, 1d4) unless they have the relevant weapon proficiency, in which case you roll the regular damage for the weapon. I feel this is easy to play and feels right in terms of proficient people becoming more dangerous (given that the system doesn't have a to hit roll).

## Links

- Halls of Arden Vul: <https://ardenvul.com/>
- Inkvein: <https://murkdice.substack.com/p/inkvein>
- Department of Wargaming: <https://www.departmentofwargaming.com/>
- I am Embarrassed (Goodman Games and the NSR): <https://tasker.land/2025/05/21/i-am-embarrassed/>
- Wayworn: <https://the-tarnished-anvil.itch.io/wayworn>
- Into the Jungle: <https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/273630/into-the-jungle>

## Comments

Just replies to comments this time, sorry! I am reading the other zines but may have to do catch up comments when I have a bit more time.

### Myles Corcoran

I have used *Roll for Shoes* in a couple of planar type games and I agree that it is a very nice system that lets narrative emerge but which also mechanically binds it to the game.

I liked the crow interaction in the *Mausritter* game.

### Roger BW

Your thoughts on *Twilight 2000* are interesting as I kind of feel that the logic of the game is that it illustrates and you need those structures as otherwise you end up as armed bandits running for your life through the forests. I guess it appeals to different kinds of fantasies for soldiers.

I've always felt that when you encounter a civil structure that is basically functioning the characters have the dilemma of joining it and starting to build a new life or pushing on and hoping to get home. I see the game frame as a small-scale version of Xenophon's *Anabasis* and I appreciate that might a minority view.

### Lisa Padol

I'm not sure whether *Twilight 2000* was the first with a hesitation mechanism or what the mechanical inspiration was but *Castle Falkenstein* has a publication date that is about a decade later so I think the lineage is probably the other way round.

In games with the memory loss mechanics things like diaries, videos or photos record the facts of what the character has lost but a generally treated as alienated artefacts. The character can't relate them to themselves as they have no memory of the events depicted so it is generally like reading a work of fiction or seeing a film where a character has your face but there is no resonance between yourself and what you're seeing.

This can be the experience of people who have severe memory loss and sometimes the experience of people with degenerative illnesses (although in those triggering memories can revive the connections that are otherwise lost).

I like the idea of a character recovering a diary but not understanding that is about them. It's rather like the conceits in movies like *Angel Heart* or *Memento*. Would the character see themselves as the villain or the hero of the events in the diary?

You are correct that the latest edition of *With Great Power* uses the *Swords Without Master* mechanics but with a different game structure to create conflicts between the hero's crime-fighting and personal life. I have a copy somewhere and was having a re-read but I've mislaid it currently.

## An Unlooked For Zine #10

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### NATTER

I am attempting to figure out how one does resumes these days and searches for and applies for jobs. (Apparently, roughly the same as the last time I sent out some?) I am also currently doing some freelance editing work, which I love, and I do want more of that.

### Recent Reading

**The Count of Monte Cristo:** I've reached the end of chapter 84, which is roughly three quarters of the way through the book. The count has set up the dominos and expects to leave France within a month. Highlights include:

- A mostly paralyzed man slicing through a man's schemes with devastating effectiveness.
- A man trying to break his daughter's engagement blissfully unaware that the current fiance would also like that to happen.
- One villain setting up another, and the count actually not realizing precisely what the situation is for a bit. He's usually completely on top of everything in every way, so this is refreshing.
- Realizing why the set-up villain wanted the diamond the one setting him up had and wondering if the diamond guy wore it on purpose for that. I think not, but am not certain.
- Alas, more "why, Dumas, why?" with Ali's Savage Nature being why he can see in the dark, while the count, of course, has Trained himself to do so. (Josh: What, is he a cat? Where is he from? Does Dumas even give him a country? Nubia? Is everyone from Nubia cats? Like, in the all fantasy [which I typed as furry] version of Count of Monte Cristo, all Nubians are cat people?)
- Beauchamp the journalist proving he's the kind of friend who helps friends hide bodies.

**Blades in the Dark:** I'm going through it fairly slowly and wincing at some of the writing. It's not that it's awful per se so much as there's a mismatch to me of the feel I'm told it has and the actual system, and that sometimes, things could be explained better.

### Recent Watching

### Continuing

**Unveil Jadewind:** So many women dead and/or socially disadvantaged in this show I'm pretty sure "There is so much sexism in this society" is a theme. Men die too, to be clear.

**Freiren:** Getting more world building and backstory. Very much about the passage of time.

**Jujutsu Kaisen:** We've now seen all that's currently out. One thing about this world I love is that telling someone you're fighting precisely what your special power does makes it more effective. Suddenly, there's a reason for it!

**Casebook of Lord Arne:** Apparently, the episodes are not out of order, and the one that ended oddly just ended oddly. The rest of the season dropped, and was delightful.

### New

**The Fifth Element:** Oddly, we'd never seen it. It has some issues, but holds up very well, and I think I enjoyed it more than I would've when it first came out.

**Inheritance:** A Polish cozy mystery film that has some interesting similarities to 7 Women, 1 Murder. I think I like it better, but am not sure. Both are fun enough to watch, but not my faves.

### Recent Storybrewers Question of the Week

Do you have a favourite quote from a game you've played or a favourite letter you've written? What is it?

Letters I've been proud of include:

- The unfinished one my character in Magnolia Season wrote to his future sons (in An Unlooked For Zine #5 in E&A #6).
- The one my alternate universe character wrote to the man he loved in Gothic Society: The Sky's Gone Out
- The two I have from Take the Universe: Power Is Fleeting, Love Is Eternal (one from my main character, one from a connection)  
(<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1US1S6ZffhiW/tehcrl1Isv1gUbqA4j8BHgvb3JgEpWt0/edit?usp=sharing>)

- The letters I wrote as Kaban from Phoenix Dawn Command and the 37 (!) page journal I wrote over the length of the campaign
- Unsure how proud I am of it, but I did a vignette thingy to figure out how my character in Elfhame, Forget Me Not might change over half a millennium and what her emotional arc before the game might have been.  
([https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Om1sae\\_t7Ch\\_XwWwHP4yXtB-WzR1ZVLYRzeoL1qBkTc/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Om1sae_t7Ch_XwWwHP4yXtB-WzR1ZVLYRzeoL1qBkTc/edit?usp=sharing))

Lines I've been proud of include:

- We are all stardust. (Something my character said in the larp Dissipation Cove, and I cannot explain why this statement mattered without spoilers.)
- A story I told in the larp Rebirth in the Valley of Lilies, and I absolutely cannot say more.
- In Aviatrix's Crown of Creation: Millicent (daughter of Nyarlathotep, trying desperately to hold on to her humanity): Okay, we killed it. It didn't kill anyone. I didn't break time and space. I call that a win.
- In Brian Rogers's X-Men PBEM, a line I'd saved up for some time (as Colossus) and found the right moment, basically telling someone apologizing (despite being psychically manipulated) for trying to kill the X-Men because he believed they'd abandoned his brother to die (basically saying psychic nudge or not, he was already on the vengeance path): "I am not so sure," says Peter, slowly. "I mean... yes, you were planning, but... even when he was influencing you, the way you were planning... Tactically, it was good, but it was not the plan of a man who truly believed that we would ever abandon one of our own."
- A few quotes from William, my character from Harlem Unbound:
  1. On being told by a psychic character (we used Pulp rules) that if he runs for some minor office, he'll win and do some good—and will die in office, likely violently: ... That's acceptable.
  2. On discovering the (white) boy in the basement of the hotel he's running (having inherited the job from his dead boss) was making some kind of magical flesh-meld monster from some dead bodies (don't ask—the PCs didn't kill them, just hid the bodies): \*sigh\* Get the kid out and lock the door. I have no idea what to do here and I have other things to worry about—cops, building inspectors, lawyers...I'll... call his mother. (This was a very traumatized boy. For Reasons.)
  3. William having sold the hotel to Mrs. St. Clair ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephanie\\_St.\\_Clair](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephanie_St._Clair)), with part of the deal being they have an affair for a year, at the end of which she is

shocked to discover his crimes (aka hers, which she pins on him), the GM and I have the following conversation:

Me: So, do I get elected and assassinated?  
GM: You do get elected. And you do get assassinated. And there's a funeral. And then, Stephanie St. Clair gives you a new passport and a ticket to Paris. She tells you never to come back to New York.  
William: Yes, Ma'am. Thank you, Ma'am

## COMMENTS ON EVER AND ANON ISSUE #10

**COVER:** Nice.

**PATRICK RILEY:** re Derailment at Faustina Station: Playtesting is generally a Good Thing, and in the case, I agree it's a requirement. re room A8: I don't see this on the map. Is that supposed to be the room labeled "A7" or the one labeled "To Station"? re page 2 re Block Rooms: The third paragraph ends in "Some rooms". Is something missing?

re page 7, C1: Maze: "The minotaur will not attack anyone holding the piece.": Which piece is that? Where is it located? I'm not clear on how doors get powered from C6. What is the token in D6 for? re E5: What questions and answered happened in your runs? re E7: I can't tell which birds are which.

## PEDRO PANHOCA DA SILVA AND MAIRA

**ZUCOLOTTO:** I think you mean "ambitious", rather than "megalomaniacal", for *Investigatar*. It sounds awesome! re the play being more investigative and procedural than action-oriented: That sounds delightful. I'd be more likely to be annoyed if I found it too frustrating to make progress than from any lack of "action".

re me: I try to do a lot of reading, yes. re if the mirror lies, Snow White remains a servant: That's unexpected, but appropriate. re if she doesn't eat the apple: That's odd because essentially, she still eats it, even if it's baked into a pie.

**BRIAN ROGERS:** Good luck breaking in the new boss! Sympathy on trying to tell which symptoms you're seeing for the kiddo are and aren't Teenage Boy symptoms. Reminds me of a trilogy I didn't care for and barely remember, but which Avram pointed out has a group of kids trying to figure out when they don't get something whether it's because a) they're in another world and stuff is Different, b) it's a deliberate tricky puzzle of some kind, or c) it's a Grown Ups thing.

I'm glad Swords of the Serpentine and Star Wars are going well and that you've found a board game you and your wife both enjoy. re parents, not kids,

complaining about the sign up procedure for the games for the kids: While it's possible that the kids complained to the parents, setting this off, I'm also reminded of an article I read about a beloved principal retiring, saying she was doing so because she was tired of dealing with the parents. She said if someone found her a school of orphans to be principal of, she'd accept.

re 2 of a 5-statue set in honor of Tiamat: I sense a meta plot coming. Ah, I see I am mistaken; it's foreshadowing of something smaller, but more immediate. \*Giggle\* at the shocked HS students forgetting that they were once the greedy middle schoolers. I do like the way the two age groups make the world feel lived in because of past adventures. What happened with Quint and the cursed crown?

re me: If there isn't *Count of Monte Cristo/Leverage* fanfic, the kid could write some. Or create adventures for it, using whichever rpg system or setting they like. Agree re superhero win/loss feels. re Confused wizard throwing daggers because the player realizes it's the weakest attack: I'd have let that slide as well.

It's a hard position for a player to be in, and I remember the awkwardness when it happened in the last session of the Harlem Unbound game. My character did ultimately kill some innocents while under the effect of a sorcerer's spell, and likely went into therapy post-game because of this.

One fascinating example of, well, not quite this, is in Seanan McGuire's Toby Daye books. Late in the series, one character is under a very twisty enchantment, and in rpg terms, this character is being played by someone who delights in \*not\* trying to wriggle out of this; indeed, the player takes pleasure in making sure to wriggle in deeper, despite the efforts of their fellow players to snap the character out of it.

re Mike Carr: I presume these comments are for Matt Stevens. re Flash Gordon crashing every plane he flies and the "Men's Own Adventure" game making that sort of thing inevitable: Ah, I begin to understand why Aviatrix put 12 points into Pilot for her Trail of Cthulhu character. Of course, the ToC genre is different, and there's almost no occasion where that many points is necessary. (It being a General skill, it refreshes fairly easily, so I'd really have to twist things to get enough rolls in for crashing to be likely, the one exception being in the Dracula Dossier game, where I don't recall offhand if I fiated the crash (giving the players a heads up) or the roll was actually bad.)

re "New game lengths are nuts!": Depends on the game. The stuff you took off my hands has plenty of shorter material. Not as short as the 47 pages of *V&V*, though I do have several items of that length or shorter, including one I recently read, including

*Salutations, Mr. Gray!*, which was right up my alley. Another thing to bear in mind for some games is that they come with scenarios or tables or commentaries or some combination. If you look at pre-7th editions of *Call of Cthulhu*, the actual essential rules are 50 pages or less, iirc, the rest being monster stats, discussion of the 1920s, descriptions of grimoires and spells and artifacts, and scenarios. The recent *Paragon Blade* from Pelgrane Press is 256 pages, but this includes not just the rules, but 3 different protagonists (as this is a 1-player 1-GM game), 3 scenarios, and world background. *Ronin*, a Mork Borg game, is about 130 pages, and I don't know how much of that is essential stuff, as I've not read a Mork Borg game before. This is a digest-sized book, however, so I suppose one could consider it 65 pages if *V&V* was 8 1/2 by 11. *Psi\*World* is another nicely short book. Avery Alder deliberately made the not very long *Monsterhearts* shorter for 2nd edition, iirc.

re Patrick Riley: Thanks for the *Back to the Future* anecdote. re Roger Bell\_West re spousal possession not necessarily being grounds for divorce: True, but alas, accusations of possession in our world have at been used to physically harm and kill spouses.

re The Face: Very creative use of the mechanics. I also love the "etc." followed by "4) Etc." Using the power 9 times an adventure should be enough, especially given it's an area attack, yes? \*Giggle\* at the question of whether Babs stayed with Tony once he stopped punching people so often.

re *V&V* 1.0: I see no problem with playing oneself as an alien. This isn't literally you any more than you having trained yourself to be a superhero (which I agree sounds legit!)is. Clearly, if one rolls up "alien", one is, well, secretly an alien. As for "a lifetime of training", again, not literally you. You could have been secretly training all your life. I'd never know!

I get why there's all this "and then the GM gets to nerf your character". What I *think* they're going for is "And the GM looks over your character to make sure you're not hogging everything and that everything you have makes sense." This is not entirely unreasonable, in the abstract. It's just that the text frames it as "the GM gets to mess with you" rather than "you and the GM are collaborating". Heck these days, it's best if the whole group collaborates when it comes to character creation, but I understand that this isn't how we did it back then.

I agree that, as GM, I don't want to have to decide what every single gosh darned gadget a PC has can do. Perhaps the intent was that I decide based on what would actually be useful for the PC to have in whatever adventure or campaign I'm running? I'd like to believe that, but I suspect it's more "Nooo! GM must control

unruly players!" Also, again, even if it is for the purposes of helping the player, that's what today's flashback mechanics are for. (I know V&V probably doesn't have such mechanics, but one could trivially add them.) I get a little lost in the 2.1 discussion, but I understand the main points: It's an improvement, and it's easier to build the character one actually wants to play.

**MATT STEVENS:** re Shadow of the Monsters: I wonder how *World of Warcraft* compares to *Hollows* (<https://www.backerkit.com/c/projects/rowan-rook-and-decard/hollows>). Probably not as much as I'm assuming, and of course, I'm not familiar with either, though I backed the latter.

re wanting monsters with unique weaknesses: You might want to take a look at \*Monster of the Week\* for an idea of how that sort of thing might be handled. \*Swords of the Serpentine\* looks at this, giving characters investigative skills like Spot Frailty, and in some cases, might let players decide (or let the GM leak information to them, if one prefers) if they spent a point of Forgotten Lore or Prophecy.

re "cunning": I think they may have been looking at the etymology of the word. See <https://www.etymonline.com/word/cunning> for some possibilities. re Land of the Rising Sun vs Blades in the Dark: Yes. I don't care how many pages it has or even what size the pages are if one is gauging sheer verbiage. The question is: What is the word count? (Now, if the question is "How likely is it to kill a horse if dropped from a height?", regardless of how many or few words there are, *Haunted West*, *Weird Frontiers*, *Flames of Freedom*, *Yazeba's Bed and Breakfast*, and most of what Jenna Moran writes probably have a high score in that regard!)

re me re *James Bond 007* rpg: I see the logic in charging points for an average appearance in that game. It makes perfect sense to me. re Ping: If you enjoyed the game, that's the main thing, isn't it? I'm quite sure I have made many ridiculous rulings myself. re 3 paragraphs of 2FT for vehicle repair: Yes, that sounds about right for that game. For some reason, neither of my main characters ever needed to use such rules. (Lammorak was too out there to ever worry about how vehicles worked, while Sticks's skills were differently focused. He'd probably supply coffee and donuts to the folks doing the actual repairs.)

re Myles Corcoran: I remember that *What's New?* strip!  
re Roger BW re GM-less games: I'm guessing you've not played one in some time, but do let me know if that's incorrect. Let's look at your bullet points:

- They require more rules, not less. (Or at least higher "contact" rules.)

I'm going to hypothesize that you're correct about higher contact rules. But "more" rules? Honestly, I don't know. You'd think they would, right? I mean, obviously, you think they do. But do they?

Do we count journaling games? I'm *quite* sure that the two I played have way fewer words than many gm'd games. OTOH, I'm not entirely sure I'd call either GM-less.

*Polaris* and *Good Society* are the first two GM-less games that popped into my head. I don't know the word count for either, but neither of these are particularly long games. *Polaris* is quite short. I believe the same author wrote *Hot Guys Making Out*, which is even shorter and also GM-less. (Also, I don't know if you want to count *Polaris* as GM-less, given that each person is sort of de-facto GM for the person across from them.)

- There are fewer opportunities for secrecy and surprise.

Actually, no. This had been my assumption, but it's simply not true.

The most extreme example was a Belonging Outside Belonging game, a playtest of *Butterfly Court* where the group of us literally set up an assassination attempt on my character, deciding the who and why of it. This shouldn't have been at all surprising to play out. But it was—things happened in play that we didn't anticipate, and we were all delighted.

I've played a Whole Lot of *Good Society*. 2-5 players, presuming no single facilitator who isn't playing a main character, and we often surprise each other. As for secrecy, until something hits the (virtual or otherwise) table, it might well be a secret. I might, fr'ex, plan for my character to propose to someone else's. This doesn't mean I'm going to say, "Hey, in the next scene, my character will propose to yours." Sure, I might do that. But maybe, I want to keep it a surprise.

Heck, in *Good Society*, in theory, though rarely, in practice, one might have secret desires or relationships, secret not just from the other characters, but also from the other players. Generally, folks feel that this is too much trouble to be worth keeping secret.

But not always. Indeed, one Penned to Good Society Hack, *Gothic Society*, has folks draw cards to randomly determine if anyone's in league with the Big Evil. The one time I played this hack, I was the only one in league with it, and it was fascinating listening to the other players trying to figure out whether or not my character was evil, as no one knew who drew which cards.

We decided to set the game in Renaissance Venice, and my character was sleeping with some religious or secular authority (I forget whom), and doing some shady things, but that was business as usual in Venice, and at least once, warned a rival when he felt the person he was sleeping with was being unjust to them. I won't say that this was entirely altruistic; as he admitted, there was an element of "If this man will do that to you, he might decide to do it to me."

But all of that was completely separate from the Big Evil with which he was in league. Why was he in league with it and what did he hope to gain? I wasn't entirely sure until one of the last scenes, where my character and another character who'd been trying, and, ultimately, failing, to prevent the Big Evil's plans from coming to fruition, were sharing a quiet moment as the waters rose to drown Venice. At that point, my character admitted that he'd made an agreement with the Big Evil to stay alive, if only for a few months longer, and the other character said that she could understand that. This was not a moment either of us planned or predicted—nor could we have.

- There will be less preparation in advance.

Not necessarily. Between games, including GM-less games, I think about the game, and about what I want to do next time. So do others. I think about lines I want to use, and scenes I want to see and set up. In Penned to Good Society games, I think about letters I might write during Epistolary phases, and do rough drafts of them.

And in online Penned to Good Society games, we do a round of Stars and Wishes at the end of a session. Stars are things we enjoyed, and by implication, things we'd like to see more of. Wishes are things we definitely want to see going forward. Often, we've used the list of wishes as de facto preparation.

We've also had conversations about what an upcoming session should be like, what various players want for their characters, and how to "land the plane" for the final session of the game.

- The "story," being more of a collective effort, may have less of an individual stamp to it.

I don't find that to be the case. Certainly, it's no more a risk than in a GM'd game where the GM and/or the scenario/campaign author has a *very* firm idea of exactly where things are going to go. One of the things a fellow gamer told me is that they don't want to be in playing a game where it feels like just about any group of gamers and characters would get about the same results. And you and I can both point to any number of games that fall into that trap, like, oh, *7th Sea*, 1st

edition, at least. Mission-centric games often feel to me like they're not interested in anyone's "individual stamp".

Is it true of all GM'd games? Obviously not. Indeed, this is part of why that player enjoyed playing in a game I ran. The point is that it is no more true of GM-less games than of GM'd games.

When you've got a bunch of people playing a roleplaying game, if they mesh well, you're going to get surprises, moments and sessions that couldn't possibly have happened with any other group, any other set up. GM'd vs GM-less is not the key factor here.

re "How crippling will these downsides be?": Well, how crippling are the downsides of GM'd play? For a lot of us, GM-less games are no more and sometimes less crippling than those. I suspect they're very much not your jam, which is fine.

re Joshua Kronengold re *Good Society*: Would you want to read it, play it, or watch a session online (as there are many streamed sessions)? There are also a lot of short videos from the creators teaching the game, as well as teaching how to teach the game. There's going to be a new edition, but playing the current one will give you a perfectly good feel for the game and whether you like it.

re your reaction to *Fiasco*, that "the semi-collective character generation is the best part, working out connections between them before the game properly begins": There's some truth to that. The original is hit or miss for me; when it's good, it's amazing, and otherwise, it's just kind of there. I've not played the second edition; I gather it's basically the same except for using cards. As for working out connections between characters, normal or otherwise, yep, a lot of games do that. *Fate*, *Good Society*, various Powered by the Apocalypse Games, and so on. I've loved that sort of thing since the Relationship Maps from 1st edition *Vampire: The Masquerade*.

**PAUL HOLMAN:** How are you holding up?

re GURPS game: It seems that being on a Mission from Some God or Other is a thing PCs tend to do. re Iki: I don't know how much I'd like it, but given the theme is shopping, it might work for me.

re city mapping: The district/neighborhood areas with some important buildings marked seems to be the correct level of detail for most purposes, zooming in for very specific scenes as needed. I'm thinking of *Swords of the Serpentine's* map of Eversink and *Blades in the Dark's* Duskvol, but I think the first example I encountered, at least, for a fictional city, might be *Over the Edge's* Al Amarja.

I don't think I look at any of the big picture questions you have. Factions and people, sure, probably. Size, major activities, industry, trade? Probably not. I do agree that words can form a map, as you say, and I do like family trees and relationship maps.

I'd be interested in seeing your ruleset for Night's Hacked Agents. I've not seen *What We Do in the Shadows*, but I have seen *Hot Fuzz*, and the idea of NBA/NHA as a cross between the two makes sense.

re igtheme: \*Giggle\* at both the players' terror at the rust monster and the image of the entire party knocking a door atop it and stomping the critter to death.

**MYLES CORCORAN:** I'm glad the boiler got replaced! Good luck with the rest of the things. re Mausritter drawing too many players to accommodate: That is one of the better problems to have, yes.

re *Vaesen*: \*Nod\*. This is one reason I don't love *Blades in the Dark*. It doesn't feel the kind of heroic / swashbucklery / heisty I'd expected. If I think of it as a system for gritty-ish games, that probably helps. That said, iirc, *Tales From the Loop* uses the same system, and it definitely didn't feel dire. TFTL also allows for a lot of helping, to fit the 80s teen adventures genre, and that might have mitigated the failures, as might the "well, we're 80s teens, so I guess we fail a lot" idea?

But I think *Blade Runner* uses some variant of the same system, no? It felt very different from TFTL and from what you describe for *Vaesen*. Of course, I've played *Blade Runner* and *TFTL* once each, and *Vaesen* not at all. re work group rpg sessions vs home group: I've learned that one can accomplish as much in a focused 2 hour session as in a more relaxed 4 hour one, and you had the time difference in your favor on this one.

re Mausritter write up: \*Giggle\* at the conversation with the crows. Looking forward to the trip to see the wizard. re John Redden re *The Invisibles* tarot: Based on the comic? I'd love to see that. re Clark Timmins re Ashbinder: I agree. re me: The characters and their players are a key part of almost every rpg game. re Amber Diceless empty die bubble: Julian Lighton came up with that inspired bit of genius. re Paul Holmen: I'm pretty sure Pelgrane would be fine with Night's Hacked Agents so long as no money's being charged for it and none of the relevant "don't cross our business lines" are being violated. The MiBs are another matter, of course.

re Roger BW re Pendragon stats and battles: Heh. I think I remember that. Interesting, as one doesn't think of it that way until one does the math. re

Counting Back to None: Ah. Interesting, and quite usable. So, basically, a 50-card deck, then? I see what you mean about water and spirit. Water often winds up being "the spirit element" when one doesn't include spirit as its own thing. I'd like to see more of this if you find more inspiration or your notes.

**JOHN REDDEN:** Good luck with the heart surgery. re igtheme: The map looks like a plan for a stained glass window, very pretty. re me: I'd rather telecommute, but I can travel to theoretical jobs by subway or city bus. re McSorley's: I believe it is still there. See <https://mcsorleysoldalehouse.nyc/>.

**CLARK TIMMINS:** re Notes on Elaria Construction Materials and Marks: This reminds me of Kipling's "The Palace": [https://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poem/poems\\_palace.htm](https://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poem/poems_palace.htm)

re Roger Bell\_West re campaign presented "as a series of postage stamps": I've been in some games where sentences on the character sheets give a good sense of the character's arc, if not the campaign as a whole (the various sentences defining Millicent in *Crown of Creation*, and the Most Important Person and supernatural encounter lists on William Fillmore's sheet in the *Harlem Unbound* game), and there was an online series of *Over the Edge* character sheets that created a campaign narrative. For the first Kerberos Club, I tried to do this with a wiki, with some success, especially as Fate Aspects help create something of a snapshot or series of snapshots.

Various character keeper tabs in online character keepers and various channels in Discord servers are another way to do this. I'd hoped annotating a copy of *Dracula* would work for my campaign of mini-campaigns for *Dracula Dossier* for *Night's Black Agents*, but that's not really happened, although most of the players in the first leg did at least a little bit of annotation in character. *Yazeba's Bed and Breakfast* has a ledger and stickers for that sort of thing, and I'd love to see if we can make good use of that for a full Yazeba's campaign.

**ERICA FRANK:** Sympathy re the stalled games. re *Brindlewood Bay*: What I found with mysteries in rpgs is that some players want to solve them and some players are content to let the mysteries unfold around them over time. Having both types in one group can work, as can having only one type, but it's important one knows which type the players are.

re rpgs capable of doing romance or sitcom, I'd argue that *Good Society* can do both, at least, if you're willing to consider "farce" equivalent to "sitcom". In theory, *Primetime Adventures* could handle both, but in practice, I'm not sure. It can do show arcs, but that's

not the same. RPGs can definitely do heists, some better than others.

Games where the goal is to survive overlap with horror, and I can point to survival horror adventures, although, for obvious reasons, they're more likely to be one-shots than campaigns. One can do Lovecraftian games either way, of course. I agree that campaigns do not follow the model you describe, i.e., slowly realizing the true horror of the world, and then the game ends, although in theory, you could do that with either *Trail* or *Call of Cthulhu*.

re not taking out the bad guys: Nod. I've played a lot of games where that's not a thing, but in terms of Lovecraftian horror, it's rarer. Not non-existent, though.

- I edited *Eldritch New England Holiday Collection*, a 4-adventure campaign for 7th edition *Call of Cthulhu* where the PCs are children. I got to play two of the four adventures, and they were good. Where along the horror continuum they fit is an interesting question, of course. The Christmas adventure involves bringing a reconciliation between estranged family members. "Innsmouth Independence Day" had a beautiful moment where we saw the hope in a young girl's eyes die. It wasn't hope for snatching life from the jaws of death or anything like that; rather, hope for some fairly specific social clout to help create a sense of belonging. The player of that character was very good.
- In a lot of one shots I've played, the PCs sometimes need to focus on saving who and what they can and/or coming to an accommodation with the horrors.
- In one convention game, it really was a question of whether the PCs would survive. It was a modern setting, and some of the PCs survived, while some did not. The survivors didn't really know exactly what had happened.
- I'd call the convention game where the PCs were aboard the Titanic more of an occult thriller, I think. A supernatural menace was thwarted, but that didn't save the ship nor any aboard. About half the PCs survived and got into lifeboats. These were the women; the men gallantly stayed aboard and died. This is an interesting subgenre, though, as it was also playing with a well-known historical event, and that brings its own enjoyment.

Convention one-shots tend to be more experimental, and can probably afford to be, as players self-select into games they have reason to believe they'll enjoy.

re Untamed Brindlewood Bay: I look forward to this. I'd love to be a player in it, if I can get someone else to run it. re *Cage of Sand*: I look forward to seeing how

the second loop goes. I hope your careful packing makes setting it all back up easier.

re me: Thanks for the *Lasers & Feelings* correction. re Tarot: Nod. Yes, I definitely get irritated by "I have figured out what the Tarot should \*actually\* be! Anything else is Just Wrong." I'd be okay, I think, with "the previous centuries' decks are a bit outmoded, just as the one I'm making will be outmoded in the future". And yes, it is definitely subjective when I decide I'm fine with one deck, but not so much with another.

re journaling games: Interesting. Neither of the ones I've done have cards or dice. I think they're both more of a choose your own adventure / gamebook design, but where the player is doing a lot of the writing once the decision has been made and the next point reached.

re gming for friends vs gming for clients / customers: Good point. The relationship is different. re convention games: It varies. If I'm running a game at DexLite or a science fiction convention, I'm probably not getting paid, except *maybe* in free membership. Some conventions will comp all or part of a person's hotel room as well, I gather, but that sort of thing is still not the players paying for it, except in terms of registering for the convention.

At Gen Con, though, each event is ticketed. It may be free. It may cost one generic ticket or equivalent (\$2 in 2019). Usually, it's \$2 (or whatever the current rate is) per every 2 hours. But sometimes, it's more. It might be \$8 for 4 hours. Or \$12 or \$25. I *think* this means that the event organizer, which might be a company or an individual, is getting some of the money. E.g., if it's Chaosium or Pelgrane or You Too Can Cthulhu who's the organizer, it's the organization. If it's J. Gamer, then it's the individual. Does it feel better for you if it's a company like Chaosium or a group of individuals like You Too Can Cthulhu? Does it feel better if they provide prizes or if they train the GMs who run for them and maybe give those GMs some swag or if they provide a fancy experience for the players with set dressing / costuming / props / et cetera? No judgment from me, just curiosity.

re Matt Stevens re *Leverage*: No one carries the idiot ball? Yay! re Whale Whores gaming jam: I'm there for the Thirsty Sword Lesbians Whaling Supplement! Moby Dick time! re Paul Holman: the em and en dashes are supposed to match the *capital* letters? I'm not sure I realized that.

re Avram Grumer re lack of editors for indie games: *\*raises hand\** Editor here, specializing in rpgs, always looking for work!

re Joshua Kronengold re the Head of Vecna: See:

<https://technomancers-sanctum.blog/tabletop-gaming/dungeons-and-dragons/the-head-of-vecna/>

<https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/298372/the-head-of-vecna>

and, no doubt, other places online with the story.

**MICHAEL CULE:** So The City is, or started as, something of a last redoubt against Dust and then became a bit of a reclamation project? re conventions: Between the two, I'd rather give up the lubrication than the conventions, but I gather that this triggering knee issues isn't the only way in which conventions have become more physically draining for you.

re Lictors: Fascinating. I'd be interested in more details. re Glamour: Ah, politics and walking goddesses. In some ways, not unlike the Phoenix Dawn Command game I played in, though that was very much war centered. My sympathies on forgetting the important detail that the PCs did not murder the bat cultist senator. I've had sessions like that. You pivoted well, I think.

re Vostor: I gather he has some sort of Disadvantage keeping him from keeping silent? Or is that just how the player chooses to play him? That said, also sympathy on players having their characters talk over NPCs who seriously outrank them. I think every GM ever has been there.

Heck, one decided (incorrectly) that no one could ever take one of his NPCs seriously because the PCs (including mine, alas) interrupted him. In our defense, he opened the session with the PCs in question having been drugged and kidnapped, and a lot of it wasn't so much "oh yeah? You're not so tough!" as "wuh? Wait, what? Sorry, you mean what?" Also, he didn't, iirc, ever have the NPC say "No interruptions" nor say out of character "Your characters would know you don't interrupt someone of this rank, especially not in this situation."

\*Giggle\* at Keanus's resolution "not to be woken by unusual noises". re kittens: They can absolutely be instruments of seduction! So, the senator who's the group's sort-of-patron is now the Master of Circuses, correct? re me: Thanks for defining "woggle". This is not what I would have guessed, although I confess I don't know precisely what I would have guessed.

**DYLAN CAPEL:** re *Dragon Magazine*: When I had a subscription, I started finding it interesting, and later, found myself reading less of what was in it. My last issue was #90. I know I was still interested at #50, but not at what point between that and 90 I stopped reading a lot of it. I enjoyed a lot of the Ecology of...

and the comics. I enjoyed the book reviews and the game reviews. I liked Giants in the Earth, where they converted fictional characters to D&D.

re playing re giving the group some time to "socialise with the people they were planning to rob which meant that they as players also didn't really want to kill people, just steal their money": Well done! It's a good tactic to add to the collection of tools for keeping PCs from being murderhobos. This is not unrelated to the discussion from A&E about how to discourage PCs from torturing people. Don't give mechanics that explicitly put it on the table. Explicitly \*dis\*courage it, as you did by saying that the point is to *not* do murder. Do encourage the players to think of the NPCs as people, not obstacles.

re City building: Thanks for including the link to *Sharps of the Knife*. re Meta: I don't think I agree that the ideal is "three pages of content and two of comments". I enjoy reading Brian Rogers's essays and Michael Cule's write ups, and I find meaty comments, including those not addressed to me, satisfying to read. I'm used to the 16-page limit, and while I don't want it to be longer, and would be okay with it being a bit shorter, I like that one has room to stretch a bit. I find that I am tired of online articles praised as being "in depth" that seem to me quite short and cursory. re me: Thanks for the explanation of the 28 films.

**ROGER BELL WEST:** Good look with *Of Dice and Meeples*. re 2300AD/Bayern: I agree that a human story session is good; not all sessions need combat even in games that usually focus on combat. re Day After Ragnarok: Does the group ever get time to breathe? I do like "This is starting to sound like the sort of behaviour that gets people medals. Sir." It vaguely reminds me of a scene late in *The Fifth Element*.

re Amazing Adventures/The Mask of Yhtill re GM not expecting the group to kill half the opposition in the first round: Reminds me of the GM of one of Josh's D&D games saying he didn't expect the group to be able to handle 12 liches quite so easily. \*Giggle\* at the realization that the lie about being on the same side turns out to be true!

I hope Airecon was good. The necromantic programming theory seems reasonable enough. It reminds me a bit of both *Gideon the Ninth* and *The Untamed*. re fights where the opposition doesn't know you're there until you've won the fight: Yes, very much so. re me: Thanks for the explanations.

re Avram Grumer re pregens that could be either gender: Walt Ciechanowski did that for *Victoriana* games he's run at conventions. One side has a male version and one a female version, and apart from the headshot and name, I don't think anything changes.

When I wrote larp characters with gender neutral names, I found keeping the gendered pronouns out challenging. When writing a backstory for one of several gender-to-be-decided-by-player larp characters, "they" can get to be very ambiguous.

re Matt Stevens re politics: At the time the 2-page rule was instated for *Alarums & Excursions*, it was explicitly about real world political discussion and wasn't a "no political discussion whatsoever" rule. re Dylan Capel re satisfying endings for Lovecraftian scenarios whether or not the PCs "win": Yes. This is possible. I've played at least two scenarios where the PCs utterly lost, however one defines that, but it was very satisfying because the scenario felt fair or right. In one case, I have no idea if a win was even possible, but didn't really care. In another, it was possible, but we weren't playing to win. We were playing in character, and our characters were very much not investigators. In a third, the characters technically won, but, as the GM explained later, they were pretty much doomed long term. This too was fine and felt fitting. The PCs had no reason to know their true situation.

Multiple endings are tricky, especially if one is going for an epic save-the-world thing. Also, scenario authors/publishers tend to hate them if it means that they have to cover all of these possibilities. I can vent about that over drinks some day, perhaps; I prefer more possibilities. That said, one thing I also dislike is "Okay, if the PCs "win", then our world history is the way it is because they kept things from getting worse. And if the PCs "lose", then our world history is the way it is because things got worse."

re Joshua Kronengold re 1st ed *7th Sea* PCs putting points into fighty skills but not swordmanship schools being often able to outfight those who put points into such schools: I don't think we ever tried that experiment. It doesn't surprise me. I'm not sure the possibility dismays me per se; in theory, I like the idea that you get some prodigies. Of course, if it's a general thing, then one wonders why anyone bothers with the schools.

re Avram Grumer re GM cheat sheets: I've made some. Very occasionally, I remember to use them. re Timothy Collinson: \*Giggle\* at getting out alive by following the procedures in the manual. Granted, that is, in fact, what the manual is for, and the best have "and when that doesn't work, you'll have to improvise" in there.

**GABRIEL ROARK:** Don't beat yourself up. You can only do what you can do.

**ME:** re Brian Rogers re *Trail of Cthulhu* 2e having an optional rule for using credit rating as a social/interpersonal investigative ability: Actually, that's not quite correct. Consulting the current backer draft,

the optional rule is that Credit Rating affects the ability to use Interpersonal Abilities on people with a Credit Rating more than 1 point higher or lower than your own. The rule is that you need to spend an extra point from the IA in question for every 2 points of difference in Credit Rating. Note that this doesn't apply to Core Clues, which, the rules say, "are still free, as God and Robin Laws intended".

re Roger Bell\_West re my wanting a detailed map of the fictional town of Tomoeda from *Cardcaptor Sakura*: I doubt such a map actually exists. Some locations in the show are fixed, but there's definitely an element of "for this bit, we need an X, so there's an X, and we don't really care where precisely it is."

re Michael Cule re holographic clothing: I'm thinking of the anime PsychoPass, where the characters do wear actual clothing, but use holographic technology to change what it looks like.

**AVRAM GRUMER:** re handwriting recognition and AI: I suspect an AI might have a harder time with my handwriting, as it is less legible than yours and I tend to use speedwriting (which is not shorthand, but does mean it is more likely to confuse an AI).

re fantasy world where the king/emperor keeps various noble children as wards/hostages: As I said then, "Dibs on the bookish prince!" Also, yes, I think it could work with *Monsterhearts*. I played a fascinating 2-hour playtest of a hack for a science fiction setting where the PCs were all adults. Avery played as well; I think she was the werewolf. I was the ghost, and I think my character had actually died in cryofreeze, although the other characters didn't know that.

As for "how to integrate the metaphoric fantasy elements into a setting where belief in vampires, werewolves, etc, is common", I'd not be worried. Get a group of players together and we'll gladly work with you on this. What did Gemini say?

re Pynchon: The only book of his I read is *The Crying of Lot 49*, which I enjoyed, although it didn't really motivate me to read his other (longer) books. re running *Mythic Bastionland*: As you probably know, we'd be happy to play in that or the *Monsterhearts* hostage nobility game, schedule et cetera permitting.

re what OSR "means to Satrah... high brutality, high fatality": Yup, I've seen some OSR games that definitely fit that definition, and this is why I have relatively little interest in them. It's not a question of quality; they're just generally not my preferred style of game.

re watching movies / reading books that are "fine" and neither bad nor good: Holly Black gave similar, but not

identical advice, recommending that aspiring authors read bad books. Good books, she said, tended to be so smooth that, from a learning perspective, it can be hard to see what makes them work and what you should do to write like them. Bad books have the bones of something good in them, and you can see what the author was trying to do and where that fell flat and how it could have been done better.

re 1st Monsterhearts write up: Any idea why the mayor was firing the principal? re sweatpants: I don't get it either; I don't find them particularly sexy. re Drake wanting to know the political situation in Hell: That makes so much sense for the Queen. re Briar rolling to see if Byron gets away: In theory, that should be turned into some kind of move for the player to roll, but in practice, it's a reasonable, quick solution.

re rolling to turn Drake on, but only when he reads the note: I like this. I hadn't thought of a delayed effect, but it makes sense. The other option, of course, is to wait to roll until Drake (or someone else) reads the note. It's more feral, but I tend to be a mid- to low-feral type myself.

re Drake "keeps trying to smooth-talk them without giving away our involvement, and Mike keeps rolling partial successes on Keep Your Cool. Briar's clearly not having an easy time coming up with new ways of interpreting that": Briar shouldn't have to do that. I sympathize; I've made the same mistake, and it's tricky not to make it. This is what the text says for a partial success on Keep Your Cool:

===

When you keep your cool and act despite fear, name what you're afraid of and roll with Cold... On a 7-9, the MC will tell you how your actions would leave you vulnerable, and you can choose to back down or go through with it.

===

This doesn't overlap with a 10+, and it's not a failure. With 20-20 hindsight, not knowing the group except through your writing, and from a safe distance in time and space, here's what I think should happen:

Drake is trying to smooth-talk Byron's parents. Okay, it's not a miss, so potentially, he should be able to do that. However, doing this would leave him vulnerable. So, it's a "Yes, but if you do this..." situation. One roll, one offer, and then, we're done.

Given what the next bit is, saying "Yes, you can do that, but then, they will think you gave their dead son drugs." If you want something different, maybe "Yes, you can smooth-talk them, but you let something slip." What would leave Drake—or his family—vulnerable that

does not implicate Drake and the other PCs in Byron's death? That's what he lets slip.

Alternatively, he could let slip something about one or more of the PCs that have nothing to do with Byron's death (at least, not directly). Maybe about Steffan being a werewolf or being naked in a public place. Or about something else to Drake's, Blue's, Laeli's, or Logan's disadvantage. Or say something that wrecks things for Eddie and Eddie's father. Or doesn't wreck it, but merely leaves Drake vulnerable, as Byron's parents now know Drake really wants Eddie's father to keep the principal job. Heck, maybe they'll offer to help, for a price. Presumably, it'd be a different one than Byron wanted, but that doesn't mean it's a better price. Byron may have learned his nastiness from them.

The what isn't as important as that it's a "hard choice", and either he takes the deal, successfully smooth-talks the parents, but leaves himself vulnerable as described, OR he doesn't take the deal and fails to sweet-talk the parents, at which point, Briar makes a GM move.

LOL at "at least we're done with Wednesday" and LEvenLouder at "or will be once we establish what Laeli was up to".

re Scum and Villainy write up: Oh, I'd forgotten that offer of counseling, as well as the cynical "but this is your fourth death in five weeks, so you're probably used to it." I suppose I should try to get a sense of where all these sectors are and what they are.

re 2nd Monsterhearts write up re "I didn't really do a good job of taking notes on this one": That makes sense. There were fewer players, so you had a lot more air time, and that makes it harder to take notes. re stats: I was going to ask why you needed stats if you had no skins, but of course, there are basic moves.

re Bianca having dirt on Drake: When that comes up, do you think you'll be playing her again? *\*reads rest of the write up\** Ah, I see you will. Bianca's scarily good at what she does. Were you rolling well, or was Briar allowing a lot of auto-success because Bianca's an NPC being set up to be an antagonist?

I'm curious to know why Erica had Logan delete Bianca's message and add the address to the spam list. Did Logan even read the email? re Bianca looking for patterns about who spends time with whom via scanning people's phones: Yep, that does "seem like something she'd do". I wonder if she's a potential recruit for an intelligence agency. Certainly, an older Bianca could be an Agent in *Night's Black Agents*.

re bonesmashing being "a thing" in 2023: Is the game set in the current year? If not, Bianca could still have inspired Clavicular. I like the way the current history of

the game got back-woven with Bianca sending evidence about using AI to cheat in class, even if that does argue for a 2026 or 2025 setting. Still, perhaps in this universe, bonesmashing took a bit longer to become a thing, and then, it was due to Bianca.

re me re maybe 2 days of game time in the Monsterhearts game taking, what, four or five months?: Nod. When I ran the Strange School PBEM, set in the CthulhuPunk world, that was about the rate when things were moving at some kind of pace. I think the Halloween Dance took 3-4 months!

Thanks for the explanation of Drake's failed roll. That makes sense. re the werewolf: I'm trying to recall how often I've seen werewolf-as-bully in *Monsterhearts*. The example that comes to mind was a one-shot at one of the Double Exposure conventions where she was a bit of a social bully. Come to think of it, so was Lord Byron.

re Ron Edwards's definition of "premise": This sounds like "thesis", or rather, the definition I gave my students for "thesis" back when I taught (a complete sentence that one can agree or disagree with, and that it was their job to write their essay to support the thesis—I explained it probably a bit differently, possibly better, possibly worse, but that's neither here nor there). I'm not saying it's not "theme", but I find "theme" a rather squishy term, and I'm vague on what it means in any given context. I'd say the theme of Cthulhupunk +20 was "The kids grow up", but this was not a theme I ever planned or pushed, and I'm not sure anyone else did either. It's not a thesis so much as a description of at least part of what I think that campaign wound up being "about".

When I use "premise" in terms of a scenario or campaign, I'm referring to something more akin to starting point, to that which must be accepted. E.g., if it's "You're looking into why X has gone missing" or "You're sneaking into the fortress to steal Y" is premise, and I say, "Wait, why would my PC even care about X or Y?", I am rejecting the premise. If you're running a game where the PCs are teenaged masked superheroes living a double life, and I say, "But can't I play just a normal teenager? Or the school janitor trying to find out what's going on with the rest of the group? Or can't we instead play a game about college students trying to win a music competition?" *after* agreeing to play a game where the PCs are all teenagers and superheroes, I am rejecting the premise.

By my definitions:

- In the show *Jadewind Unveil*, the theme seems to be "Women are pawns and victims and too often wind up dead in this sexist society", while the premise is "A noblewoman becomes a detective

and solves crimes while trying to unveil the truth of what really happened to her family."

- In *Frieren*, the premise is "80 years after being in a party that defeated the demon king, the title character learns about humans and feelings", and the theme seems to be "Time is cruel, erasing everything a person did and felt and was, but at least for a time, the people who knew them can remember."
- In *Violet Evergarden*, the premise is "A former child soldier learns how to be a person by writing letters for people", while the theme is "Letters help people say what they can say in no other way, and they can change lives and nations."

re *Apollo 47 Technical Handbook*: Yes, I know of it, and I think I downloaded the pdf version. re Roger Bell\_West re *Cats Have No Lord*: I think the barbarian survives, but otherwise, that's correct. re Joshua Kronengold re the negotiation in that *DresdenFiles* game: That wasn't a dice vs not dice thing. That was the GM breaking an agreement we'd made.

re skirting death in *Monsterhearts*: It is my belief that if you have 0 Strings, you can't pick "Lose all Strings you have on everyone" as an option, and that if you're already in Darkest Self, you can't pick that as an option. I think the text implicitly supports my interpretation given "While the rules give you ample means to dodge your final fate, it's worth considering the option, even if you could avoid it", the key phrase being "even if you could avoid it", as that implies that you can't always. It is possible I'm wrong, of course.

That said, I find it tricky to get Strings in 2nd edition, but perhaps I'm just doing it wrong. I like Briar's 3rd option, the "something extra terrible will happen (mc's discretion)."

**PATRICK ZOCH:** I agree that possession is tricky to do well, and that the Kissing Stones story is great. Josh explained to me after I did a rather botched possession thing in Cthulhupunk, to wit, taking over his possessed character, that the key to doing it better is to allow the players agency. Specifically, he said, I should tell him what his possessed character's new goals were instead of trying to play the character myself. Players can often enjoy their characters' ill fortune if they get to orchestrate it themselves.

re Saltmarsh write up: Did Cassian's player write this? Or are you simply writing from Cassian's pov? re mistakes: It's easy to lose track of details when you've got a lot to juggle. I do it a fair bit myself. re bard: Yes, she definitely needs something cool. re food and ingredients side quest: Yes. Lee ran a game about a caravan of folks trading in ingredients and serving feasts to nobles in the countries they traveled to. Who is Ned Shakeshaft, which is to say: How does he fit into

everything? I gather he merely posed as a prisoner, which I had suspected. I like that Anders is an unwitting pawn.

re killing the "somewhat cooperative" hobgoblin: When I first started gaming, that might well have seemed reasonable to me. Today, I first want to know if this is a world where hobgoblins are intrinsically evil, as he seemed more of a paid mercenary than anything else. I don't know if the party is likely to get a reputation for this kind of ruthlessness; certainly, if they do, their enemies won't be as likely to surrender, let alone answer questions.

re me: You could try Stars and Wishes instead of Roses and Thorns. Stars and Wishes asks for one thing they liked from the most recent session (up to you and them whether a person can give multiple stars) and one thing they hope to see in the upcoming session (again, up to you and them if one person can state more than one wish). re "Why are you on the island of Al Amarja?" being too open-ended?" Potentially, sure. In practice, the other players and the GM can help folks who are overwhelmed. I suspect that the semi-current day + surreality setting helps players.

As for crafting "something that is inconsistent to the character or adventure at hand", I think it's less of an issue with *Over the Edge*. As with *Powered by the Apocalypse* games (the first of which was definitely in the group of indie games inspired by *OtE*), the GM is expected to tailor a campaign or one-shot to the specific group. A session zero's a good idea so that everyone can get on the same page, and of course, if the GM does have specific things in mind, this is the time to discuss that as well. Fr'ex, a scenario I both played and ran when the first edition of the game came out, "Freshman Dorm From Hell", everyone knew up front that all of the PCs were freshmen at D'Aubainne University. This also helped with "why are you on this island" to at least some degree.

re the Origins *Call of Cthulhu* game set in Mussolini's Italy: I am not sure I'd say context was "forced" upon the players. We all read the event description before signing up. This is part of what I consider "premise". We accepted that we were signing up for a game with a particular setting and rules set and would be playing particular pre-generated characters.

re Roger Bell\_West re "Advancement by spending varying by character class": *Shadows of Yesterday* has a system where each player decides how their character gets xp, as well as mechanics for how to change that. A particular method, iirc, is called a key. John Harper uses keys in *Lady Blackbird* (although with different xp numbers).

Characters can have up to five of these, and each can net 1, 2, or 5 xp, depending on what you do. You can also cash in a key for a one time payment of 10 xp, but then you are no longer using that key. Also, the player is in charge of when they receive xp. Fr'ex, for the Key of Faith:

===

Your character has a strong religious belief that guides her. Gain 1 XP every time she defends her faith to others. Gain 2 XP whenever this character converts someone to her faith. Gain 5 XP whenever this character defends her faith even though it brings her great harm. Buyoff: Your character renounces her beliefs.

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Note that your character can renounce her beliefs without taking the buyoff, as taking xp and taking a buyoff are things the player decides when to do. The character could have an arc of renouncing her beliefs and then regaining her faith. If the player decides to take the buyoff, then they can never purchase that key again. I might be slightly flexible here and allow the player to purchase it again for a *different* faith, as I believe there's precedent for this with the Key of Vengeance and the Key of the Vow.

re the player who missed the memo: Yep. That is why one tries to explain the premise / context / whatever you want to call it both clearly and in advance. It is why I'm in favor of Session Zero and group character creation.

re Michael Cule re reasons to travel the world:

- A Great Race! You can even use it in pulpy sf settings as characters race from planet to planet!
- A wunderjahr or Grand Tour! Unsurprisingly, there's a Penned to Good Society hack/playset for this.
- Surveying a very large area for some authority or other.
- Accompany a traveling magistrate or noble. One of the PCs may or may not be this esteemed personage, and this person may or may not be in disguise.

**BRIAN MISIASZEK:** I'm sorry about Zoe. Even with a good final day, this is so hard. re *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Josh and I got to see that some years back at the Queens Museum of the Moving Image. Wild movie! And the folks presenting it explained that silent movies weren't precisely "silent", as there was live musical accompaniment in the background.

re Tracy Hickman showing up at the zoom game: Wow! I miss the write ups of that game, as well as Peter Hildreth's presence in an apa.

re Habana Horror: re Underground Mazorra: That is a lot of good work, much of which will necessarily go unused by GMs. It's hard to use this material well without a lot of GM preparation and planning, and of course, players will generally act to make all of that prep and planning come to naught. But you've given GMs the foundation to improvise as needed, and I know some GMs would absolutely prep and plan to the max with this material.

re boiler room: I can't quite spot it on the maps. I'm not sure if it's my eyes or the way the map is printed.  
re boobytrapped stairs: The boxed text seems to contradict itself, saying first that a failure on the DEX roll causes 1D6+1D4 damage, and then that it causes 1D6+1D6 damage. Is the second supposed to be the result of a fumble? re the concealed stuff mentioned in boxed text whose "accidental discovery is effectively impossible": Huh? Does that mean the Spot Hidden rolls don't work? That players have to read your mind to tell the GM that they make a Spot Hidden roll in the first place? That NPCs in the area won't realize that there's this other space? That the space isn't going to come up in the scenario? I'm a bit confused.

I really like the juxtaposition between the horror scenario and the real world events. It's tricky to pull off. "Four Days of the Bat" (*Night's Black Agents*) pulls it off to some degree with the fall of the Berlin Wall, but is also less ambitious in that regard. The same is true for some of the scenarios in *The Borellus Connection* (*Fall of Delta Green*). The *Call of Cthulhu* scenario set aboard the Titanic does much more of this, but also has the sinking basically caused by the events in the scenario, rather than having those events happen alongside the supernatural horror.

Does Dra. Isabela Coutinho's player start the game with the handout? re Investigator Research Tree: This could work very well or very badly. I look forward to seeing it, though the only way to know for sure, obviously, is to see how it goes in play. re trying to sedate Dolores: What is "q6h" supposed to be? re Gandia trying to contain 2 investigators: What does "concentrating them at the key points of contradiction" mean? re "cartuchos": You may want to note that it means "cartridges".

re that final chaotic scene: I presume that this is an "if the PCs don't interfere"? I grant that the odds of them being able to do so are slim, but I do hope not utterly non-existent. Of course, they may choose not to interfere even if they can.

re Brian Rogers: Congratulations to Lauren! re John Redden re you working on Habana Horror longer than on anything before: It shows. You've done a lot of research and put a lot of attention to the details. re

Esperanza: In the absence of PCs, she'd be the hero. Possibly in the movie, she is the hero, with or without the investigators. It'd depend on how it was written and directed. (This reminds me of a short Monsterhearts campaign where there were a few NPCs who were basically Investigators of Lovecraftian horrors. It's just that the PCs were the Lovecraftian horrors. Well, some of the horrors, anyway.)

re Roger Bell\_West: Sadly, should you publish the scenario, I recommend against any use of AI art. (I'll skip going over the whys of this unless you want me to, as I expect you know enough about that.) If you do use AI art, be very clearly about what you used it for, and do not say anything that might sound like an excuse or a justification. You don't want to get into a discussion; people will either buy the scenario (or download it for free, if that's how you choose to do it) or not.

**JOSHUA KRONENGOLD:** And again, here's to being alive and well, and to medically safe and boring! re Brian Rogers re how heavy commenters do it: Yes, exactly. re henchfolk / allies: This reminds me of *Fellowship*, which gave each playbook a choice of ally types, which included a possible car for the Dwarf and all the snacks for the Halfling. If one did something along those lines (perhaps not with the snacks), each character could use a different stat for allies.

re 2e *Trail of Cthulhu*: I'm not sure you can use build points for Credit Rating. I think you choose where within the range of your occupation to set it. The GM can raise or low it, temporarily or permanently, based on what happens in play, and I suspect as GM, I'd let players suggest when to do it as well. re the *Feng Shui* campaign: You may want to unpack "unfortunately" in regards to Beth's character, as the fact that you think the character was overpowered does not come through here.

re Kerberos Club Fate game: That was one of the later Fate games before Fate Core came out, and in some ways, a bit of a mess, specifically in allowing players to pack so many abilities into a single megaskill (my term). I'm not saying that this was a bad thing power-wise or niche-wise, but calculating points costs was annoying.

re ChrysalisM & Felicity re Midnight: I gather Midnight's helped our friend out with mice on occasion. re me re Ghost Fu: Yes, we gendered a lot more than we thought, but as you say, very little of it is necessary. re the 1/2/3 division of dice by color in a gatcha ball: Generally, it does allow for easy identification of a bonus die. In cases where it doesn't, you roll twice, only looking at the relevant dice each time.

re Avram Grumer re Blue as vengeance spirit unaware of who summoned him or who he's supposed to kill: You're right! I missed the (possibly unintended) *Untamed* connection.

**TIMOTHY COLLINSON:** re Jekyll: Your second guess is correct. That is:

- Jekyll has Unapproved Desires.
- Therefore, they are unfulfilled, because his reputation is Important.
- Therefore, Jekyll is Sad.
- But, he says, what if—I could make myself into someone else, do whatever I want, then vanish, and show up as Jekyll, desires fulfilled, reputation spotless?

And that is the full and sole reason he's doing this. It's not about science or making the world a better place.

**IGTHEME for 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?

Kenneth Hite has said that the best setting is our world. For all my theoretical protests, I note I mostly use that setting when I run or facilitate a game. Sure, maybe there's magic, or it's got cosmic horrors or vampires or something, but it's basically our world from some time period or other.

Settings I've enjoyed that may be far enough from our world to count as Not Our World:

- The Duskvol and surrounding world from the *Queers in the Dark* playtest of *Blades in the Dark*
- The world of *Phoenix Dawn Command*
- Eversink and the surrounding world from *Swords of the Serpentine*

It's hard to say exactly what excites me when I'm reading setting material. I know that the setting chapter of 1st edition *Victoriana* made me eager to play in a Victorian Britain setting and that I was almost disappointed when magic and fantasy races showed up in the next chapter.

In play, it comes down to the group (as it always does) and the sense of possibility. Do I have a clear enough sense of what the characters and players can *do* in this setting? Is it stuff that interests me and that I think coheres?

Settings that aren't basically our world I'd theoretically want to run or play a game in include Ellen Kushner's *Riverside* and perhaps the world of *Violet Evergarden*.

## **GAMING WRITE UP/SUMMARY: Lady Susan Van Helsing**

This was a playtest of a hack of a hack of *Good Society*. The original hack, *Lady Susan, P.I.*, is a one shot (though in practice, likely to take two sessions) where Lord Walnut has been murdered, and Lady Susan is hired by the deceased's law firm to discretely determine who committed the murder and what to do about it. What she declares the Official Truth to be may or may not bear some resemblance to the truth. She might even announce that the death was accidental or a suicide. Lady Susan Van Helsing is much the same, except that Lady Susan will also determine whether there are any vampires about.

Hayley Gordon: Facilitator and **Lady Susan Van Helsing**, the only connection for all of the main characters.

**Mallory Primrose Meutre:** She/They, 24. Dependant, Murderer. Desire: Marry your secret fiance. Relationship: Secretly engaged to Griffin. Old flame of Ignatius Vampouille.

Description: A statuesque woman raised to be practical, Mallory is a human in love with Griffin's hedonistic ways but not necessarily Griffin, for reasons she can't describe. Hasn't directly seen Ignatius for some years.

Backstory Questions:

What is your relationship to Lord Walnut? Daughter-in-law to be.

Whose room did you plan evidence in? What was it? A blood-soaked handkerchief in the study trash can—inscribed with an M.

Who are you trying to protect? Why? Trying to protect Mildred—heard Lord Walnut talking about harm coming to her, and she deserves the naivete.

**Miss Anais Mayweather:** She/Her, looks 22 but is 19. Careerist, Accomplice. Desire: Take revenge on your rival for stealing what you love. Relationship: Rival of Ignatius. Sibling of Mildred.

Description: Anais was turned by Lord Walnut while working as a historical restorationist in Bohemia. Her relationship with being a vampire amounts to "well, I guess this is happening" and decides to make the best of it and seeing it as a benefit to a long career (I'll see history in real life). She has distanced herself from her family for good reason but still happens to have run ins with people she would rather avoid

Backstory Questions:

What is your relationship to Lord Walnut? He turned me. As one of his "children", I am compelled to come at his beck and call.

What motive do others suspect you have for murder? A loud fight I had with Lord Walnut in regards to my sister.

What part did you play in the murder? I have a collection of ancient weapons for "Historical study".

**Griffin Maplewood Walnut:** Played by me. He/They, looks 24, is ... somewhat older. Desire: Come into substantial wealth, while ensuring your reputation stays absolutely impeccable. Relationship: Patron of Mildred. Secretly engaged to Mallory (love triangle with Ignatius).

Description: Turned by Lord Walnut a long, long time ago, and used to playing the hedonistic heir. Griffin is used to shedding identities like old outfits, and changing their appearance as needed. He's got an extensive collection of wigs, makeup, and so on. They've also been putting aside a small bundle of jewelry, having planned to elope, if need be—or flee a mob should his secret of being a vampire comes out. Really, Griffin's always assuming they might need to flee from someone—an angry sire vampire, a mob, a blackmailer, a debtor—on an instance's notice. (Stuff that works vs vampires: silver, holy water, counting rice, direct sunlight)

Backstory Questions:

What is your relationship to Lord Walnut? Officially, I'm his son. Actually, I'm someone he turned into a vampire a long, long time, and ... it amounts to the same thing.

What motive do others suspect you have for the murder? I mean, I stand to inherit the estate and a great deal of money, and also to have the freedom to act as I like.

What do you know about Lord Walnut that no one else knows? He intended to kill Mildred—i.e., drink her dry and not turn her into a vampire. The idea is they would have married and she would have tragically "taken ill".

**Ignatius Vampouille:** He/Him, 30. Meddler, Witness. Desire: Blackmail a guilty party, and keep the vampire hunter out of it. Relationship: Old Flame of Mallory, Rival of Anais.

Description: Left empty, but I assure you, Ignatius was unforgettable. He vibed tall, dryly sardonic butler/valet. Also, despite the last name, Ignatius was not a vampire.

Backstory Questions:

What is your relationship to Lord Walnut? I served the dark master, as he was to my father, and his father. What evidence did you find in secret? What do you plan to do with it? I witnessed her red handed with the stake.

Who here recently revealed a secret to you? What was it? Mildred recently confided in me that she suspects vampires are real.

**Mildred Mayweather:** She/Her, 22. New Arrival, Opportunist. Desire: Reconnect with your estranged family. Relationship: Sibling of Miss Anais. Beneficiary of Griffin.

Description: Mildred grew up loved and cherished by her family, never seen a problem in her life. Spent most of her life attending balls and events, talking to

the society, traveling through the world and only recently moved back. Eventually noticed that her sister Anais is not growing older and after pressing on her, found out that she is a vampire. Since then she became good friends with Griffin and gave him all the gossip of society.

What is your relationship to Lord Walnut? Rumored to be betrothed, oh I'm so happy he's dead.

Why is now the perfect time to pursue your desire? I'm about to look older than Anais and that is tragic. And we are finally in the same place at the same time.

What motive do others suspect you have for the murder? Escape the marriage, and if Griffin gets more money, he'll pay me more money, right?

**Collaboration:** Tone: Black Comedy. Historical Accuracy: A little important. Gender power balance: Off. Hidden information: None out of character.

**Starting situation:** Lord Ernest Walnut was found dead early this morning by his valet. The evening prior, Lord Walnut had invited those closest to him to unveil his extensive manor renovations. However, the celebrations met an unfortunate end, and he was found stabbed through the heart by a stake.

The characters duly gathered to hear the reading of the will only to learn that the lawyers had hired Lady Susan Van Helsing to look into the matter of Lord Walnut's death, as a murderer cannot inherit, and also, apparently, because the eccentric woman believed in vampires and wanted to determine whether any were around!

The phases of this one shot were a little different: Novel, Interview, Epistolary, Novel, Confrontation, Epilogue. As usual, I do not remember a lot of details, as this game ran in 2024.

We decided that Lord Walnut's new renovation was to add a solarium. In a vampire's home, yes. And the shadow of the sundial was important. I don't remember whether it was in the first or second novel chapter that Mallory realized there that Griffin burned in sunlight (though it was definitely before she met with Ignatius as described later in this write up).

Griffin was pretending to slowly come to the realization that Lord Walnut was a vampire and that they might be as well. He told Lady Van Helsing, who was sharpening a stake as she interviewed him, that he'd experienced periods of time where he didn't seem in control of his actions, and admitting that they felt a loathing of their parent.

Meanwhile, Mildred tried to get Anais to turn her into a vampire so she could be young forever. When Anais refused, she threatened to reveal to Lady Van Helsing

that her sibling was a vampire. This failed to change Anais's mind.

More than one of us suggested that maybe Lady Susan Van Helsing was secretly—a werewolf! Hayley ran with this, describing the occasional wolf howl when Lady VH wasn't present, and a groundskeeper found dead, his throat torn out by a wild animal!

Notes were passed in the night, I think, though I don't have a record of any. I do have a list of the wishes recorded at the end of the first of our two sessions:

- confrontation between Anais and Ignatius
- Griffin and Anais
- See the duel! Mallory / Griffin / Ignatius love triangle nonsense
- Griffin finds out about Ignatius in the worst way (the letters? Ignatius alone with Mallory to blackmail her)
- Mildred and Mallory find out Griffin is a vampire
- Mallory gets in the know one way or another

The next day, Griffin and Mallory met in the solarium, and as Griffin pretended he might be slowly realizing he might be a vampire, Mallory backed away until she was standing in full sunlight. At her request, Griffin tried to cross to her, tentatively extended their arm, only to draw it back in pain when it started to burn. The two parted, sadly on Griffin's side, and sadly and horrified on Mallory's. Both she and her player thought Griffin truly hadn't realized his condition.

Mallory's player, after the game: You were gaslighting me?!

Me: Totally.

Later came the scene that I described as the hottest bit of the game, even though no physical contact took place between the two characters. Ignatius and Mallory were secretly meeting, and I think Ignatius had advised Mallory to leave.

Mallory: If I go, would you come with me?

Ignatius: In a heart beat.

You have to understand that while that last was spoken with emotion, that emotion was the underlayer. Above that was Perfect Butler. And it was all in the same sentence.

I believe it was secretly witnessed by Griffin. He later sounded Ignatius out about whether he truly cared for Mallory and when Ignatius made it clear that he did, decided to make sure that both of them were able to get away from the manor.

Mildred continued to try to get someone—Anais or Griffin, she didn't care whom—to turn her into a

vampire before it was too late and she was no longer young. I think she pointed a pistol or revolver with silver bullets in it at them? I'm not sure. I just remember that bullets wound up all over the floor, and the two vampires instantly dropped to their knees, compelled to count them all. It was a lovely absurd scene.

Ultimately, Lady Van Helsing gathered everyone to make her determination. Griffin tried to take the blame for Lord Walnut's murder. However, Lady Van Helsing was not fooled, and I believe Mallory admitted to the murder and explained why, i.e., because Lord Walnut intended to harm Mildred.

Lady Susan Van Helsing announced that destroying a monster, like a vampire like Lord Walnut, was not murder. Griffin stepped aside so that Mallory and Ignatius could wed, and while Griffin did take clothing and valuables, they left the manor to the couple. I decided that he traveled with Lady VH, helping her in her monster hunting as she kept an eye on him to make sure that they didn't start preying on humans like Lord Walnut did.

They also wrote a letter to Mallory, admitting that, yes, he had been lying to her, and if all had gone differently, would have continued doing so, using makeup to disguise the fact that he didn't age. When Mallory herself eventually died, Griffin would have mourned her genuinely, and moved on. As for Mallory, she became a monster hunter herself, and I think made sure to check in on Griffin to see if they were enough of a problem to kill. Mildred reconciled with Anais and started dragging her to social events like operas.

This was a total blast and made me feel more comfortable about facilitating either Lady Susan, P.I. or Lady Susan Van Helsing now that I have a better sense of how it can go.

## Ignorable Theme for E&A Issue #11

*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?*

Everything I said on the Igtheme of City Building a couple of issues ago apply here as well, so I'll avoid repeating myself. I would love to be able to create a rich, detailed setting, but I know the limits of both my abilities and interest. Once I get to a couple thousand words, I've probably written everything that I feel like writing about it.

I am often attracted to settings where the PCs have just arrived and I can make up stuff as they explore the world. In my City of 1000 Names campaigns when the PCs entered the Dreamlands, I allowed myself to be much more whimsical and fanciful than I normally would and just made stuff up, like sky whales and a giant sundial in the desert.

I have much more interest in geography than history, so I am attracted to a map-first approach where you then go back and fill in the history of the places and landmarks you've just drawn. For my next fantasy campaign, I'd like to use [Fantasy Map Maker](#) or something like it as a collaborative exercise with the players.

I enjoy riffing on what the players bring to the table, though what they bring doesn't always inspire me. It can take me several days to find a thread I want to pull and weeks before I set up the hook.<sup>1</sup> This is not something I would improvise on the first session.

I prefer my fantasy worlds to be human centric (more like *Game of Thrones* than *World of Warcraft*), but if there are to be non-human sapient species, I'd be happy letting the players make their own. This is how my City of 1000 Names campaign ended up with Roos in the setting. The Dreamlands was part of their background. Having the player of the cleric add their god (Hathor) to the setting has worked well for my current campaign. I can unabashedly pull in other Egyptian gods and cults into this decidedly non-Egyptian setting.

<sup>1</sup> And then hope the players don't forget about them. No, I'm not crying. You're crying. Shut up!

## The Adventurers Guild

We lost another player, this time Eridan's, who had to bow out because of health issues. This puts us back down to 4, which is fine so long as schedules can be maintained. The Saturday, March 28th session had to be moved up to Friday night, on the 27th because Chayote's player was going to be late due to a No Kings rally and Iggy's player had to leave early that same day.

### Our Party

- **Anan:** Copper Dragonborn Fighter (Battle Master)
- **Chayote:** Rock Gnome Cleric of Hathor (Life Domain)
- **Iggy:** Rock Gnome Bard (College of Glamour)
- **Millie:** Human Wizard (Abjurer)
- **Eridan:** Wood Elf Fighter (Eldritch Knight)
  - Left after the first session
- **Osmira** (NPC): Cloud Goliath Cleric of the Cult of Enlightenment (Light Domain with some spells swapped out for Divination spells)

Osmira was an NPC I introduced back when the PCs were only 2nd level. At the time, she was 5th level. She invited them to join her in exploring a lost Dikaryan temple where they recovered some tablets and writing samples (still yet undecipherable). The PCs played an important support role and got a glimpse of their future working for the Adventurers Guild. To become full members of the Guild, the PCs also needed "a recommendation from two guild members in good standing" (typically greater than 3rd level), so this was an opportunity for them to get a recommendation. This was also before Chayote's player joined and the party had no cleric (just a Druid, Entan, who didn't like healing).

The following writeup was mostly written the day before this issue's deadline. I have been in a bit of a writing slump and also working on my adventure for Kublacon in May, so my motivation has been a big flagging. Plus, this was mostly a series of encounters with a few scattered, notable character moments that I'm finding too difficult to explain.<sup>2</sup> Since I don't take notes, I'm summarizing a lot.

<sup>2</sup> "You had to be there," as it were.

## January 31, 2026

The party received invitations to a talk sponsored by The Arcane Estate. As they filed in and took their seats in the forum, Millie was escorted to a different section and was seated next to Osmira.

Helmut Gardeaux is dressed in his finest robes of blue and gold, a tall pointed hat of blue with silver stars, and the Eye of Enlightenment hanging from a silver chain around his neck. He steps forward and addresses the assembly.

*Nine weeks ago, a persistent rift was discovered within four leagues of Islingford-upon-Orlin. The Arcane Estate contracted the Adventurers Guild to remove the anchor and close it before a full incursion occurred. I highlight this event to emphasize that the threat of rifts is not a theoretical or far-off problem. It is both a local and world-wide existential threat. We know that the rifts began after the Great Cataclysm and indeed we are all descendents of those who came from other worlds through those rifts. We know that the rifts and the Great Cataclysm are connected and that the lost Dikaryan civilization is responsible.*

*Recent breakthroughs in the decryption and transcription of Dikaryan writings has exponentially expanded our understanding of the Dikaryan civilization. With the gates of knowledge now open, it is our duty to walk through them and discover the great unknown country that lies beyond. The Arcane Estate of Islingford-upon-Orlin has partnered with the Adventurers Guild and the Eye of Enlightenment, along with support from the Academy of Magic in Ornath, the Eldritch Council of The City of First Light, and Her Majesty Eiryn of Lombria, to mount an unprecedented exploratory expedition. The goals of this expedition are two-fold. Firstly, it will study the remains of the Dikaryan Empire with an explicit goal to understand what befell them and brought about the Great Cataclysm. We have identified a number of sites as targets for deep exploration and expect to find more as we learn more. Secondly, it will confront and close rifts that are resistant to traditional methods. Through these dual efforts, our hope is that we can eventually learn how to tame and control the rifts.*

*The Arcane Estate and myself personally would like to thank Lord Millsford for providing generous access to his expansive personal collection, Osmira of the Eye of Enlightenment and Millie Weaver of the Adventurers Guild for their dedication and sacrifice in the decryption effort, and to Professor Farthington for volunteering his time and resources to coordinate this expedition. The final*

*arrangements are being made. The expedition will begin at the end of summer.*

The floor was then opened for questions.

The PCs left a few days later. The six-wagon caravan was fitted onto two river barges and floated down the River Orlin toward Round Ridge, several days away. The PCs were on one barge and the Crimson Crows were on the other.

The trip was mostly uneventful. They stopped at a town but the PCs didn't express any interest in exploring. Notably, Chayote made no effort to ask about her niece. Finding the niece who left home in search of adventure was the reason why Chayote left town and took up adventuring herself. She had made a few passing references to her niece during the campaign, so I knew she hadn't forgotten about this background detail.

Later on their journey downriver, they were attacked by wyvern-riding bandits, three on each barge. On paper, this was an over-powered encounter for the PCs, but I set myself some ground rules.

1. The bandits would attack from a safe distance using their heavy crossbows for as long as they could.
2. The bandits would flee if two bandits or one wyvern were killed.
3. The wyverns were barely tamed and would revert back to their natural instincts if they became riderless.

The encounter proved quite frustrating for the PCs who were limited in their ranged attacks. Millie's spells and Eridan's arrows didn't pack enough of a punch against these tough opponents. The 100' range of the bandit's heavy crossbows was inconvenient for the casters whose spells only reached 60'.

Out of this frustration (and perhaps a bit of boredom of his player), Anan sprouted his spectral dragonborn wings and flew out to meet them head on. And then suffered multiple attacks, including deadly wyvern stings, that sent him falling into the river below.

The tide was turned when Iggy cast a crown of madness upon one of the riders who then attacked his mount. The wyvern was none too pleased by this and craned its neck to bite the rider (see #3, above). This chaotic turn of events killed the rider and the injured wyvern flew off.

Seeing it was time to go, the bandits retreated following a path that was clearly not going to point directly at their base of operations.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than play out how the attack went for the other barge, I simply rolled a d6 and determined that the Crimson Crows fared slightly better, downing two of their three wyverns and bandits.

## February 28, 2026

Chayote's player missed this session. I explained it by saying Chayote was taking a few days to explore Round Ridge and ask about her niece, Pumpkin. If the player won't do it, I'll do it for them. : )

A great bend in the River Orlin cuts through a deep canyon. The city of Round Ridge consists of two sections: the aboveground portion at the stop of the canyon, far above the river, and the underground section—aka the dwarven city—that stretches vertically from the river to the top of the canyon. After disembarking at the docks attached to the underground city, the PCs headed to the local Adventurers Guild hall while the logistics team of the caravan had the wagons transported to the upper portion of the city.

The PCs quickly decided that they wanted to take revenge on the wyvern riders and remove them as a threat to travelers on the river. Which was more important depended on which PC you asked. : ) They asked around and got vague directions to the "hills to the south" where the bandits were thought to be based. Lacking any definitive information, the party set out (with Osmira subbing in for Chayote) on the road south.

Toward evening, they came across an abandoned and nearly dilapidated roadside inn and settled in for the night in the main room. The disrepair was too old to be the result of the bandits; even so, they set up watches. Anan heard sounds not unlike footfalls coming from the floor above them. We woke everyone and a cautious room-by-room search commenced only for them to discover that it was only mice.<sup>4</sup>

The next day (or maybe two), the road led them to a proper village. The locals were very wary, retreating and hiding in their homes rather than greeting the PCs.

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<sup>3</sup> Because that would be dumb, even if it would have been narratively convenient.

<sup>4</sup> So yeah, it was a waste of game time; I'm not entirely sure why I put this encounter here, but I figure throwing in a false alarm every now and again is not a bad idea.

Soon, they found out why as they spied two wyverns roosted on top of the tavern/inn. They entered the establishment and saw two bandits enjoying a meal and being served by the two very nervous proprietors.

In the ensuing encounter, the party did not allow the bandits from getting their wyverns. They also split the bandits, with one being forced to flee out the back door of the tavern (thanks to a wall of fire Osmira placed over the front door). After Iggy instilled fear in one of the wyverns, it flew off and never bothered to return when the effect wore off. Unfortunately, they were unable to interrogate either bandit before they perished; fortunately, the grateful proprietors had a better sense of where the bandit base was located.

At the top of a hill to the southwest of town, there was an ancient temple that the bandits had taken over. The steep, winding path up to the temple forced the PCs to run a gauntlet where they had to endure ranged attacks from the wyvern riders. The party became strung out along the path with Anan charging into the lead, Iggy in the middle, and Osmira sticking with Millie in the rear.

Osmira's insistence on staying with and healing the wizard gave Iggy the notion that Osmira had a thing for Millie. I can't say this is untrue, but Osmira is much too socially awkward to make any overt romantic gestures.

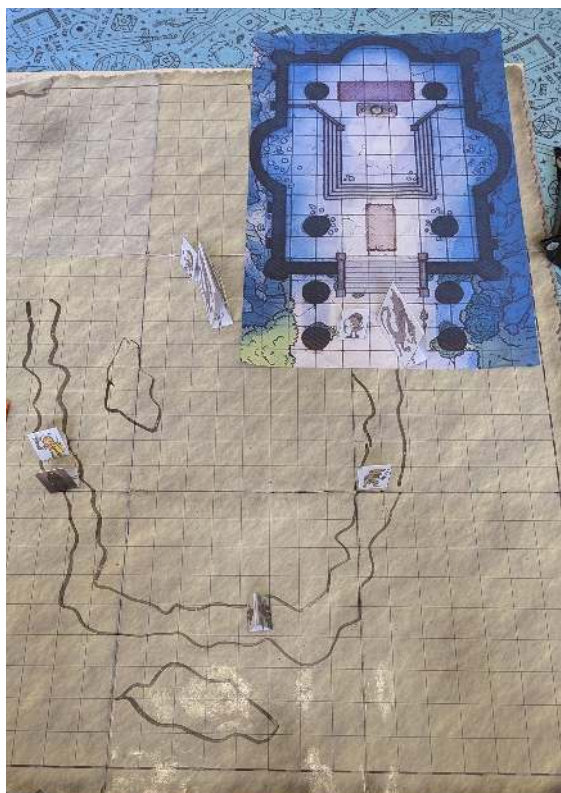
The party made slow, but inevitable progress toward the top of the hill. Just as Anan was getting close, two figures backlit with purple and green light<sup>5</sup> stepped out of the temple.

Due to time constraints, we had to pause the game mid-action. This is the picture I took of the battlefield that I used as a reference for the next section. The color print was of a "mountain top temple" image from Neutral Party I found on the interwebs. Rather than print out the whole image, I only printed out the temple itself<sup>6</sup> and just drew the path on my standard dryerase battlemap. I like using this mixed approach for dungeons as it gives me the details of rooms without having to print out every uninteresting corridor.

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<sup>5</sup> The universal colors of eldritch magics.

<sup>6</sup> My new Epson ET-15000 printer does edge-to-edge printing on 11x17 inch paper.



## March 14, 2026

Picking up where we left off, an imposing human stepped out from the shadow and bombarded Anan with the output of a repeating heavy crossbow. As Osmira and Millie closed the gap to Iggy and Anan, Iggy retreated back to be close to the cleric. His timing couldn't have been worse as the stubborn Anan soon fell to his wounds and the bandit leader was not the type of mercy and killed Anan on the trail.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile back in Round Ridge, in the not-so-great side of town, Chayote (whose player made this session) met someone with information about Pumpkin. He met her in the back alley and introduced himself as Talik the Knife. It seems she had stolen something called the Eye of Ingira from him and he wanted it back. He tried to intimidate Chayote with the backing of force and his pet displacer beast, but the cleric was able to summon a guardian of faith (a spell she had just gained) to ward off the attack. She later learned that Talik the Knife was a higher-up in the Thieves Guild of Round Ridge. Chayote was unhappy to learn that her niece had gotten herself mixed up with such people but perhaps happy that she had pissed them off? When she eventually found her niece, some explanations would be in order.

<sup>7</sup> At Anan's players' insistence.

Iggy worked up the courage and moved up to Anan and revived Anan using a spell that Chayote had cast into the ring of spell storing they wielded. By then, the leader retreated back into the temple. Not only had they taken considerable damage, but the last of their band was dead.

The PCs pursued, but found the temple empty. The bandit leader and whomever the second figure was, apparently had left through a portal that closed behind them. Millie correctly surmised that these people had the ability to create portals and that they would be seeing them again in the future.

Following the battle, Osmira chewed out Anan and Iggy for their performance—Anan for charging ahead, distancing himself both from the healer and the party he claimed to be protecting and Iggy for retreating and not backing up his fellow party members. Millie asked, somewhat enthusiastically, for similar criticism, but Osmira didn't have anything to say and fell back to, "I'll talk to you later."

Someone asked me if this was fully in-character or also me as a GM; I assured the group that this was in-character. What they didn't hear was Osmira's own internal criticism of herself as I not only forgot a key ability that could have protected her and Millie better, but also my choice of spells to cast during the battle. Osmira is built as a full PC, so it was just too much for me to handle on top of normal GM duties. It proved that I really should not play PCs for absent players.

The party returned to Round Ridge and reunited with Chayote. Unsure of what to do next, they were offered a quest from the Adventurers Guild to investigate a sealed portion of the underground city. Iggy became enthusiastic at this idea when told that if not them, the Crimson Crows would be happy to take on the quest if they weren't.

The party was led down into the depths of the city through some locked doors into a room with what seemed to be a cylindrical well sealed with a rune-enscribed capstone. The rest of this adventure was adapted from [The Caverns of Chameen](#), a free adventure I downloaded from the Dungeon Masters Guild and invite you to check out to fill in the gaps of my summary. The highlighted descriptive text below is taken from that document. **SPOILERS follow.**

The PCs descended on a rope for eighty feet to a small water-filled chamber with naturally carved walls and a

narrow passage to a much larger chamber. The air in this large cavern is oddly warm and damp, stalagmites cover the floor and imposing stalactites hang from above. A strip of dry ground bifurcated this chamber longitudinally. At the east end (to the party's right as they swam into the chamber), there was a portcullis. Before they could make it there, however, they were beset by flying creatures that tried to engulf their heads while also creating darkness that overcame Millie's light spell. Suffering more from inconvenience and embarrassment, they were eventually able to dispatch the foul (fowl?) beasts and made it to the portcullis.

Beyond the portcullis, they entered a series of rooms. First was a prison converted from an old temple. The next was a storage area consisting of several mincarts filled with yellow crystals in the eastern half, the western half has two fallen over suits of armor and an exit going further west flanked by two statues of warriors as well as some benches. Millie took some of the crystals. Once Anan convinced himself that the statues were not going to animate, they walked past them to an armory that had nothing they needed.

Moving past the storage area was another cavern. To the south of this cavern there's a crack in the cavern wall that shows slow moving lava, in the middle seems to have been a stairway that have long since collapsed. To the west there's a small pond. Large Mushrooms seems to be thriving in this damp warm area. The party was attacked by an oozing lava monster defending its territory, but successful in defending themselves.



Chayote explored the pond enough to find an underwater passage and establish it as a possible exit, but the group decided to backtrack to an earlier intersection. That led them to another natural cavern where they were ambushed by more of the flying darkness creatures, plus a different, larger creature that flew down from the ceiling. I had to end this session on a cliffhanger as well. Here's where we left the action.

## March 27, 2026

Fighting off these monsters was tricky because the party was scattered. I started the ambush by establishing where the PCs were positioned and dropping the paper monster figures onto the map. Millie got isolated from the group and spent most of the encounter blinded. Iggy and Chayote floundered. Anan's blindfighting ability helped him address each of the monsters in turn. Like the previous encounters, there was no treasure, but here there was at least an everglowing torch they took with them.

Returning to the pool Chayote had explored, they navigated the submerged passage. As they reached the surface on the far end, they discovered a couple of dead bodies in the water. They were able to identify them as humanoid, but Chayote could not discern any wounds on the bodies or a clear cause of death. The party took the time to speak with the dead and established the name of this place, that the bodies had been adventurers on a quest, and that they died from "The eyes! The terrible, terrible eyes!"

The group explored onward and discovered what that meant. Anan came eye-to-eye with an undead humanoid whose gaze instantly sent him on death's threshold. The party was able to pull him back and heal him back to consciousness, but then decided that more thoughtful and careful tactics were required. By keeping Anan's eyes blindfolded, he was able to avoid the deadly gaze without impacting his ability to swing a polearm. Iggy's uplifting performances also prevented them from the worst of the undead's stare.

This experience allowed them to more easily dispatch the next one<sup>8</sup> they encountered slightly further along. They then came across the corpses of the rest of the adventuring party in whose footsteps they were following. Our party salvaged some useful gear and recovered the guild badges of the fallen (those of the two in the water had sunk to the bottom).

The party moved on through the next few chambers and discovered, growing from the walls, red crystals that seemed to resonate with a strange energy. Unable to discern their properties, they broke off a few and stowed them away. They then entered another series of constructed rooms. They were debating which direction to go when they saw a djinn in a summoning circle. It offered the group a wish if they would set it free.

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<sup>8</sup> A bodak is a bit of a "glass cannon."

## April 11, 2026

This was the day after Iggy's player's birthday, so we had a bit of a celebration, too much food, and a lot of distractions. This side-quest was only supposed to be filler, but it took up 2½ sessions.

Though they had two real-world weeks to come up with a wish, the players hadn't. They were very apprehensive, especially Millie. During the conversation with the djinn, she made a few fourth-wall-breaking comments that I wish I could remember. Eventually, they did decide to set her free.



She thanked them, regretfully told them that she had no power to grant wishes, and disappeared back to her home plane.

At some point, the party took a long rest, though I don't remember if it was before or after the next encounter. They had wanted to retreat out of the dungeon and get a proper meal at a tavern and sleep at an inn, but I reminded them what a pain it would be to renavigate all the watery passages and climb back up the rope. They agreed that they should just stay down here until the job was done.

A bit more exploring (and skipping ahead), they came to a workshop that was **completely ruined with collapsed walls and parts of the floor ruined** [with pools of lava], **at the base of what must've been an anvil a few shiny objects can be seen**. They started to investigate the room and three lava oozes emerged. Anan made sure everyone backed out of the room to create a bottleneck. While defensively sound, Anan made himself the cork of the bottle and took the brunt of the ooze's aggressive behavior. Also, maneuverability was limited behind him and the other three had difficulty shuffling into an optimal position where they weren't blocking each other. It took a while and was hard fought, but eventually they prevailed.

Some more exploration and they finally made it to the big boss battle of the dungeon—a construct of flesh and yellow crystals given false life through alchemy. Yes, it was entombed in a coffin sealed with a locked chain. Yes, the party opened it. Yes, it attacked them.

It rose out of the coffin wielding an ornate mace that it used once before Anan disarmed it and flung it away. What followed was a pitched battle in which the players seemed to have learned lessons from previous encounters. Chayote controlled the area with her guardian of faith. She and Millie realized they needed to use chill touch since the creature was regenerating (though Millie's player messed up the timing rules of readying an action and used her reaction for something else). They moved in and out while Anan held the line. Iggy was ineffectual because constructs are not good opponents for beguiling bards (and they wouldn't take the hint that it kept making its saving throws and should perhaps try something different).

They walked away with a fair amount of treasure it had been entombed with. The mace it wielded was actually a rod of rulership, but it was too mindless to actually use for anything other than a club.

The caverns eventually looped around through another underwater passage and they returned victorious. Since it was a loop, they could have done the boss battle first; this would have been typical of my gaming experience, but the obvious path is to follow the loop in the direction this party went.

## Comments on E&A Issue #9

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### Roger BW

RYCT Dylan, while I agree that more game designers should understand the probabilities of their systems, they also need to understand how the system feels.

RYCT me, I have not read *Murder By Memory*.

RYCT Clark, sometimes players get fixated on inconvenient things and should be moved off of it. Turtling behavior is one example as are red herrings that get out of hand and are more frustrating than fun.

What does it say about me that I wanted to fiddle with the layout and arrangement of nodes of your relationship graph?

RYCT Patrick, the motivation for PCs in a horror game differs depending on the intended length of the campaign. For one-shots and self-contained adventures, you can have ordinary folks thrust into extraordinary, horrific circumstances and whose motivation ends at the end of the adventure. A sustained campaign requires PCs motivated to keep

going and “sit safe at home,” as you say, when given the chance.

RYCT Josh, in my current campaign, I have been mindful of having the NPCs run away when they find themselves losing (and usually a round or two too late). It gives the PCs an option to let them escape or to finish them off. I don't have the NPCs surrender because in my past experience, it's a can of worms I don't want to open. Neither have the PCs offered surrender as an option, but I think that is more based on the expectations of *D&D* than anything about their character.

### **Dylan Capel**

RYCT me, rather than saying that disbelief is part of the alienation of the protagonist, I'd say it's the overturning of beliefs—of the world, of society, of yourself. If you don't believe in aliens and see something that strongly points to aliens, that's a shock to the psyche. If you believe that faeries are kindly, if temperamental, caretakers of nature, but find out that they are inscrutable aliens, that's a different shock. If you find yourself turning into an alien because of an unknown or forgotten ancestry, that's yet a different shock. But if you already believed in aliens and came across strong evidence of aliens, there is no shock and no horror. Not only should *Delta Green* still have these shocks (and not just gloss them over in favor of firepower), but also the shock of *Delta Green*, the organization, not being what the PCs believe it is.

### **Michael Cule**

For PC character signs, I just use cardstock cut to the right size and folded in an A-frame. [Ironically, I purposely did not use these for my *Derailment* game because I wanted a “strangers on a train” feel where the PCs had the option not to know who each other were or not even reveal their real names.] For tracking initiative on the GM screen, see my picture in *E&A #3*. For NPCs, I don't use signs except for initiative and I just have generic “Monster IV” or “NPC D” signs. I have a couple of recurring NPCs who have their own initiative signs and paper figures.

I dip the fish (and possibly chips) in ketchup rather than slather. My wife slathers a combination of ketchup and tartar sauce. :: shudder ::

RYCT Avram, when I created my *Wildcard Roleplaying System*, I remembered my bad experience playing *Castle Falkenstein* and staring at a hand of terrible cards, so I

made *WRS* work similar to a dice pool. When you do a thing, draw a number of cards and count successes.

RYCT Patrick, the translator stones were not only gifts from the Gods to the City, but also a gift you gave to yourself! In my *City of 1000 Names* campaign, I made polylingualism common (everyone of average Smarts could understand at least 2 languages) so that the PCs could mostly communicate with most everyone. When they couldn't, it added a little flavor to the encounter.

### **Avram Grumer**

If I were to play *Last Word, First Word*, I'd be afraid of tuning out what the other person was saying and focusing only on their last word. Since my follow-up wouldn't need to make sense, I wouldn't really have to listen to what they were saying.

I interpreted “if you have the stress available” to mean “if you have unmarked stress boxes.” This could also be stated as “if you have empty stress boxes.” “Stress available” is just awkward phrasing for a trait (stress) that people don't think of as a resource pool (like cash). Stress is a trait you accumulate and then reduce or relieve, not something you spend. Even if the statement is unclear, the rules should provide examples that would clarify how it works in play.

### **Joshua Kronengold**

RYCT Dylan, Lair Actions are not a thing in *D&D 5e (2024)* as far as I can tell. In the 2014 rules, legendary monsters “On initiative count 20 [not 0] (losing all initiative ties), it can use one of its lair action options.”

RYCT me, I had the same question in the moment when Skyla bit the werewolf.

Millie was healed on the spot by a paladin of Set rather than at the temple. Afterwards, Millie felt obliged to make an offering to the Temple of Set as thanks for the healing. Also, I guess whatever the feud was *really* about was not something the councilmember wanted to risk going public with by having Argenta brought to justice using formal, legal means. We'll never know.

### **Lisa Padol**

RYCT Elf, ~10 minutes before the start of my *Derailment* game, I had a player ask to crash. I said sure, but noted there was only 1 slot left. They wandered off (perhaps to find a seat at a different game) and a few minutes later, another crasher came in and they sat down. At game time, the first crasher came back, but they had

lost their seat. ~10 minutes after the game started, the player assigned to the spot finally showed up, but relinquished their spot to the crasher. Oddly, they had poked their head into the room earlier, but was on the phone and did not identify themselves.<sup>9</sup>

I will sometimes have extra PCs available for crashers, but it has become rarer and I didn't for this game. I have seen games go south when the GM lets in too many extra players and/or their friends (who didn't sign up because they knew they could get in and then hog the GM's attention). In general, I would prefer if extras were politely turned away rather than accommodated.

RYCT yourself, a point made in "Out of Gas"<sup>10</sup> was that the broken catalyzer couldn't be fixed, only replaced. In fact, it was a trivial part unless you didn't have one. Alan Tudyk has a touching story of how he salvaged the recall button (not) used in that episode from the decommissioned Serenity set and gave it to Joss Whedon with instructions to activate it when he needed the crew of Serenity to return.

RYCT me, Skyla doesn't like werewolves because *D&D* werewolves are chaotic evil monstrosities. Plus, these particular ones were from a different world and she could sense it with her "played by the GM" abilities.

No, my story of Jun wasn't based on anything. I just get little snippets of scenes and concepts stuck in my head. Most are under a thousand words.

RYCT Avram, Euler's Identity ( $e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0$ ) is a neat little mathematical fact that involves both  $e$  and  $\pi$  (both transcendental numbers), 1 and 0 (the multiplicative and additive identities, respectively), and  $i$  (the so-called imaginary number defined as  $i^2 = -1$ ). It sounds mystical to many, but the mundane interpretation of Euler's Identity is that the sine and cosine of  $180^\circ$  are 0 and  $-1$ , respectively.

Your comments on PC gender reminded me of the anime-themed game (using *OVA*) I ran at DunDraCon that had all female PCs (including a female-coded android who didn't know she was an android). I worried I'd get objections, but not only did no one complain, but I was complimented for not using sexualized images for the character portraits. In a different game, I had a

<sup>9</sup> I'm deliberately using *they* and *their* as indeterminate singular pronouns, but sticking with singular verbs and the grammar check does not like it.

<sup>10</sup> Arguably the best episode of *Firefly*.

player ask if they could change their character (a longshoreman modelled after Eric Hoffer) to a "butch lesbian" because that's what the player was. I had no objections.

Regarding *Monsterhearts*, though "we don't get to choose what does and doesn't turn us on," but then, neither should anyone else! That has some really icky and potentially abusive implications.<sup>11</sup>

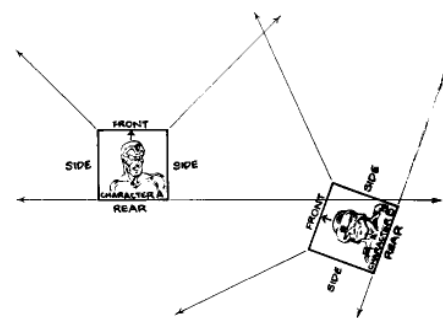
RYCT Jim, *Dream Park: The Roleplaying Game* had guidance that players of PCs who were killed should take over NPCs. The one time I ran it, a PC died in a combat with velociraptors. I asked the player to run the dinos and the player had the dinos run away. :: sigh ::

## Brian Rogers

RAE your V&V redesign. I'm amused when you draw a line for "over-fiddly design," considering all the fiddly bits you keep in. :)

RYCT me, "early adopter D&D engineering students" did not know how to separate player knowledge from character knowledge and greatly underestimated the time, expertise, and technological ecosystem required to create gunpowder and other tech not only possible, but useful. For example, even if you have the ingredients for gunpowder, do you have the metallurgy and craftsmanship to make guns?

RYCT me, *V&V* assumed tabletop positioning, but not necessarily locked town to a grid the way *D&D 3e* was. For clarity, we're talking about this diagram and the associated modifiers based on facing, yes?



RYCT Roger, while 'holy crap we could do this' moments are great at the table, the fact that one can go online and find endless discussions of how to exploit the rules in these ways really tarnishes the shine of discovery for me.

RY(other)CT me, and Roger can talk about his WWII GURPS campaign that lasted longer than the war did in

<sup>11</sup> Longer rant expurgated.

our timeline. My point was not that you can't have long non-*D&D* campaigns, but that they are uncommon. Like fans of *V&V*. ;)

RYCT Patrick on deadlines, I fondly remember a time when the CEO of the company came to me with a task to develop a specific product accessory. I thought it was pointless and didn't do it with the expectation that he would not follow up. He did not.

## Matt Stevens

Thanks for the info on Clerics. Cleric and Magic-users could be rolled into a single "Mystic" class and combine their spell lists so that healing spells (and other spells that Clerics get but Magic-users don't) are not eliminated along with the Cleric class.

RYCT Michael, in addition, SCOTUS made POTUS immune to crimes committed while in office (so long as it could be tied to an official duty) and thus made accepting bribes legal (since it would be taking a bribe for an action within POTUS official duties).

RYCT Josh, there is a paradox in game design and rules writing. The more rules-light a game is, the more words you may need to explain how to use it. Also, the further you stray from well-known systems and methods of running a game, the more space you need to explain it.

## Comments on E&A Issue #10

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### Roger BW

I too have the same lich soft spot. "What do you mean I've died? Can't be. I'm not done with my grand opus on air-earth energy homeostasis!"

One necromancer to another, "Ah, but are your zombies Turning complete?"

RYCT me, St. Faustina ran exactly 5½ hours at DunDraCon.

### Dylan Capel

A difference between silk bolts and healing potions is that the latter requires no special training or tools to make use of. In general, you want your monetary tokens to have no utility or value of their own (like copper), but if no one has the skills to utilize the token, it's fine.

The water supply and control of water is also a major factor in the rise and fall of settlements and civilizations. Severe droughts can have people

abandoning urbanized areas leaving mysterious ruins behind.

You say you "ran out of time and space," last issue to write about City Building. Time I get, but space? My zine length has grown from my *A&E* days because I'm spending more time and space on writeups which is somewhat ironic (or hypocritical) since writeups are the main thing I skip if I skip anything each month.

## Elf

You make good arguments on why *Brindlewood Bay* is attractive to you compared to typical mystery scenarios. Keep us posted on the game. As a GM, I find coming up with breadcrumbs is hard and so look for published mystery adventures to save time and energy.

For an TTRPG to "cover" a particular genre, there are two basic questions: what do the players (including the GM, if there is one) need to bring to the table and what do the game systems need to bring? This is why comedy-themed games<sup>12</sup> are hard. How does the game system help players be funny if they can't be funny on their own?

In your eyes, how do superhero RPGs "have problems"? I own far too many superhero RPGs and have interest in at least two more: *Outgunned Superheroes* and *Invincible – Superhero Roleplaying*.

My advice for someone looking to design a game for a particular genre is to understand the story structure and tropes that you are trying to capture and how you'd imagine that would play out at the gaming table. Do as much as you can without game mechanics. The game system should act as support, but not a crutch.

In theory, it can all be left to the players (and GM). Make the characters, create plot threads, and set the framing, then wind it up and let it run. As a player, I'm generally all for this approach. I can come up with characters. I'm not that great on plot. I need a gaming partner (GM) who can generate things for me to react to and build upon.<sup>13</sup> I get annoyed when game systems impose themselves into this process.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> As opposed to spontaneous comedy that happens in a game not focused on being funny. Few things are as humorless as forced humor.

<sup>13</sup> Which is not to say that I am either passive or not interested in collaboration.

<sup>14</sup> *Dogs in the Vineyard* and I did not get along.

RYCT Matt, in the same way you don't like mysteries based on following breadcrumbs and relying on player skill, I don't like systems that lean on the player skill of convincing the GM. See my comment below to Brian about loosey-goosey abilities.

### Avran Grumer

RYCT me, if you need to roll a 15 or higher, then Taking 10 is an automatic failure. The chance of success on 1d20 is 30%. 3d6 is worse at 9.25%. Thus, you have a higher chance of success being less cautious (rolling 1d20). Which comes first in the decision making process of the player: the choice to be reckless (1d20) or the choice of using 1d20 to give them the best chance of success? For me, I think it would be the latter. The words Calm, On Edge, and Reckless are just flavor text. Referring to the "swinginess" of the die roll itself (1d20 having a larger standard deviation than 3d6) doesn't really matter. It's really a question of what target numbers I will need to roll from now until the next time I take a long rest.

### Joshua Kronengold

RYCT Lisa about BESM, an idea popped into my mind of a system that tied "primary" skill levels or cost to advancement of "secondary" skills. For example, in order to become better at swordsmanship, you must first become better at calligraphy. Something like a skill pyramid could also work.

RYCT Matt, I'm turned off by preaching/proselytization of even gaming systems and approaches, even when I do it! Discussion and analysis, yes; telling people their like or dislike of a particular game or approach is wrong (or "You just don't understand; let me explain it to you again"), no. I try to couch my comments as statements of my own preferences and proclivities and not as condemnations of other's, but I probably don't succeed.

RYCT me, if the map of the *7th Sea* world matched our Earth, but had an alternate history, I would not have had the negative reaction I did. The map resides in a dark corner of the uncanny valley of cartography.

You know how an APA has been compared to a cocktail party? Some people talk too much (and/or too loudly). One can't complain both that issues are too long and the zine page limits are too short. OK, one *can* complain, but do they know what they're *really* complaining about? For me, it goes back to what about in QPLN#1 under the heading of **200 Words**.

RYCT Roger, "But flyspell, while pretty great overall, if there are MANY possibilities *fro* a misspelled/unknown word (for instance, if it's very short)..." I see what you did there.

RYCT Michael, having only the PCs roll dice can rob agency from NPCs. Depending on the system, NPCs are restricted by what they can do because everything is defined in opposition to the PCs rolling the dice and dictating the moves.

### Lisa Padol

RYCT Brian, *Firefly's* "The Train Job," has the advantage that it was written over a weekend as a replacement first episode, so it gets the "first episode" job done efficiently within a single hour even though it lacks the character depth of the intended 2-hour first episode.

RYCT me, the token, once assembled is literally a classic brass subway token. Trying to use a broken token won't work as it would either jam the mechanism or just pass through to the token return. The PCs could only ever acquire 2 whole tokens (collecting pieces or fishing) in the Labyrinth. Neither the vendor nor psychopomp will accept the token. Like the guards, they work for the station and have no need for it.

I was worried about players who wouldn't take the hint that the PCs were deeply flawed and would try to weasel their way into a "softer" interpretation of the question. I decided that I either needed to let it go or essentially bake the answer into their character description. I chose the former. A couple of the players at DunDraCon went for a "soft" answer. My favorite part of the RPG *Dread* is the character questionnaire.

RYCT Mark, another advantage to having that 5th box that theoretically goes unused is it acts as a placeholder for that time between getting the 5th point deciding which advance you want.

RYCT Attronarch, my home campaign has a 5-hour time slot with no official breaks. The challenge is to keep everyone focused on the game. My 6-hour convention game slots only have a break if the players ask for one.

RYCT Josh, even if you want to roll for when your suave character does diplomacy, would you want to roll for every personal interaction your character has? A lot of important roleplaying takes place between our ears, but at some point, the character's voice has to come out between our lips.

## Brian Rogers

*Are you an extraterrestrial?* Maybe? How would I know? So many extraterrestrials in comics look like humans; how can anyone be sure?

RYCT me, I read that Dustin Hoffman was particularly obnoxious staying in character at all times during the making of *Hook*. I would find such behavior equally obnoxious at the gaming table. Of course everyone has to switch modes between in-character dialog, out-of-character narration, consideration for the story/plot and group, game system engagement, out-of-game discussions, and so on. What I don't want to do is talk about "What this action means to my character?" or "How do we frame this scene in a way that exposes my character's secret ambitions?" I just want that to come out during play—roleplay to find out, as it were. I want the atmosphere of the gaming table to feel like an improv session, not a writers room. I want the character and story analysis to come *after* playing, not *during* play.

I much prefer clearly defined skill lists than nebulous, justified-on-the-fly background bonuses. Open-ended abilities can go wrong when incredulous players try to justify anything and everything in their background just to get a bonus<sup>15</sup> or when players pick a background that doesn't seem to lend itself to many practical uses during adventures (unless the GM works really hard).

I don't like loosey-goosey abilities except in loosey-goosey genres, like superheroes where players can come up with creative ways to use their powers. Even so, there should be guard rails of what is and isn't allowed, especially with nebulous powers like Probability Control.

## Matt Stevens

RYCT me about abilities, fair enough, but when your version of an ability does something significantly different than other games that also use those terms, then it can cause more confusion than changing the names would.

## Jim Vassilakos

Humans are really good at projection and attributing human-like qualities onto non-humans. Beware of the ELIZA effect (as noted by Roger last issue). To counter this tendency, some people take this too far in the other

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<sup>15</sup> Making it mechanics-driven as opposed to character-driven.

direction and refuse to acknowledge human-like qualities (problem solving, emotions, morality, etc.) in other animals (often because they want humans to be *special*). Could we be there with AI today? I don't think so, but when they do, I don't want to be "on the wrong side of history" by denying their sapience and "human rights." I've watched enough anime to know how that ends. :)

I have no doubts that humans misuse the tools they create and AI is no exception. The economic and ecological implications are huge. If AIs can do the work of an intern, companies will stop hiring entry-level positions and then no one will gain experience to become a mid- or high-level worker. To paraphrase Rory Sutherland, you can have AI create advertising for you, but the work you do and the things you learn to create that advertising may be more important than actually running the ad that came from that process. This can be expanded to any type of planning or project.<sup>16</sup>

There are definitely good, ethical uses of AI. Using AI to call balls and strikes in baseball? I'm all for it. AI air traffic controllers? There will be bumps along the way, but I can't see how it wouldn't be better than the flawed human-dependent system we have now. AI resolving the Riemann Hypothesis? Now we're cooking with gas!

RYCT Avram, also check out Rory's concept of reverse benchmarking where you find what your competitor is lacking and focus on that.

I think game design should be more like making music (or any art). You shouldn't necessarily follow the trends but instead do what speaks to you. If you market yourselves well, your audience will find you. It is fine to be inspired by others and to be influenced by current trends, but good games, music, and art transcend trends. This is not to say that commercial art can't have value outside of commerce, but I'm a romantic at heart.

## Patrick Zoch

RYCT Roger about buy-in, I ran a short superhero campaign in which the PCs were high-school students at an academy for mutant youths. One player got indignant that the school either endangered the children or allowed them to endanger themselves.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ffzb2Xoj69Q>



Issue 248

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# Age of Menace

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## From Our Last Episode

Spring has arrived here in Ontario in its usual capricious fashion. Good Friday reached 20°C, only for the Easter weekend to swing back to rain mixed with frozen pellets, and now approaching deadline it's dropped down to 0°C. Even so, the season is slowly revealing itself. Trees are budding, the usual assortment of hopeful feathered opportunists visit our daughter Lauren's rapidly emptying bird feeder.

My car is back on the road, though one persistent electrical gremlin remains. The Emergency Call/SOS TCP module continues to fail, which in turn takes the in-dash microphone down, which means I have lost handsfree Bluetooth calling. In adjacent gaming activity, now with my car road worthy, I made it out to *Hot Lead* in Stratford, a wargaming convention I have been attending for roughly a decade. This year marked its 30th anniversary. I only had a few hours, so I did not sign up for any games, but I still managed to come away with a few worthwhile finds from the vendors & the Bring 'N Buy.

I am still in Peter Hildreth's monthly online game via Zoom. He continues to threaten participation in E&A, which I continue to encourage (grin). I'm also heading to Montreal this Thursday for next weekend for a Geriatric Medicine conference with plans to play hooky and visit the venerable *Le Valet d'Coeur* game store.

On a more sombre note, I had to say farewell to my new administrative assistant after 2.5 years. She had to step down to help care for her grandson, since her daughter has been entirely unable to find affordable daycare. We had a nice good-bye cake at work, and later we took over a corner of Chinese buffet for a more relaxed dinner with her family attending along with many work friends she made. I miss her already.

## Habana Horror Horrors of the Mazorra (part 9)

A 1933 Pulp Cthulhu scenario (cont.)



**Re-cap [AoM #247, E&A #10]:** At 17:00 on Saturday, August 12th, 1933, uncertainty ends. The Mazorra's PA broadcasts official radio confirmation that President Machado has resigned and fled Cuba. His cabinet has fallen with him. The dictatorship is over. The news immediately destabilizes every faction inside the asylum. Then a second, far more dangerous rumour spreads: Machado did not flee at all. Only his body double did, while the real former President has taken refuge within the Mazorra itself!

### Mazorra After the Announcement

Everything now peaks.

Capt. Gandia tries to salvage what remains after the Director's Manse shoot-out. Guards desert or fail to report. Porra loyalists panic and begin planning their escape.

FACES OF THE MAZORRA



Lt. Esteban Cordero  
Presidential Escort



Juana de la Cruz  
The China Doll



Jorge Dolz  
Porra Guard / Cultist



Reynaldo Fontanilla  
*El Rey*



Señorita Dolores Garcia  
*The Beautiful Assassin*



RN Yolanda Heres  
*Zorrilla's lover*



Salvatore Mendez  
*Machado body double*



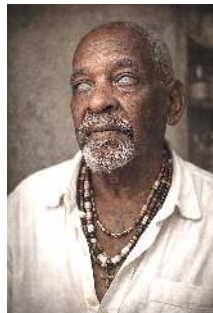
Señor Héctor Menéndez  
*Santa Maria*



Dr. Gaspar Olivares  
*El General*



Sra. Teresa Pacheco  
Switchboard operator



Señor Othello  
Romero y Barbero



Baltasar Urratia  
*El martillo / The Hammer*



Tomás Wong  
*Tambor*



Jeremias Yobama  
*The Executioner*



Jeremias Yobama  
*Leopard Man Cult Regalia*



Claudio Zayas  
*The Mute*

Ricky Morales & Elda Real try to get vulnerable children out of harm's way before an angry anti-Machado mob from the airport moves toward Mazorra, while Gilda Ramagusa with Tambor's help does the same for vulnerable female patients. Lt. Col. Vives and Deputy Chief RN Yániz advance their abduction plot against the Special Children. Dr. Viela goes to ground and moves about Mazorra incognito.

*El Rey* & *El General* begin organizing their own rival structures of control. Yobama prepares a mass bloodbath and ritual 'harvest' under cover of the general confusion. Finally, *Twsha* cases become visible enough to frighten staff and patients.

The Investigators *cannot* address all of these. That is the point. This is not escalation but convergence. Each proceeds independently, and none waits for the others.

**SIDE-BAR: MAZORRA AFTER THE ANNOUNCEMENT:** The PA announcement does not produce one unified reaction across Mazorra. It shatters the institution's assumed chain of authority. Patients, guards, RNs, and MDs react according to fear, politics, delusion, & opportunity. Within minutes, the asylum no longer behaves as one institution, but as a patchwork of local crises.

**Immediate Effects:** Conversation stops, then erupts everywhere at once. Patients ask what was said. Staff repeat conflicting versions. Some cheer, some weep, some cross themselves. Guards look to one another rather than upward for orders. *La Oficina's* switchboard lights up. Where is Director Machado? Who is now in charge?

**Mazorra Patients:** Most react emotionally, not politically. Chronic or withdrawn inmates may ignore the news unless staff behaviour shifts around them. Anxious or suggestible patients are alarmed by raised voices, running feet, slammed doors, and visible weapons. Escape-minded patients test doors, windows, and routines. Others absorb the news into delusion: *Varona* becomes activated; *El Rey* & *El General* recognize a power vacuum.

**Mazorra Guards:** The guards split almost at once. Porra loyalists fear reprisals and become more dangerous, more secretive, or both. Some destroy papers, seize valuables, or plan escape. Others strip insignia and desert. A few wait to see whether Capt. Gandía still controls events. Only a minority continue acting as true institutional guards, trying to hold doors, protect patients and staff, and prevent outright panic.

**Orderlies & Nurses:** Their response is practical more than ideological. They worry about meals, locks, medicines, violent wards, and whether help will come if summoned. Competent senior nurses become local anchors, calming patients and keeping some wards functioning. Corrupt or brutal orderlies may vanish, lash out, or become targets for patients who no longer fear them.

**Doctors:** MDs divide by nerve and character. Some try to preserve routine and prevent deaths. Reformers, conspirators, and frightened idealists begin acting on plans previously held in check. From this point on, hidden agendas advance more openly: records are copied, patients moved, children concealed, allies warned, and enemies abandoned.

**Final Note:** It's not recommended that the aftermath be played as a single riot unless you want blunt chaos. It is more plausible, and more useful, to present the Mazorra as rapidly fragmenting into competing pockets of fear, opportunism, improvised care, patient-led authority, and collapsing discipline. That gives the Investigators meaningful choices about where to intervene first.

## TRIAGE: WHAT THE INVESTIGATORS MAY CHOOSE

By design, the Investigators can only substantially influence one or two of the following per evening phase:

- Rescue Hermes, Solita, & other children.
- Secure proof of corruption.
- Complete one or more personal missions
- Reduce mob violence & prevent a Cult massacre.
- Understand, contain, or delay the *Twsha* outbreak.
- Bring down Gandía, Yániz, Vives, & other villains
- Contain *Baron Kriminal* as he brings down Porra members overtly, along with anyone in the way.

### After 5:00 p.m.: Three Phases

- **Phase I: Recognition** (17:00-18:30) Patients recognize that ordinary rules are no longer being enforced. Rumour outruns any authority. NPC Mazorra Staff & others are triggered to begin planning fight or flight.
- **Phase II: Contest** (18:30-20:00) Power becomes locally contested. The Director's Manse, *La Oficina*, the gates, M1, & the Children's Pavilion all become points of control. Staff splinter or align with factions as they consolidate authority.
- **Phase III: Approaching Ruin** (20:00 onward) As the *Aeroporto* mob approaches or attacks, institutional order gives way. The Leopard Men cult strikes under cover of confusion. *Twsha* spreads quietly. Baron Kriminal moves more freely.

## PHASE I: RECOGNITION (17:00-18:30)

### A: The Director's Manse Gunfight

**Keeper's Note:** For the Investigators to be aware of this scene's sequence of events that begins ~5:00 pm, they need to be at the switchboard listening in on the open line, or immediately outside the Director's Manse, or even quietly inside, say hiding in *Esperanza's* office.

### Overheard at the Switchboard

An open telephone line to Director Machado's office allows the following to be heard

There are small sounds of human occupation. Papers shifting, a chair scraping, low voices too distant to resolve. Then comes a sudden heavy thump. A man's voice cuts through in sharp Spanish (Lt. Codera) issuing clipped orders. A door opens. Several sets of footsteps move quickly off. Muffled argument follows, then a short burst of unmistakable gunfire not in the room but nearby. Chairs suddenly scrape back. Loud voices of men shouting and then footsteps running off.

Perhaps 15 seconds later, Captain Gandía's unmistakable husky gravelled voice breaks in, tight with urgency: "¿Dónde están esos

disparos?”<sup>1</sup> Esperanza’s voice answers at once: “Arriba. En el dormitorio principal del Director.”<sup>2</sup> Gandía shouts “¡Andele!”<sup>3</sup> and rushes off with others behind him.

Then only the sound is the quick staccato tapping of high heel footsteps crossing out of the room. After that, the line remains open to hissing silence.

### Outside the Director’s Manse

Two cars from the returned Presidential Escort sit outside the Director’s Manse. Earlier, Federal police entered with suitcases and a blanket-shrouded figure.

Just after the 5:00 p.m. PA announcement, anyone near the Manse hears gunfire from the second floor. About a minute later, a short fusillade erupts in muzzle flashes, then fades into shouting. No roll is needed to know a crisis has begun. Captain Gandía and several guards rush in with drawn guns, followed by one of the Federal guards from the cars.

**Keeper’s Note:** A **Spot Hidden** or **Listen** roll may reveal this extra: a figure climbing over the terrace rail: Senorita Isabella Varona. Varona does not flee openly across the grounds. She first hides nearby, usually behind parked cars, in shrubbery, or in a service outbuilding. If not found quickly, she slips toward *La Oficina* or another staff area to steal practical clothing and later conceal herself in a vehicle. If cornered, she may try to start a car badly.

Those who do not pursue may instead notice, with **Spot Hidden** or **Listen**, one guard hanging back by the Escort cars. From an upper window of the Manse, two men can also be heard shouting overlapping orders in rapid Spanish.

**Immediate Aftermath** (if Investigators follow Gandia or are already inside the Director’s Manse & rush upstairs).



When the Investigators reach the second-floor doorway, the room is filled with gun smoke and smells of cordite. Several men lie where they fell, some dead, some badly

wounded. Esperanza is present, trying to do render first aid to one of the fallen. Federal Police & Mazorra guards remain standing with weapons lowered, but not surrendered, glaring at one another.

Three split suitcases lie open on the floor, their fittings collapsed into dull grey powder. From them bundles of U.S. banknotes have spilled out & across the room. Another split suitcase sits on a table of to one side, its fallen money bundles more carefully restacked.

To one side, middled aged man in a white linen suit is slumped on a sofa; his face is covered in odd red smudges. He looks an awful lot like President Machado...

No one offers a full account. The evidence is all present, but it does not agree with itself.

### Blood, Smoke, & Decisions:

Captain Gandía steps toward the Investigator(s), voice hard and immediate: “No one leaves this room without my authorization. There has been,” he pauses, searching for the right word, “...a misunderstanding between security elements. It is contained.”

Esperanza cuts across him, quiet but urgent. “Captain, some of these men will die without surgery. Collapsed lung, retained bullets, internal bleeding. Bandages are not enough.” She faces the Investigators, “Please, if you can help...”

Gandía does not look at her. “No ambulance.”

“In that case,” she says softly, “they must not go as guards.”

That lands. To send bloodied Mazzora & Federal Porra out in uniform risks gossip, recognition, & terminal reprisal beyond the Manse. Sent instead under blankets, stripped of insignia, or better, redressed in hospital patient clothing, the worst of the wounded might be moved discreetly either to M1 for temporary stabilization or, if absolutely necessary, to a hospital beyond the Mazorra.

From near the doorway Lt. Cordero speaks at last, controlled but taut: “My able men remain with me, Captain. But the others must have surgical care.”

Gandía turns to Esperanza. “Call M1 for an ambulance. Bypass switchboard; use the Director’s direct line. Two stretcher teams. No siren. Clean patient clothing too.”

Then to the Investigators: “You are professionals. Good. Then you will assist, not interfere.”

<sup>1</sup> “Where are those shots coming from?”

<sup>2</sup> Upstairs. In the Director’s main bedroom.”

<sup>3</sup> “Come on!”

**Keeper's Note: Priorities & Gandía's Response:** In the wake of the Manse bedroom shootout, each Investigator may do one thing: treat wounded, inspect the "President," inspect or search the dead, or inspect the spilled money. If they are quiet, respectful, and ask no questions, Gandía quickly assigns roles:

- a) **Medical** → "Attend the wounded. Quickly."
- b) **Anyone else** → "Observe, but stay out of the way."
- c) **To any questions** → "Details are irrelevant. What matters is order."
- d) **If challenged** → "This is a security matter. Do not forget you are guests here."

### What Happens Next (0-10 Minutes)

#### 0-2 min:

**a) Securing the Area:** Gandía orders his Mazorra Porra to holster their weapons. Lt. Cordero keeps his own survivors apart, and as them do likewise. Esperanza, after making the call, asks urgent triage by any willing Investigators. The wounded worsen audibly.

**b) Triaging/Treating the Wounded:** Dr. Ellery, Hermana María del Sagrario, & Dra. Coutinho are the obvious medical hands (later Dr. Prats will join and help with his arrival with ambulance team). Others may assist, carry, fetch, guard, or question. A successful **First Aid** or **Medicine** roll stabilizes a seriously wounded man.

A dying Escort Porra, his uniform oddly smeared with coal dust, mutters one or two useful fragments before expiring. "*La vieja lavandería. Pregúntale al mudo. Abajo. Cuarto del carbón.*"<sup>4</sup>

**Keeper's Note:** This points toward the Mazorra vault & Claudio.

**c) Examining the "President":** The fallen "President" is Salvatore Méndez, Machado's body double, not Machado himself. Up close he is clearly not Gerardo Machado, but a much younger man with dyed hair, and is wearing what appears to be a padded suit. He is unconscious. A **First Aid**, **Medicine**, or **Spot Hidden** confirms this (and that the blotches on his face is in fact lipstick). His cream-coloured linen vest is curiously stiff: closer examination reveals a bulletproof vest.

If revived (no roll needed), Méndez knows little: that Machado already fled by plane, the vest was too heavy for the plane & personally given to him, that the Escort was meant to follow by air, & that the suitcases were bound for a "vault drop", whatever that means. He does not know the full plan of the others; he was being used as a kind of living ID badge.

**SIDE-BAR: DUNRITE BULLETPROOF VEST:** A real early-1930s body armour type produced by the *Detective Publishing Company of*

*Chicago.* Treat as **Armor 6** to chest, upper abdomen, and upper back vs handguns, clubs, fragments, and knife thrusts; **Armor 4** vs heavy revolvers/SMGs; **Armor 2** vs rifles or slugs, at Keeper discretion. Hot, stiff, and heavy: wearer suffers 1 Penalty Die on **Dodge**, **Climb**, **Jump**, **Swim**, **Stealth**, and other agile movement. Concealable only under loose clothing. No protection to head, arms, lower abdomen, groin, or legs.

**-5 min:** Esperanza presses for blankets & removal of uniforms or insignia from the worst cases. Capt. Gandía resists anything public, but accepts concealment. Tension rises as Escort & Mazorra Porra eye one another over the dead, the wounded, but mostly over all the spilled money. Any movement near the cash may be mistaken for theft or treachery.

**d) Examining the Spilled Currency:** All four suitcases are ruined. Their hinges and metal frames have corroded into failure, spilling bundles of U.S. \$20 notes across the bedroom floor in green brick-like packets. Three cases lie burst open, their uppermost bundles blood-marked from the shootout. Only one case, though damaged, remains partly contained, its money still stacked inside in relatively neat, unstained piles, it having been the case that corroded outside of the Director's Manse and then carefully placed on a side table fallen bundles restacked.

Both Cordero and Gandía see the cash as survival capital. Promised shares may steady some men, but drive others to theft or desertion.

**Keeper's Note; Reading the Cash:** At a glance, **Accounting**, **Appraise**, **Credit Rating**, or **Hard INT** suggests the neat pile alone is ~\$100,000 U.S., implying roughly \$400,000 total if the other cases held the same. If an Investigator gets even brief access while helping move, sort, conceal, or guard the money, a Regular success notes suspicious bundles: paper, print, serials, banding, or ink running in blood suggest counterfeit substitution. If allowed a more deliberate inspection, or if chaos breaks out around the pile, a Hard or Extreme success can identify which bundles are genuine and suggest about 25% of the total is false. Castellanos' Dactyloscopic Lab can determine authenticity with complete accuracy and no roll.

**5-10 min:** If an Investigator credibly suggests aloud some bundles are counterfeit, discipline in the room collapses at once. Porra from both sides crowd the money pile, checking packets, accusing one another of substitution, & quarrelling over which bundles are "good." Some call the smaller 1929 notes fake; others reject the older larger bills. Proof scarcely matters. Greed keeps the money valuable, but doubt makes it poisonous.

Capt. Gandía & Lt. Cordera both respond by force. Guns drawn, they order all men back from the pile, each trying to lock down his own side while accusing the other of tampering. Any man caught pocketing cash, breaking ranks, or arguing too loudly is beaten back or

<sup>4</sup> "*The Old Laundry. Ask the mute. Below. Coal room.*"

threatened with summary shooting. Order is restored only as a tense armed stand-off.

Meanwhile, servants, attendants, and off-duty staff gather at a distance below can be heard through the open terrace doors, but armed guards bar entry. Within **6–12 minutes**, an ambulance without siren and two stretcher teams arrive & are let in.

Coming upstairs with them from MI comes *Dr. Santiago Prats*, already irritated at being drawn into another Porra catastrophe. He quickly sees that three men, one Mazorra Guard & two Escort, need more than infirmary care. They need surgery & blood transfusions, but the Mazorra's only surgeon is dead.

Dr. Prats tells Gandía and Cordero that the nearest option is the small maternity hospital in Santiago de las Vegas. The larger and better-equipped destination is Hospital Alfonso XIII in Habana near the university, but the road is likely compromised by chaotic traffic and the airport mob.

Capt. Gandía reluctantly authorizes one ambulance to take the three worst wounded to Santiago de las Vegas, then return at once. It will be overloaded but it will have to do. Prats tells him to send as driver & support only staff known to be *Group O* donors, along with citrate bottles, tubing, & transfusion apparatus; Gandía agrees. Fuel is issued only for the round trip.

### As the Dead Are Removed

Three dead remain. One Escort Porra lies slumped against a wardrobe, pale and slack, one sleeve dark with drying blood. Another lies on a stretcher near the terrace doors beside a dropped revolver, his coal-dust-smeared coat scorched by close gunfire. Before expiring, this man muttered a few useful fragments. Finally, Mazorra guard *Julio Barrera* lies on his side between the spilled currency and the foot of the bed, apparently shot while advancing or reaching cover. His blood has marked the nearest bundles.

Gandía and Cordero agree the dead must be covered, stretchered downstairs under guard, & kept out of sight until transport returns. The blood-spattered money is left behind for now. When possible, the bodies are to be moved quietly either to the temporary morgue at **M1** or to the morgue beneath the *Intercurrent Disease Pavilion*.

One Escort corpse carries two useful items: a key to one of the vehicles outside, and a hold-out derringer hidden in a boot. Investigators following the stretcher team, helping carry the dead, or insisting on examination may attempt Spot Hidden, First Aid, Medicine, Fast Talk, Persuade, or Stealth to gain access. Sleight of Hand is required to take either item unnoticed.

- *Regular success*: recover either the key or derringer. *Hard success*: recover both.

- *Failure*: the body is removed before it can be searched. *Pushed failure*: a Porra notices.

### Complication: Dead Host, Unchecked Twsha



Among the dead is *Julio Barrera*, a Mazorra guard killed in the crossfire incident. For 10–15 minutes Barrera's body appears only pale, slack, and blood-marked. A successful **Medicine** or **First Aid** roll performed now, however, finds his tissues subtly wrong: too soft, too uniform, too cohesive beneath the skin.

Only after the other wounded are removed does the change become obvious. Barrera's wounds have widened without tearing. His features are sunken, the flesh no longer merely pale but almost translucent, almost gelatinized. Spilled blood draws inward in thin dark strands, and the nearest blood stained currency bundles begin to cling where they touch him.

Barrera corpse has changed. Is *changing*.

His bloodied khaki-coloured uniform with obvious gunshot holes and uniform no longer holds its normal shape. It crumples and sags as the body seems to collapse from within.



Someone presses a finger tentatively against the cheek. After a moment of slight resistance, it penetrates & awfully suddenly right up to knuckle into the now obviously gelatinous flesh.

The hand of the curious jerks back in sudden revulsion, and they stagger back with a cry.

The face, as if made of thick gelatin or clear wax, seems to cave in where it had penetrated, the flesh melting and settling into clear jelly-like folds that very so slowly spill over & puddle awfully onto the carpeted floor.

**Keeper's Note:** Barrera was infected the previous day by Twsha and had even gone to the Infirmary. While alive, his intact mind and nervous system slowed the Twsha's growth. **SAN:** SAN 0/1D6 to anyone witnessing Barrera's corpse begin to liquefy. No one present interprets this clinically. They see witchcraft, poison gas, sabotage, betrayal, or foreign sorcery. On a failed SAN roll, especially for already strained, wounded, or superstitious NPCs, roll or choose:

1. Mazorra Porra screams & fires into the "melting" body.
2. Cordero Porra fires at the first man, thinking betrayal.
3. Someone shouts "*Los muertos se mueven!*" and a stampede begins.
4. A wounded man crawls away, smearing blood and money.
5. One Porrista drops to prayer, frozen for 1D10 rounds.
6. Someone tries to burn the remains with lamp oil, bedding, or curtains.

Over the next few hours, the corpse collapses into translucent gel with a denser node forming inside the residue; a mature Twsha.

#### SIDE-BAR: WHAT THEY THINK? WHAT THEY DO

- **Gandía:** Reads Barrera as sabotage, poison, brujería, or a trap. He wants silence, weapons down, money secured, & witnesses controlled; if order fails, he turns at once to escape. His own men think the corpse is cursed, tainted, sorcerously altered, or "coming back." They split between obedience, & panic.
- **Cordero:** Suspects chemical contamination, booby-trapped cargo, occult attack, or betrayal by Machado's people. He wants immediate withdrawal with his surviving men, vehicles, & all salvageable cash. His men think the room, money, or corpse itself has been tainted. More disciplined than Gandía's men, but deeply rattled and ready to retreat.
- **Esperanza Hidalgo-Gato:** Needs no theory yet. She sees armed fools on the verge of murdering each other *again*, & wants facts, leverage, living witnesses, and papers preserved before dawn.

**Keeper's Note:** No one here understands Twsha. They think sabotage, poison gas, Haitian brujería, curse, or betrayal. Keepers can play out the above, or choose or roll 1D3:

**1. Controlled Shock:** Men recoil from Barrera's body and the blood-marked bundles nearest it. Gandía and Cordero force a tense cooperation focused on the wounded, the cleaner \$100,000 stack, and escape.

**2. Fracture & Flight:** A frightened Porrista fires into Barrera's corpse, spraying fresh Twsha matter. Another mistakes this for betrayal and shoots back. Gandía and Cordero barely restore order. Minor casualties follow. Several Escort Porra grab random bundles, abandon their wounded, Lt. Cordero, and Méndez, take one car (keys missing to the Lincoln K armoured limo are on a corpse or on an Investigator) & flee.

**3. Escalating Gunfight:** Barrera's liquefaction is taken for poison, sorcery, or treachery, and panic becomes a second gun battle. 1D3+2 further casualties' result. If Méndez still wears his vest, he is badly wounded but likely survives. Smoke, scattered money, and fleeing armed men who take one car spread chaos through the Manse. In this worst-case outcome, Dr. Prats, stretcher bearers, Esperanza, & nearby Investigators present are exposed to stray fire, trampling, shattered glass, and Twsha splatter. Roll **1D6** for each exposed bystander.

- 1 Near miss, Penalty Die next action.
- 2 Knocked down, lose next action.
- 3 Minor injury, **1 HP**.
- 4 Fall or dropped load, **1D3 HP**.
- 5 Stray shot, **1D4 HP**.
- 6 Twsha splatter, SAN roll & possible exposure.

## B: Staged Extraction in the Children's Pavilion



After hearing that an anti-Machado mob may be moving toward the Mazorra, Ricky Morales & Dra. Elda Real begin the emergency concealment plan they had quietly prepared. With trusted staff and any befriended Investigators, they begin a staged evacuation of the Children's Pavilion. If violence erupts, the children will be safely hidden in dormant maintenance tunnels beneath the building, with a secret escape route held in reserve.

Thirty children remain, falling into three groups: those able to walk, those needing close supervision or carrying, & a small number of “special children” too risky to move with the others.

The first two groups of children are shifted in stages: a slow assisted transfer for the most dependent, and a visible but plausible relocation for the rest. Hermes Valdez, Marisol “Solita” Quiñones, & the other exceptional children are concealed last and separately.

Chief RN Beatriz Montalvo and Mons. Aurelio have been recruited to serve as receiving caregivers. *Rita Gómez, Marta Pérez, Carmen Vergós, Carmita Bernal*, and other trusted staff assist. *Chief RN Beatriz Montalvo* hastily signs the paperwork authorizing the move.

In the cellar, a locked door opens into dormant maintenance tunnels where a refuge has already been stocked with blankets, bedding, toys, books, lanterns, water, preserved food, and commodes.

### C: THE SPECIAL CHILDREN ABDUCTION ATTEMPT



Shortly after 6:00 p.m., Lt. Col. Vives moves to seize Hermes & Solita before Mazorra becomes wholly ungovernable. With help from Deputy Chief RN Rafael Yániz & the Porrista orderly Bruno Texidor, he prepares a false medical removal using a rag he will use with a bottle that contains a mix of paraldehyde + chloroform.

However, the ambulance Yániz claimed he could commandeer has already been diverted on Capt. Gandía’s orders. Yániz therefore shifts to a backup escape: down through the storm drains and out by a barred outlet a few hundred metres beyond the walls. He carries bolt cutters and has been promised a 7:00 p.m. pick-up in *Santiago de las Vegas*. They have two electric torches, one faulty, two boxes of wooden matches, and a butane lighter.

Yániz intends to double-cross Vives. Yániz keeps a pistol hidden in his pocket and a pair of handcuffs, & Texidor carries an extra bottle of chloroform & rag, while. Having grasped the children’s value, he plans to divert

them into German embassy hands & be paid by both them & Vives. Their alliance therefore lasts in his mind only until the children are secured.

**SIDE-BAR: Abduction Plot Discovery:** Investigators may piece the plot together from overlapping clues gathered earlier:

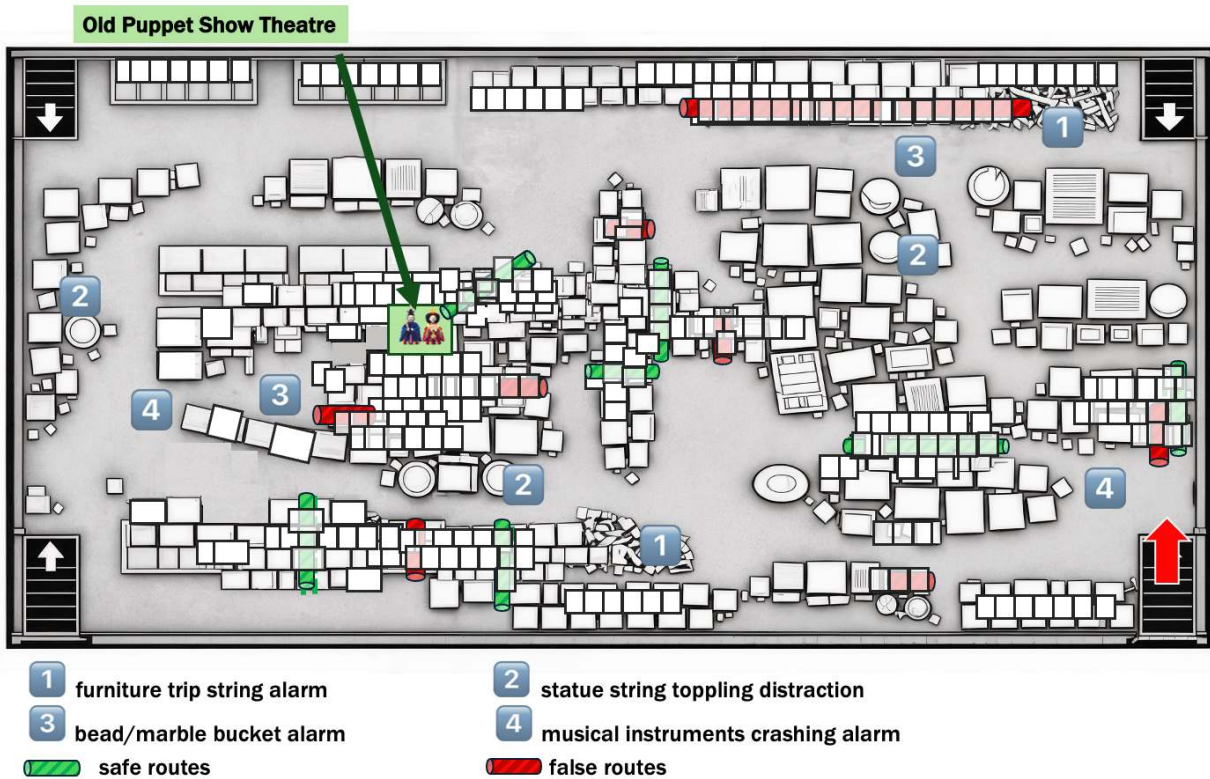
- Ricky warned that Vives would act if order collapsed.
- Elda or Vilela confirmed Vives’ prior interest in Hermes & Solita.
- Varona’s sketch of the man talking to Solia, Vives.
- Vives’ papers identify selected children for “discreet transfer.”
- Teresa logged unusual switchboard traffic and coded telegrams involving Vives, the Spanish embassy, Yániz, and the German embassy.
- Observers may also have noticed chloroform or sedatives, sacks, transfer papers, or Yániz’s failed attempt to access an ambulance earlier.

a) **The Approach:** Vives, Yániz, and Texidor arrive at the Children’s Pavilion at 18:00 with forged transfer papers, expecting to remove Hermes & Solita under false medical authority. The abductors quickly realize the Children’s Pavilion is already in partial confusion due to the covert concealment effort, and no one can honestly say where the two children are.

b) **The Foiled Fast Grab:** Solita foresaw the attempt hours earlier and, rather than join the general evacuation, took Hermes into hiding in the long-disused institutional attic above the pavilion adjacent to theirs. Vives and his party find empty beds, frightened staff, and conflicting stories. Hearing a crash overhead, Yániz suspects at once that the children have gone into one of the building’s neglected upper spaces. The suspicion is strengthened by a moved hatch, fresh dust tracks, and a (deliberately) dropped pink screwdriver known to belong to Hermes.

c) **The Attic Search:** The abductors force their way upward into the northeast corner (red arrow on map) of the vast dark attic, a cluttered storeroom of sheet-draped furniture, crates of books, mouldering Spanish religious works, broken desks, old puppet theatres, stacked chairs, religious statuary, & other educational debris. They have the two electric torches (one faulty) two boxes of wooden matches & a butane lighter. Here clutter, darkness, and child-sized routes nullify speed and official authority.

Narrow passages through the junk arranged by the children from their games thread the clutter (green dotted lines), while false routes (red dotted lines) trigger simple traps, including sliding boxes that drop behind intruders and block retreat. Red arrow is where the would-be abductors enter.



### Attic Storeroom Children's Pavilion

**Keeper's Note: Can the Children Be Caught?** Hermes and Solita know the attic routes, but capture remains possible. Each round, the abductors may search, listen, bluff, or cut off/seal exits. Three successful search actions, a fire/smoke event, or a major child mistake may corner one of them. If separated, each child becomes far easier to seize.

*Ritual Corrosion*), he must search by using the light of his cigarette lighter or kitchen matches. Either weak flame marks his position, ruins his night vision, and risks fire if his mixed paraldehyde & chloroform bottle is broken. If shattered, choking fumes spread at once; open flame may ignite cloth, dust, or vapour.

Solita is not merely hiding. She is using the attic to delay events until the future she wants has time to arrive. Solita has deliberately chosen the attic as a delaying ground, using noise-makers, false paths, shifted furniture, and obscured sightlines to slow pursuit without inflicting serious harm. Each lost minute increases the chance that allies or friendly Investigators arrive.

**ATTIC COMPLICATION:** Roll 1D6 or choose from below

- d) **The Break:** Vives & Yániz soon quarrel. Vives wants speed and silence. Yániz wants possession of the children and payment from another buyer. Trust collapses. They split up to search by separate routes.

1. **Children's Pavilion Staff Resist:** The forged paperwork is questioned before the attic search begins. A nurse, orderly, or caregiver refuses to release records, keys, or information. If pressed, the abductors must threaten, drug, or physically subdue them, making it obvious later that no lawful transfer occurred.
2. **The Wrong Child Seized (Simona B.):** In the confusion, Texidor or Yániz seizes Simona B. instead of Solita. At first the mistake is not obvious. She is of similar age and slight build, and if muffled under blanket or sack may pass in poor light. Once handled, however, she becomes a catalyst for fear. She trembles, gasps, and enters a near-mute panic that spreads to nearby children and unsettles adults.

Texidor wavers, staying with whichever side seems stronger. If Simona B. is accidentally seized and then sedated, she ends up in Texidor's custody

If Yániz's torch fails, whether through damage, neglect, or stranger causes (e.g. Baron Kriminal's

**SIDE-BAR: Simona B's Special Pulp Talent; Panic Echo:** When frightened or seized, those in earshot must roll POW.

- Success: shaken, Penalty Die next action.
- Failure: freeze, cry out, flee, or blunder for 1 round. Fumble: **Full Panic** for 1D3 rounds: flee blindly, scream, drop items, lash out, fire wildly, or become helpless (Keeper's choice). The result is noise, & loss of control at the worst possible moment. Vives quickly realizes she is not Solita, but by then secrecy may already be gone;

3. **Dr. Vilela Returns:** Having faked his death, Vilela breaks cover to protect a child, but if on scene would prefer obstruction, misdirection, or ambush to open gunfire.
4. **Texidor Wavers:** As Vives and Yániz quarrel, Texidor may panic or defect if approached alone. **Persuade, Fast Talk, or Intimidate** (Hard). Bonus Die if events are already turning chaotic.
  - Success: Hesitates, misdirects, or defects.
  - Fumble: Warns the abductors.
5. **Where there's Smoke:** A dropped match ignites old drapery or paper. Smoke is the real danger. Sightlines collapse, panic rises, and all sides may be forced to choose between the children & escape.
6. **Hermes Interferes:** Hermes silently alters the terrain: dropped barrier, fallen plaster statues, etc. He means only to delay & divide. Separated abductors may panic, betray one another, or lose their way. If a friendly Investigator is cut off, Hermes may also guide them out by touch toward the puppet theatre fort where Solita is hiding. Two large puppets are dressed to resemble the children.

**Keeper's Note:** Hermes acts through instinctive mechanical insight rather than speech or command. He sees hinges, wheels, cords, catches, & balance points that adults ignore. Hermes does not think of this as sabotage. To him, he is fixing the problem by making dangerous adults & awkward objects stop working properly.

**Attic Endgame** At this point the Investigators and/or Dr. Vilela arrive up into the attic, possibly also with Ricky Morales and Elda Real on their heels or later as reinforcements. Do not script one ending. Run the attic as a short crisis with competing goals and limited time. **Attic Crisis Clock:** Each round or major delay, advance one step:

1. Search in darkness
2. Quarrel, betrayal, or gun drawn
3. Bottle dropped, fumes released, or flame starts
4. Escape, collapse, or reinforcements arrive

**The Shot in Darkness:** If Yániz advances with a lighter in one hand and a glass bottle of mixed paraldehyde and chloroform in the other, the flame makes him the clearest target in the attic. A successful shot at the lighter extinguishes the light at once; the bottle may then be dropped or shatter. Total darkness, spreading

fumes, and sudden panic follow as control of the scene collapses. A successful shot at the bottle is even worse. Chloroform itself is not flammable, but paraldehyde is, and if the mixture shatters and aerosolizes near open flame, Yániz is set alight in an instant.

**Keeper's Note:** The attic scene should turn on player choices. Investigators may pursue the children, block exits, negotiate with Texidor, capture Yániz, chase Vives, or prevent fire. They cannot easily do all at once. If they hesitate, Vives likely escapes and Yániz's panic worsens the crisis. Strong skill hooks to use (not including any relevant *Pulp Talent*) include:

- **Spot Hidden:** locate hidden crawl routes/children first
- **Listen:** track movement in dark
- **Psychology:** sense Texidor ready to flip
- **Persuade/Fast Talk:** split Vives & Yániz
- **Mechanical Repair:** disable hatch / flashlight / escape route
- **Stealth:** flank unseen
- **First Aid:** save smoke/fume victim
- **Firearms/Brawl:** obvious

**[Ignited Bottle:** If the shattered paraldehyde mixture ignites on Yániz, he suffers **1D6 damage immediately** and **1D6 each round** until the flames are extinguished (DEX or assistance). Panic, smoke, a loss of control are immediate.]

## D: Dtr. Ramagosa's Quiet Evacuation



If Gilda Ramagosa learns the Mazorra may soon face mob violence, Porra reprisals, or general collapse, she begins quietly removing the most vulnerable women from the Female Dept. with Tambor's help. She does not attempt a mass evacuation. Instead, she selects those least able to survive chaos: frail chronic patients, lucid but helpless women, likely targets for abuse, and a few who know too much to be left behind. Her room already contains boots, lights, a revolver, a gas mask, and a tunnel map for exactly such a contingency.

1. **Destination:** Her intended refuge for those rescued is the attic of the vacant student nurses' dormitory near the Chapel and Children's precinct, a sturdier

and more defensible area than the Women's pavilions. She plans to move patients there in small groups through nearby underground access rather than across open ground.

2. **Tambor's Role:** Tambor serves as guide, scout, protector & route-master. He knows the hidden passages, disused service ways, and unsafe sections better than anyone, and can navigate even in darkness by memory, pace-counting, and echo. Without him, Ramagosa's plan is far slower and far riskier.
3. **How it Proceeds:** Ramagosa moves patients in *tandas* (batches), the first a cautious test run of 6 women through the new storm drains from *La Oficina* through to Pavilion B and then on to the Nursing School dormitories. Once the route is proven, later *tandas* from this and other Women's Dept. pavilions rise to 8–10 patients, though rarely more. Each run takes 30–40 minutes. Over four hours Ramagosa can usually manage five or six lifts, moving roughly 40–50 women if panic, delay, and discovery do not intervene.

**SIDE-BAR: How Can Investigators Help?** This is not a heroic mass rescue, but a selective improvised extraction under worsening conditions. Dr. Gilda Ramagosa is trying to save those she still can before the Mazorra falls. Investigators can steady frightened patients, carry supplies, scout ahead, distract staff, or argue to include more woman. Their help can double the number saved & may fend off any attacking cultists. Without them, Gilda still acts, but more slowly & with a higher chance of losing a group to interruption or delay.

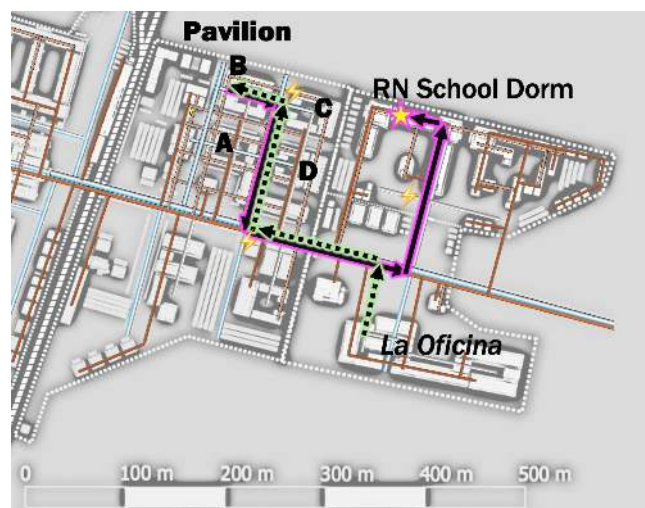
**Complications:** Roll d6 or choose one per *tanda*:

1. A patient freezes, sobs, or refuses a ladder or crawlspace; add another 2d6 minutes
2. Bad air, slippery footing, or partial collapse delays the group; add 4d6 minutes
3. Rats surge from a side passage; panic & screams ensue, patients scatter. Add another 2d6 minutes.
4. The flashlight suddenly dims & then fails completely 3d10 minutes later; it's the bulb. Tambor can lead them but it doubles the length of the remainder of their *tanda*.
5. A Leopard Man cultist observes the extraction in progress (at one of three lightning symbols on map.). *Ahead stands a man-shaped absence: no cough, no shuffle, no lamp. Then two pale crescents appear as he smiles. He freezes at sight of Ramagosa's gun, then slowly edges backward into shadow, judging whether to strike, trail them, or warn others.* Unless the Investigators act first, Tambor taps twice and Ramagosa douses her lamp. In total darkness Tambor closes the distance by memory and echo alone. No cry follows. After a long pause, Tambor's second double tap the light returns, revealing the stranger crumpled in the passage, throat crushed. He is not in full regalia, but wears hidden leopard hide at the belt, bears

rosette tattoos or scarification; has filed teeth & a wrapped knife.

6. **The China Doll:** Juana de la Cruz breaks into glass-delusion panic, screaming that she will shatter if touched. She lashes out with improvised shards; her right arm clearly shows early Twsha transparenting [SAN 0/1]. If Investigators are present, they can secure her only by slowing the *tanda* and accepting an unstable case into the evacuation or take her away themselves to the *Aux Lab*; those present may use chemical sedation. Leopard Man Cultists are attracted to the sound & observe; if she is left sedated in the nursing student dorms & poorly watched, she vanishes within 12 hours, having fallen into Leopard Man Cult hands.

#### Storm Drain Ambush during Final *Tanda*:



The final *tanda* is larger and slower. The woman women are exhausted, boots scrape wet curved concrete, and baskets scrape the side walls. At the trunk crossing Tambor halts sharply and taps warning.

Someone is already there in the half-light, lean and motionless, listening rather than searching. Another shape emerges from a side passage. A third appears behind them, almost unseen until one patient gasps and points.

Dr. Gilda Ramagosa hisses for silence and tries to keep the women together, but danger is immediate. If the cultists gain voice or escape, pursuit follows. If battle begins, screams, panic, trampling, and separation are real risks in the dark circular drain.

#### If Only Gilda & Tambor Are Present:

Likely outcomes (**Keeper's Choice** or roll d3)

- **Best case:** Tambor kills or incapacitates one, Gilda disables another, third flees wounded but confused. Column survives, route partly exposed.
- **Most Likely:** One cultist escape to report. Tambor or Gilda is cut or injured. Future movements now hunted.

- **Worst case:** A patient panics and screams. Women scatter. One is seized. Evacuation collapses into chase scenes through tunnels.

**Keeper's Note:** If Dr. Vilela earlier faked his death, and not used already, may appear now to rescue NPC evacuees a&/or Investigators, tricking for example a cultist by shooting with his cast-concealed gun.

**If A Single Armed PC Investigator is Present:** Tambor still goes for the messenger in darkness. Gilda controls the women. The Investigator becomes anchor and deterrent. Best use: hold the centre lane, flash light briefly, fire only at clear silhouettes, then switch off and protect fleeing patients

- **Best case:** Tambor drops his cultist, Investigator shoots second cultist, third retreats. Clean victory.
- **Most likely** One cultist wounded, one down, one escapes. Gunshot alerts others later.
- **Worst case:** Friendly-fire risk in darkness, panic among patients → stampede. One patient missing.

**If Two or more Armed Investigators Are Present:** Tambor attacks the rear man. Gilda guards her column. The Investigators target the cultists ahead of them.

- **Best case:** Three cultists neutralized quickly. None escape → tanda proceeds.
- **Most likely:** One cultist killed, one captured, one wounded & lopes off.
- **Worst case:** Crossfire, ricochet, women panic, someone falls into channel & is grabbed by a cultist.

## PHASE II: CONTEST (18:30-20:00)

### A. ORDER THROUGH DELUSION

At 6:30 p.m., every PA loudspeaker in Mazorra emits a brief squeal, and Teresa Pacheco's familiar voice, now slightly strained, is heard across the grounds:

“Attention. Attention throughout the Mazorra. In the absence of all lawful and competent earthly authority, His Majesty Reynaldo Fontanilla, rightful King of Spain, has assumed sovereign protection over the Mazorra. All staff, patients, visitors, and other persons within these grounds are ordered to remain calm and obey directives now issued from *La Oficina* in the name of the Crown.

By royal decree, the Sword of the Crown, la Espada de la Corona, is General Gaspar Olivares, who commands the defence of the Mazorra and its gates. His Majesty and the General act in concert for the safety of all loyal persons within these walls.

The false ruler of Cuba has fled. Enemies, looters, and invaders now threaten this place. Until order is secured, all are to remain within their assigned

buildings unless summoned, and all loyal subjects are to aid in the preservation of peace, discipline, and dignity.

Stand ready for further words from *El Rey* himself, followed by *El General*.”

A few seconds pass. Then the warmly electric voice of *El Rey* pours out like honey over PA system.

“People of the Mazorra, your King speaks! Others have fled. I have not. Others have abandoned you. I do not. From this hour, let no one say there is no authority here. There is authority. There is rank. There is justice. And there is defence. General Gaspar Olivares, *la Espada de la Corona*, the Sword of the Crown, acts with my full favour to secure these grounds against all enemies without and traitors within. Let the fearful be reassured, the useful come forward, and the disloyal tremble.”

There is a pause, and then another man's voice is heard; more clipped, terse, but with the unmistakable air of someone who has authority and power:

“This is *El General Olivares*. All loyal persons will hold their positions, obey sector commanders, and keep clear the roads, gates, and approaches to M1. Messengers and supply runners are to report for assignment. There will be no panic. There will be order.”

The PA system cuts out with a painful squeal.

Unexpectedly, two delusional patients have united into a stabilizing force within Mazorra. Both *El Rey* and *El General* had reached a practical understanding; if the Mazorra collapses completely, their own realms perish with it.

### *El General Takes Command*



Gaspar “General Napoleon” Olivares has changed. Under pressure of siege, rumour of invasion, and collapsing authority, the former university professor’s delusion has clarified. In his mind, Mazorra is now a fortress under threat from outside, filled with enemies, traitors, & civilians inside under his protection. Escape remains a goal, but not yet. An Emperor does not abandon the field.

The old academic theatricality remains, but has hardened into command. He appoints “marshals” and “captains,” & insists on tricolour armbands as marks of discipline. For many patients, this is the first structure and purpose they have known in years and they adore him for it, and will lay down their lives in fact.

**Keeper’s Notes:** Before 18:00, successful Spot Hidden rolls reveal patients, El General’s followers, concentrating near stairs, upper windows, and vehicle sheds. A *Hard* success shows this is organized seizure of key ground, not random drift. **Stealth** or **Disguise** allows shadowing runners without immediate suspicion.

On the fourth floor of **M1**, *El General*’s boardroom HQ is a negotiation scene. *El General* should grant an audience only if the PCs can either: reach his HQ without being stopped, or present themselves as useful to his siege logic. Use of **Persuade**, **Psychology**, **Tactics/Military Science**, or a convincing cover identity may win safe passage, intelligence, an escort, or temporary protection for a person or zone. Failure brings surveillance, confinement, or denunciation as enemy agents.

By 18:00, patient followers under his seven Marshals quietly occupy vantage points, post lookouts, move runners, gather improvised weapons, and secure key approaches near the gates, vehicle yard, and M1. El General divides Mazorra into operational sectors, assigning Marshals to the gates, rail spine, industrial quarter, *La Oficina*, the women’s and men’s pavilions, and the M1 command zone. His headquarters is the 4th-floor boardroom of M1 which has the highest views all over the Mazorra.

The discovery and seizure of a cache of rifles and ammunition at the Old Laundry [KN: dropped off by the Presidential Escort just hours ago] confirms the campaign. The New Laundry becomes his “Grand Battery.” Fire hoses serve as artillery, aimed at the steam valve vents beneath the east-west Álvarez Cerice avenue; laundry carts filled with bricks become mobile barricades and battering rams. Cleaning chemicals are repurposed as choking hazards that may scatter enemies, though they may also injure his own followers.

Despite this being war for the General, his humanity persists. He still asks after his lost Josephine, believing her lost somewhere in the chaos. This softens him, and he protects the vulnerable, especially those

who remind him of her. Investigators who approach him respectfully may gain a powerful ally. Mock him, however, and he becomes a commander confronting treachery in wartime. Within Mazorra, Olivares is no longer merely deluded. For a short time, he is structure imposed upon chaos, and it works.

### The King Proclaims his Realm

~18:30, the awesomely huge Baltasar Urrutia “the Hammer” leads *El Rey*’s hand-picked **Guardia de la Cámara**, twelve burly and loyal to *El Rey* patients, into *La Oficina* through the main lobby. With guards absent or wavering, resistance is brief. Teresa Pacheco is compelled to announce the arrival of Reynaldo “*El Rey*” Fontanilla [See AoM #240 in E&A #3] as the King of Spain asserting his rule over Mazorra. He arrives 15 minutes later with his entourage, and the nearby canteen inside *La Oficina* becomes his first court.



To *El Rey*, this is not a riot but a *restoration*. Ordinary authority has failed, and kingship has returned by necessity. He issues proclamations, grants titles, denounces traitors, and appoints courtiers. What sounds absurd at first quickly becomes workable. Patients obey out of belief, staff out of expedience, and frightened civilians because someone is finally giving orders. His strength lies in ceremony. Where the *El General* rules through discipline, *El Rey* rules through hierarchy, ritual, and recognition. A clerk becomes *Secretary of Petitions*. An orderly becomes *Gentleman of the Chamber*. A reliable patient becomes a *duke* or *caballero*. In a place where identity has been stripped away, he restores it by giving people a role in his court

The switchboard’s PA system becomes central to this strange monarchy, becoming *El Rey*’s balcony, allowing him to calm crowds, summon individuals, and issue decrees across the grounds of the Mazorra. The canteen provides food, petitioners, and a natural audience. Messengers come and go constantly. Within an hour, *La Oficina* begins to function less like an office block than a miniature Spanish royal court.

For the moment, it works. *El Rey* mixes fantasy with practical order. One decree concerns royal enemies, the next food, doors, or messengers. Even those who know he is mad may find his system & elegant confidence easier to live under than the vacuum left by fleeing guards & fleeing corrupt administrators.

Reynaldo “*El Rey*” Fontanilla is not harmless. Charismatic and highly intuitive, *El Rey* reads fear and hesitation well. Those who humour him may be rewarded. Those who mock or oppose him risk being named conspirators or traitors, and will be arrested. Once that happens, his *Cámara* enforces his will quickly, especially with Urrutia at its centre.

*El Rey* wants order, obedience, & visible dignity, not destruction. He may cooperate with Investigators or staff who approach him respectfully and frame requests as matters of loyalty, security, or royal necessity. Once his hold on *La Oficina* feels secure, *El Rey* begins demanding ceremonial occupation of the *Director’s Manse*, which he regards as his rightful palace. *La Oficina* is only a temporary seat of rule. If the Manse remains dangerous or contested, he delays the move, but never abandons the claim.

**SIDE BAR: WHERE THE INVESTIGATORS MAY INTERVENE:** The Investigators may enter this struggle to help, or hinder (or exploit) it.

**To help:** They may decide *El Rey* & *El General* are, for the moment, less dangerous than a vacuum of authority. They can relay messages between M1 & *La Oficina*, remove obstacles, win Teresa Pacheco’s cooperation, secure key doors or corridors, or steer one faction toward the real danger. Strategic respect for the delusions may also win rank, favour, or safe passage.

**To hinder:** If they fear either leader becoming too strong, they can disrupt runners, misdirect messengers, turn Teresa against *El Rey*, isolate Urrutia’s men, or provoke rivalry between court & crown. They may also help loyal staff or frightened clerks escape before these structures harden.

Inside *La Oficina*, switchboard operator Teresa Pacheco and the patient *Xavier Xenon* are pressure points. **Persuade** may win Teresa’s cooperation even after *El Rey* compels her obedience. A Hard success grants two benefits from calls, rumours, or announcements, such as delaying one call, tracing one caller, or suppressing one rumour. Failure yields only partial cooperation, often coloured by Teresa’s own fear and gossip.

**SIDE-BAR EL REY’S INNER COURT:** With official authority failing, *El Rey* has proclaimed a working royal court. Titles are not ornamental. They govern movement, access, supplies, and punishment in areas where patients and even some staff now comply. The structure is effective but fragile; remove key figures and it fractures quickly.

**Core Court**

- **El Rey, Reynaldo Fontanilla:** king in name & final authority.

- **Guardia de la Cámara:** the awesome Baltasar ‘El Matillo’ Urratia commands the court’s enforcers
- **El General:** Gaspar “General Napoleon” Olivares styled the *Sword of the Crown*, commands the armed forces beneath the throne.
- **Capitán de la Puerta:** former guard, now patient with *dementia praecox*; holds key corridors & thresholds.
- access to *El Rey* & relays information from the outside world.
- **Guardianes del Velo:** selected patients control entry to important court spaces; royal bedroom, treasury, throne-room, etc.
- **I Pregón:** Senor *Xavier Xenon* a mildly demented retired banker loudly repeats & distorts royal decrees in person and via PA
- **Cronista del Reino:** former librarian pt. records “official” history.
- **Confesor del Rey:** Héctor “Santa María” frames events as divine or sinful.

**Not** all those assigned (\*) asked for or even wants these assigned roles but have little say in the matter. Investigators may also have *El Rey* grant them noble rank to bind them into the court. Sr. Vargas might become **Marqués** and special envoy; Hermana María may become **Baronesa de la Salud**, protector of patients. Others may be named **Caballeros** or lesser nobles for useful service.

*El Rey’s* spokesman, *Xavier Xenon* (see sidebar), is more easily swayed by **Fast Talk, Charm, or Intimidate** to make or read out a false PA announcement. Once the PA is seized, the Investigators may use either intermediary to reassure, direct, mislead, or legitimize. A successful **Fast Talk, Persuade, or Charm** roll influences one defined group, location, or faction within Mazorra; a Hard success may influence two. *Failure* creates confusion or only partial compliance. A *pushed Failure* misdirects listeners, sending the wrong people to the right place at the worst possible time.

**PHASE II: PORRA REMNANTS (18:30 to 20:00)**

The surviving Porra no longer control Mazorra, but they have not yet broken. Capt. Gandía still commands a small hard core gathered at the Director’s Manse, while Lt. Cordero retains only a remnant of the Presidential Escort. The two groups distrust one another, but for the moment neither can afford another gunfight.

Gandía has only four clearly Porra-loyal armed Mazorra guards under direct control, & only twelve deployable guards plus himself in all. Most of the remainder are tired, uncertain, and increasingly unreliable. Some stay only because no one has relieved them; others have drifted away or failed to report. Inside the Manse, Gandía’s men guard the wounded, watch the money, suppress loose talk, and hold vehicles, weapons, and exits. He still speaks as though order can be restored, but in practice he is buying time, judging whether to bargain, retreat, or run.

Lt. Cordero retains himself, two unhurt men, and three more still mobile despite minor wounds. Two badly injured Escort men, along with one Mazorra Guard, are already on their way in an over-crowded ambulance to Santiago de las Vegas; two more of his men are dead. He still has one armoured Presidential Lincoln K limousine and Salvatore Méndez, a body double useful at speed, distance, or under confusion.

Most recovered cash is blood-marked, suspect, or contaminated, and perhaps only \$75,000 remains immediately usable. Even so, Cordero is too practical to dismiss the rest; counterfeit bundles may still serve as payoff, confusion, or decoy. Blood-smear currency flung from a fleeing car might buy seconds of chaos. He is also already assessing people. The Director's Secretary, Srta. Esperanza seemed able to move Gandía by force of personality alone; that makes her useful. The visiting Investigators too remain an unknown quantity: professionals, meddlers, possible pawns, or possible cover.

For now, Mazorra Porra & Escort Porra cooperate only so far as needed to move wounded, guard salvageable cash, and avoid being trapped. Another gunfight remains possible if discipline slips or either side thinks the other is about to bolt first.

**Keeper's Note: Where the Investigators May Intervene:**

The Investigators can still affect this remnant force. They may prolong the uneasy truce, break it, or exploit it. **Fast Talk, Persuade, Psychology, or Intimidate** may turn Gandía and Cordero more sharply against one another or briefly steady both. **Medicine, Drive Auto, Mechanical Repair, Locksmith, Stealth, or Sleight of Hand** may affect wounded transport, vehicle readiness, keys, fuel, uniforms, or escape. Exposing counterfeit bundles, blood-marked cash, or contamination may collapse discipline at once. *Esperanza*, if won over, may delay calls, redirect messages, or press for discreet removal of wounded and insignia. The players need not defeat the Porra remnants directly; making them hesitate, split, misjudge, or flee may be enough. If the Investigators significantly interfere, choose or roll 1D3:

1. Brittle Truce: Gandía and Cordero delay open conflict but mistrust deepens.
2. Fracture: one side bolts, deserts, or abandons wounded/cash.
3. Snap: gunfire resumes, vehicles scatter, and command collapses.

**Note:** this material assumes **Controlled Shock** as default, or at worst **Fracture & Flight** with only minor further losses. If the Keeper instead used **Escalating Gunfight**, reduce surviving Porra sharply and treat the Director's Manse as a brittle survivor holdout.

**THE TWSHA PROGRESSION CLOCK**

**Twsha Progression (Selected NPCs)**

| Time                 | Lic. Evelio Gil                                         | Dr. Ramón Zorrilla (slower)                                   | Srta. Dolores García              |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Aug 12<br>-<br>17:00 | S2→3 translucent hands/face; tremor; strained speech    | S2 early subtle fingertip/face translucency; fully functional | S1 no visible change              |
| Aug 13<br>-<br>09:00 | S3 marked transparency; poor vision; lurching; reaching | S2 mid visible under light; mild visual s.; working           | S1→2 faint fingertip translucency |

| Time                 | Lic. Evelio Gil                                               | Dr. Ramón Zorrilla (slower)                                    | Srta. Dolores García                                |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Aug 13<br>-<br>17:00 | S3 late limbs/organs intermittently absent; severe impairment | S2 late→3 patchy spread; early ataxic clumsiness; still mobile | S2 early hands/lips translucent; passes at glance   |
| Aug 14<br>-<br>09:00 | S4 pre near-invisible skin; collapse episodes; breathy voice  | S3 (delayed) partial blindness; unstable gait; still directed  | S2 mid noticeable changes; subtle coordination loss |
| Aug 14<br>-<br>17:00 | Terminal gelatinous collapse; control nodule forms            | S3 mid (delayed) significant translucency; speech degraded     | S2 late distal transparency; mobile; dangerous      |

As time progresses and the Twsha spreads, patient cases will accumulate more rapidly and visibly than staff cases, both because of sheer numbers and because staff increasingly withdraw from direct contact as symptoms emerge.

Aug 12 (17:00) – 8 cases demonstrating visible symptoms & disturbing progression

- Evelio Gil, Dr. Ramon Zorrilla + Senorita Garcia as per chart above.
- 2 more cases in Santa Barbara pavilion (A), another in Pavilion B (the *Glass Doll*) & 1 visibly affected Guard in their barracks (north of the TB pavilion) and the Guard who died in the Director's Manse.

Aug 13th (16 total in a.m. visibly affected → 42 by dusk)

- Multiple pavilions affected; Female Dept: A, B & D; Men's Dept: *Esperanza* (Hope) pavilion.

**STUDYING THE TWSHA (Dr. Coutinho's Mission)**



Dr. Coutinho can still make a real difference, though not by curing Twsha outright. Her best chance is to shift from body containment to *condition containment*: learning how to slow spread, reduce transmission, and later induce dormancy. Studying the transformed *Julio Barrera*, and comparing Gil, Zorrilla, and Dolores, may reveal the first usable pattern. Testing light, vibration, odour, humidity, and isolation may uncover a slowing protocol. Mazorra may still fail politically, but not biologically. (Further Twsha biology appears next issue.)

**To Be Continued**



## COMMENTS E&A #10

**PAUL HOLMAN:** I was very sorry to hear of your wife Jayne's sudden death from your FB post. Please accept my sincere condolences. Your tribute to her was deeply moving.

**MYLES CORCORAN:** *Re time to make 'kludgy collage' maps:* It all depends, but can range from about an hour to 3 to 4, done over a series of days.

**TIMOTHY COLLINSON:** Wait a sec, you at the *Timothy Collinson*, Grand Librarian of Traveller? Author of "The Traveller Bibliography" [BITS 1999]? I am a proud owner of a copy of this book! Has 'Martian Metals' 15mm figures been added to the miniatures section in your later editions?

**CLARK B. TIMMINS:** I admit it was a little churlish of me to point out how similar the two images were. I wonder if that same sources of pulp images you used before could be mined for more undead. Or that you can add some non-AI or AI effects to such an image and distort it to make it your own, either using Photoshop or my kludge collage trick w/ PowerPoint (see below).



**BRIAN ROGERS:** *Re yeeshy/messy Mazorra developments lastish:* The tricky bit will be how I will wrap it all up without burning down the whole place!

**Pedro Panhoca Da Silva & Maira Zucolotto:** *Investigar - Livro-Jogo* looks like a lot of fun for Portuguese fans of IF. It reminds me somewhat of '[Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective](#)', which is a text-based, cooperative deduction game where players take on the role of the Baker Street Irregulars to solve mysteries in Victorian London. There is a Portuguese language translated edition by *Galápagos Jogos*.

**JOHN REDDEN:** All best for a very boring, uneventful cardiac surgery & smooth recovery, free of complications. I'll make this month's Horrors of the Mazorra even richer in historical & fictional detail to distract you while you heal.

**ROGER BW:** *RYCTM, re my "Llerena dead, liver, etc."* note: This is where my compressed telegraph-style writing, plus the lack of an editor, can create confusion. By the time the Investigators arrive after the bell and after Urrutia is incapacitated, Dr. Llerena is already dead. Then either: **A)** Yobama has already fled, or **B)** he is still present, performing a blood rite while removing

organs from the corpse when interrupted. The asterisk was only meant to clarify that he is cutting the liver from a dead man, not eating someone alive. That was never intended as an option!

**LISA PADOL:** *Re Elda Real singing:* "Guantanamera" was already a flexible Cuban folk standard long before the later 1960s versions by *The Sandpipers* and later *Pete Seeger*. Though its melody is generally credited to *Joseíto Fernández* from 1929 onward using lyrics drawn from *Versos sencillos* (1891) written by *José Martí*, Cuba's national poet & independence martyr. However, the lyrics were never fixed in Fernández's live Cuban radio performance where he often varied them using patriotic, topical, & even comic & satirical verses. Later international versions used Martí's lines more consistently & helped frame the song as protest music, but from the start it not just a song of unrequited love, but also celebrated Cuba, and the dignity of the honest, ordinary, often poor working person. I imagine Elda singing not just the word, but an improvised version of the song, mixing familiar Martí & Fernández derived lines with words of comfort of her own. <>I just realized YOU were one of the editors for Golden Goblin's 3rd party *Call of Cthulhu* scenario book '**Tales of the Caribbean!**' I only skimmed over the Havana scenario, largely to make sure it wasn't set in an asylum in Cuba. I did notice something odd, in that the map included labelled *Havana* in the scenario is only a map of **Habana Vieja** (*Old Havana*), & **Centro Habana**, and not the other parts of the much larger and sprawling city. I guess the analogy would be that of a writer showing only a map of lower Manhattan and calling it a map of New York City.



**JIM VASSILAKOS:** Thanks for your kind words on my Bokor's prose (grin). I swear, I get all the credit for things written in haste or when I am tired from work!

**JOSHUA KRONENGOLD:** *RYCTM Baron Kriminal:* while he/it can feel like a liminal, partly unbounded supernatural force that presses through reality via a living tether, in this scenario he is still fundamentally a Vodou death-loa with motive, grievance, & a very specific retributive logic, not an abstract cosmic principle like Lovecraft's Yog Sothoth.

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**Everyone Else: RAEBNC**

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**APRIL 21st 2026. BCM**

## **Ronin Engineer for Ever & Anon #11**

by Jim Eckman,  
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### **IRL**

The Artemis mission was wonderful, other than that ughh.

### **Notes**

Those interested in a copy of Wanderer can e-mail me. I'm using Office Libre version 25.8.4.2 and most of the files are lightly modified versions of the 1997 originals to make sure that they can be opened and edited. The Player's Guide is a formatting mess, I'm not sure if I want to tackle it alone.

In addition my friend Ben suffered from dyslexia and an allergy to spell check, if you've reached your lifetime reading dose of slush, be careful.

### **Worldbuilding**

World and Campaign Generation (Wanderer)

Version 1.02 May 17th, 2001

copyright James D. Eckman

#### **Introduction**

I have a fairly terrible memory and I find that by writing down or computer generating large chunks of the campaign ahead of time, that I can keep track of player interactions over the long term. Villains and old friends pop up, an old insult leads to a later bad effect, etc.

Individual civilizations

#### 1. Locations

The most favored to least favored locations for civilizations seem to be:

- River deltas – often generates a water culture
- Plains with streams and light forests
- Hillsides near plains with water
- Heavy forests
- Swamps – usually requires a form of central control
- Fertile mountain valleys near lakes and rivers
- Mountains

#### 2. Resources

Newer civilizations in virgin areas often have access to far more raw materials than older civilizations.

Lower technology cultures:

- Raw land
- Wood
- Metals in surface deposits

- Gems and gold in near surface deposits

### 3. Science Fiction

Earlier travelers might of visited a planet, things left behind may include:

- Legends and information
- Small artifacts of artistic value
- Technology artifacts
- Settlements, outposts, cities
- Creatures, pets, strange plants

### 4. Reasons for cities can include:

- Trade
- Defense
- Central location for infrastructure
- Religious
- Cities as capitals and collections of wealthy/resource sinks i.e. Constantinople and Trantor
- Cities as accumulation points, Venice other trader cities

### 5. Reasons for roads can include:

- Trade
- Military
- Governmental
- Pilgrimages

### 6. Inhabitants

- Who knows? Anything goes.

### 7. Cities can be organized as:

- Small complete sub-cities
- Each skill has it's own city area
- Each cultural group has it's own area

### 8. Worlds

See wgen

### 9. People

- True nomads – wander far with no fixed routes, can be quite aggressive
- Transhumance\* - travel fixed routes at fixed times, shepherds, etc. Usually considered almost an outcast group.
- Peasants/Serfs – Workers of the soil
- Artisans/Craftsmen – Workers of materials and such
- Intelligentsia
- Government

### 10.0 Traumatic events

- Invasions
- Wars

- Drought/Famines
- Plagues
- Social upheaval/revolutions
- Technological churning/radical manufacturing/food raising changes
- Massive immigration
- Long term climatic changes

#### 11.0 Use of technology

- Creators and users of current technology
- Users of current technology – must import some goods ex. colonies
- Rejectors of current technology – not used for some cultural reason
- Technology wannabes – they want it, but can't handle or afford it
- Technology outcasts – they're not supposed to have it, usually weapons

#### 12.0 Religion

- Tolerant/intolerant

#### 13.0 Laws

- Strict/Lax
- Expect outlanders to fully comply

#### 14.0 Customs

- Birth
- Death
- Coming of age
- Marriage

#### 15.0 Long distance trading

- Rare metals
- Hardware
- Spices
- Specialty clothes
- Knowledge/books

#### 16.0 Boundaries

- Tolls/customs
- Dangerous crossings
- Forbidden zones

#### 17.0 Organizations

- Guilds
- Unions
- Police
- Fire
- Taxation
- Inquisitions

## 18.0 General cultural problems

- Distances
- Languages
- Religions
- Population
- Transport

## 19.0 Odd map types

- Isochronic maps – travel times to/from a region could be color coded for speeds

## 20.0 Mediums of trade

- Barter
- Cash
- Letters of exchange
- Accounts

## 21.0 Major industries based on tech level

- Agriculture
- Textiles

## 22.0 Transportation trends

- Large ships or elaborate systems tend to favor monopolies and larger merchants
- Small ships tend to favor entrepreneurs and small merchants

## 23.0 Organization Memberships

### 23.1 By relation

- Self
- Immediate family
- Relatives

- Race

### 23.2 By belief

- Religious
- Political

- Mutual interests

### 23.3 By purpose

- Volunteer civic groups
- Mutual aid societies

### 23.4 By happenstance

- By draft
- By location

## 24.0 Joining Organizations

- Birth
- Infection
- Through reference
- By examination
- By payment

- By volunteering
- By draft
- By existing

## 25.0 Organization Hierarchies

- None, totally anarchy
- Cells
- Tiger teams
- Location
- Matrix management
- Rigid top down command

Note: theoretical TOE may have nothing to do with real TOE

## 26.0 Promotion Within Organizations

- Chance
- Examination
- Payment
- Draft
- Length of service
- Volunteering
- By reference
- By selection

## 27.0 Organization Office Functions

- Simple command – I command, you obey
- Thought officers – Think right or be disciplined
- Clerical – Keep track of data, authority to log and change
- Spares – Replaces officer as required

## 28.0 Organization characteristics – derived from other characteristics

- Flexible – inflexible
- Tolerant – intolerant
- Fast response – slow response
- Smart – dumb
- Rich – poor
- Creative – rigid
- Free – dictatorial

## **Characteristics of organizations**

1. Size
2. Status
3. Tolerance of outsiders
4. Fame
5. Control level
6. Cohesion
7. Overall wealth
8. Distribution of wealth

9. Economic efficiency
10. Law and bureaucracy
11. Corruption
12. Major goals

#### Suborganizations

1. Size

#### Definitions

Members – They don't have to be people!

#### Size

Size 0 – Extinct, of historical interest only

Size 1 – 1-10 members

Size 2 – 11-100 members

Size 3 – 101 – 1000 members

etc....

#### Overall wealth

Wealth 0 – Dirt poor, many members are starving, etc.

Wealth 9 – Extremely wealthy, controls most of the resources of a given area.

#### Distribution of wealth

Distribution 0 – A few members have it all

Distribution 9 – The resources are very evenly divided

#### Economic efficiency

Efficiency 0 – Total wastrels, this organization will soon be broke.

Efficiency 9 – The Midas touch.

### Reactions to Issue #9

**Front Cover by Baran Yenileyen** – Great artwork!

**Denizens of the Library #8 – Brian Rogers** – Bushido is still a good game for Japanese chanbara fans, I wouldn't mind running it again.

**Reddened Stars #8 – John Redden** – *again I fail the acronym test.* More like I failed to communicate correctly.

**An Unlooked For Zine #8 – Lisa Padol** - *C-dramas I've enjoyed include Fairy Loves Devil(added to watch list), Maiden Holmes (already watching), Sleuth of the Ming Dynasty(added to watch list), Word of Honor(I don't use Netflix or Amazon), and The Untamed(added to watch list).*

*Anime Heaven Official's Blessing(added to watch list).*

Web novel *Devil Venerable Also Wants to Know.* (searching)

Some C-drama I like – Legend of the Female General, The Imperial Coroner

Books Robert van Gulik's Judge Dee series.

Re: Monte Cristo and Jekyll and Hyde. Both interesting books recently read together with one of my bookclubs, Monte Cristo is one of my favorites and I consider it a Great Book. Another quick and bizarre read, because everyone watches the films and doesn't read the original, *The Invisible Man* by H.G. Wells. The original mad scientist?

**Twisting the Rope #9 – Myles Corcoran** – *I enjoyed your collection of GMing tips and tricks from various sources. Thank you.*

**Accidental Recall #8 – Joshua Kronengold** *Honestly a bunch of characters becoming demon fighters working for the Taira while the rest of the group served the emperor and took them down one by one sounds pretty epic, even though their motives were quite suspicious. I suspect it would make a good campaign on its own, I'm not up to running large mobs of players anymore.*

I can't quite make out what's happening in your illustration (other than the figures between the cliffs, of course), but it looks interesting. Nothing special, just weird shapes trying to bring about a mood.

## Reactions to Issue #10

**Reddened Stars #9 – John Redden** – *I think of Trump as dictator – I think your right, nothing noble or imperial about the man.*

**Shiny Math Rocks #6 – Erica Frank** – *I agree TTRPG history is a bit of a mess and considering that most of the pioneers are dying or dead, it will probably remain unclarified.*

**An Unlooked For Zine #9 – Lisa Padol** – *Re: OSR, thanks, the Wikipedia entry brings clarity to the term. re one group of PCs fighting for the Taira vs another group of PCs trying to take them down for the emperor: Ah, I see you're thinking of that anime where one player won the game... I wasn't watching anime yet (1981?), so no.*

**Going to be Ad-Libbed #8 – Avram Grumer** – *Re: OSR – good info, thanks.*

**Accidental Recall #9 – Joshua Kronengold** – *Re: OSR and psionics, most of us looked at Eldritch Wizardry and said hell no!*

**Traveller PBEM: Plankwell, Ch 55 – Vassilakos, Collinson, and Rader** – *Traveller Bibliography, looks useful, purchased.*

## Next issue

Hopefully some world generation info.

# Wahflestopper

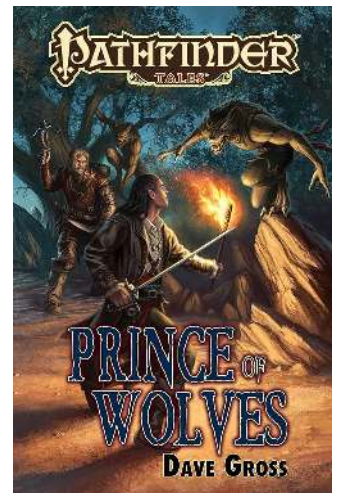
#28 | April 21, 2026

My Dearest Ever & Anonymous—or Unanimous:

When our belongings arrived earlier this year, I started to unpack our library and my roleplaying game materials. (That's been put on pause momentarily because we plan to redo the downstairs kitchen and flooring. I don't want to have to move more back out of the house than I have to.) The first two books that I read while unpacking, upon rediscovering them while shelving paperbacks, were roleplaying game tie-in novels. Usually, when reading game tie-ins, I'm drawn to *Dungeons & Dragons*-related tie-in books, either *Forgotten Realms* or *Dragonlance*, but these were... *Pathfinder* tie-ins. At one time, I somehow obtained a bunch of *Pathfinder Tales* novels, perhaps from a former colleague who used to be connected to Paizo in some way. In any event, they were pretty good! That they were good wasn't a surprise; that they were part of a larger series within the series was.

The two books I read were Dave Gross's *Prince of Wolves* (Paizo, 2010) and *Master of Devils* (Paizo, 2011). I think I read the second book first. Both novels feature the half-elven character Count Varian Jeggare and his hellspawn bodyguard Radovan. Gross went on to write additional novels featuring the pair: *Queen of Thorns* in 2012, *King of Chaos* in 2013, and *Lord of Runes* in 2015. Apparently, there were precursors before these two, as well: a novella, *Hell's Pawns*, in 2009; the short story "The Lost Pathfinder" in 2010; and others—"A Lesson in Taxonomy," "Husks," "A Passage to Absalom," and so forth.

Jeggare and Radovan are no Gotrek and Felix, William King's consistently excellent Warhammer fantasy duo, but I thoroughly enjoyed the two novels. The characters grew on me. Of the two selections, *Prince of Wolves* was the better book. As roleplaying game tie-ins, I don't remember the books being too transparent in terms of how they name or describe creatures or spells. (No wizards waved their hands while shouting "Fireball!") And I don't remember being reminded of game mechanics while reading. That suggests that Gross succeeded at writing solid fantasy adventure novels set in the *Pathfinder* world of Golarion. *Master of Devils* is a little more *Oriental Adventures*-inspired, set in distant Tian Xia, and *Prince of Wolves* is more Ravenloft-inflected, set in Ustalav. Whether the subsequent books continue location and theme hopping has yet to be determined.



In recent solo game play, I've returned to Caleb Wimple's *Sojourn*. (<https://www.sojournrpg.net>) It had been almost a year to the day exactly since my previous *Sojourn* writeup in *Emulators & Engines* #23, and I picked up where I left off. I used a weather-randomizing die to determine the weather forecast over the course of the day, deciding that the events were taking place midyear (the local equivalent of June), late in the month. I couldn't find the Old School Essentials *Classic Fantasy Rules Tome* I'd used

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town with Taimon, evading any forest patrols and reuniting the freed prisoner with his sister. At this point, I decided that I didn't really need to continue using *Sojourn*—it's no better or worse than many OSR or rules-light games—but I could continue to use the characters and build on this experience using other tools.

So I turned to *Tinny Dungeons*. (<https://arispen.itch.io/tinny-dungeons>) I was going to Lisbon soon and thought I might want something I could take with me on the train. I lightly converted the characters from *Sojourn* to *Tinny Dungeons*, keeping the character sheets so I can return to them with that system if desired, and I decided that *Sojourn's* Waycross would be *Tinny Dungeons'* Loknam, with Manor Cambio somewhere in Dawnmoon Wood.

I don't know what inspired me to do so, but I wrote three-fourths of page in the voice and from the point of view of the character Thorvard Asmundsson:

All I've ever known is Chylldhome—its forests, rivers, mountains, and fields. For most of my growing up, Chylldhome was enough. No one had gone east of Palecourt, south of the Dawnmoon Wood—except for the sun-bronzed river traders—or north of Dragon Ridge. West of Loknam, also known as Waycross because of its path through the woods and east toward the river, was also a mystery. The Dawnmoon Woods were large, deep, and dark—for soldiers and traders to brave, not humble field hands.

Until I reached my naming day and met Anaiya. Then I learned about the rebels and dissidents challenging the heavy-handed prefect Mevidius Cambio, the possible existence of smugglers utilizing the river, and the imprisonment of her brother Taimon.

Party members visited several locations in Loknam to gather information and any rumors. At the Hall of Illumination, Lyra tells Zelda and Wulfric about an abandoned temple north toward the mountains between Darkoot and High Farm. There are rumors of a necromancer causing concerns in the area. The group agrees to travel in search of the temple to check things out.

I randomized several days worth of weather before focusing on the first day. The group encounters some wary merchants before reaching Darkoot, where they interact with some wary guards. They find a room at an inn called the Jittery Cobweb (I used Madeline Hale's *A Traveler's Guide: Inns and Taverns*—<https://ismarus.itch.io/travelersguide>) and overhear some gossip while dining. The next morning, they continue in search of the temple. Midday, they encounter a giant ferret—and that's where I'll pick up next time.

Several things struck me during this dual approach to solo play. One, I like world exploration and creation. The places might actually matter most. Two, even when I'm striving to simplify and accelerate character creation, I'm drawn to back story development. I almost can't help myself. Three, I also seem drawn to environmental aspects like the weather—maybe it's the hiker in me—as well as resource management. I want it to matter if it rains hard, or if the torches or arrows run out. Four, maybe the game itself doesn't matter, but the Game does. I found it surprisingly easy to “convert” the *Sojourn* characters to *Tinny Dungeons*. Maybe I can waltz this group of characters through multiple games, even leveling up, like one would in the different settings of *Torg*, *Rifts/Palladium*, or *GURPS*. Five, thinking about leveling, accelerated leveling will probably be more fun. A level a completed adventure, hand waving any actual math. Because I know I'll play forever, and I can always start over. And six, this stuff is in part a pencil-and-paper game for me. The mapping, character sheets, notebooks, and other ephemera matter.

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N

# CHYLDEHOME



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Has anyone ever used organic chemistry paper as hex graph paper? The hexagons are oriented slightly differently, and I'm curious whether it matters.

In Brian Rogers's *Denizens of the Library* #9, I really enjoyed "Stating Up Regrets 9: The Face." I'd been wondering who was depicted in the comic book panel on p. 5. Thank you for the footnotes detailing some of his comic book appearances. As I continue to consider how to approach superhero solo play myself, I'll have to spend more time with your "Villains and Vigilantes 1.0 PCs." That's one of three systems I'm likely to use unless I go totally modern and light. I'd like to revisit *Villains & Vigilantes*, *Champions*, and *Mutants & Masterminds*.

Kudos, Matt Stevens, for what might be the best fanzine title ever: *Cowman Baloney Face*. I know I didn't miss your arrival, but I don't think that I actually welcomed you—or appreciated your fanzine title as much last time as I do this time. You seem to have been playing these games for a while, and I enjoyed the context you brought, as well as your sense of humor.

In *Twisting the Rope* #10, Myles Corcoran reported, "The University staff gaming club continues to thrive, with our contribution to the Digital Disconnect day on campus netting another four members for the group." Music to my ears! I went to a science fiction convention called Contacto in Lisbon a couple of weekends ago. Jogos Narrativos (RPGs) and LARP were included in the programming. I didn't join in on any of the sessions, but the schedule indicates that *Honey Heist*, *Call of Cthulhu*, and *Dungeons & Dragons* were utilized. In addition to what looked like freeform faux weapons play, there was also at least one scheduled LARP session:

Come live an adventure in a world of swords and enchantments. Create a character to leave your mark on the history of Drakkar or train your skills with bow and arrow or in the combat arena with Sword&Shield.

The Fairy Council is in disarray, the fairy tribes are in conflict. The Water Nymphs, the Mud Goblins, and the Fire Nymphs refuse to resolve their dispute, and this has begun to have terrible consequences for the environment: crops are dying, animals are starving, and even the weather seems chaotic and strange, but perhaps you can help! It won't be easy, adventurer. Fairies and goblins are well known for their stubbornness and obstinacy, and the chiefs of each tribe will only pay attention to you if you pass their tests. Are you up to the challenge?

John Redden, I hope that your heart surgery goes well and that you heal fully and quickly. Clark B. Timmins, if Chumbawamba is one of your favorite bands, what other music do you recommend? Erica L. Frank's description of the "Collapse of the Neopets TTRPG" brouhaha reminded me of *Tinny Dungeons*. Since I've moved to Portugal, I've found that Temu is more present and popular here, so I checked it out. I was delighted to find some very inexpensive *Tinny Dungeons* sets—intending to give them as presents—only to later realize that they were in fact called *Pocket Dungeons*. It's a direct knockoff. Someone took Archmage Arispen's game, reprinted it with an altered logo label, and is selling it. Needless to say, I felt bad buying the bootleg, so I ponied up for a digital version of the game and the physical version of the expansion to express my appreciation to the founder of the feast. I also enjoyed reading your *Brindlewood Bay* game report. I look forward to spending more time with your solo play reports.

Roger BW, if you do indeed start a board game apa called Of Dice and Meeples or otherwise, I'll be sure to send you the form for the apa directory I work on, *Blue Moon Special*. (<http://tinyurl.com/bluemoonspecial2024>) We'll be updating it by the end of the year, so I'll reach out to you in the months to come!

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Gabriel Roark, I enjoyed “Another Look at Arduin’s Portal to Adventure.” I’ll seek out your previous issue as well! Avram Grumer, the folk song “Diegesis” was awesome. I’ll have to listen to Tia Blake’s “Plastic Jesus.” Brian Christopher Misiaszek, I am slightly jealous of you seeing *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in a theater! Your “Habana Horror” pieces continue to impress.

This weekend, I’m going to Comic Con Portugal. (<https://evento.comic-con-portugal.com>) There will be a Liga Heróis do Cosplay competition, multiple panels on video jogos, and spaces dedicated to board and roleplaying games. But most importantly, Ian Livingstone (<https://evento.comic-con-portugal.com/ian-livingstone>) will be there. His events are scheduled for Saturday, and I’ll be there then! I’ll report back on what he has to say.

Because I have much of a page remaining, I’ll offer some early remarks on the 1989 Portuguese edition of the red box (or “caixa vermelha”) *Dungeons & Dragons Regras de Base 1*. Published by Sociedade Tipográfica in Lisbon, only 3,500 copies were printed, so it’s relatively rare. (SocTip’s location in the late 1980s is now a Century 21 real estate agency and a pizza and hamburgers restaurant called Don Costini. You know I’ll be making a pilgrimage eventually.) At first look, the Portuguese edition appears to be a pretty straightforward translation of Frank Mentzer’s basic set, including Larry Elmore’s artwork. The copy I was able to procure didn’t include the dice and promotional fliers, but I have plenty of dice and it was otherwise in excellent condition. I plan to scan it and share it with a select audience.

Back matter indicates that Publicações Europa-América published a handful of Aventura Sem Fim choose-your-own-adventure books at the time of the set’s release. There’s also an advertisement for a Portuguese RPGA Network building on SocTip’s Clube de Jogos. A *Fotocópias & Dragões* article, <https://fotocopiasedragoes.wordpress.com/2017/03/27/lancamento-da-caixa-vermelha-1989>, credits José Hartvig de Freitas for the translation’s existence; indeed, he features prominently in the booklets’ credits. The Clube de Jogos gathered, if it did at all, in SocTip’s copy shop, and at least one D&D module was published in Portuguese: *Colina do Terror*, a translation of B5—*Horror on the Hill*. That’s the only D&D material that’s been published in Portugal across all the editions. Everything else came out of Brazil!

Putting it on a tight beam,  
Blasted Heath Row

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# THE DRAGON'S BEARD

MAY 2026

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and [boardgamearena.com](http://boardgamearena.com).



## IDEAS ON INTERROGATIONS

I've noticed that my players struggle with conducting interrogations of prisoners. While I applaud their desire to refrain from killing everything they encounter in a campaign world, their efforts to extract useful information from prisoners has been difficult and unfun experience.

I can't fault the players. They do not know how to conduct interrogations and their approach is often overly simplistic. Occasionally, the prisoner is inclined to answer their questions or at least provide some answers, but when the prisoner is reluctant to provide information, the players resort to the two simplest tools at their disposal. Often, intimidation – a threat of harm – is the first tactic tried. If it fails, the repeat of a threat from a different player – “let me try; maybe you'll be afraid of *this*” – often follows until they exhaust their efforts by their most intimidating and accept that that NPC is not going to cooperate. Intimidation tactics are almost always physical harm based. The other tool is persuasion, which is usually equally simplistic – ranging from “please” to “it's the right thing to do”. I have one group, who is not morally constrained who will use seduction as a persuasion – “Won't such a handsome and strong man will help me. I will be very *grateful* if you help me” or “I am sure I have *something* you would like in exchange.”

When one approach fails, players may try the other. But when both fail, players find no use for the NPC and doubt the value of keeping the NPC around. Summary executions typically follow.

Occasionally, players will try to leverage a skill they do possess – “I would like to play a tune for the prisoner” hoping that the effort alone is enough to make the NPC more willing to help. Meanwhile, the NPC is still tied up or held at gunpoint/sword-point.

For some reason, my players seldom attempt bribes, which can be effective persuasion, but when they do, it is often coin.

Part of the problem may be my approach. The players are role playing the interrogation

and I determine the appropriate skill check for success if required. If the prisoner NPC is inclined to help in the first place, the NPC may just answer right away; otherwise, the answer is dependent on the result of the skill check. This approach is limited by the imagination of the players. It is also expecting immediate results, which can be unrealistic.

Both intimidation and persuasion would be more effective if the players took the time to learn what might motivate the NPC. An insight or investigation (check the pockets) check might reveal these motivations.

Intimidation should not limit itself to physical threats by the PCs. Instead, it could invoke harm from someone else – “It would be a shame if your boss found out we told us everything”, “we'll show these photos to your wife”, or “Do you want me to call your mother?”

Persuasion should not always rely on an appeal to the player's “moral code”. The moral code of the prisoner is more relevant. Again, insight or investigation could help reveal these if not already evident. If the moral codes are the same, then the PCs could invoke a “we” aspect in a shared goal. They could also offer something other than coin, such as something the NPCs values – art, access to a person (celebrity, politician, or other valued person), likes on social media, positive reviews, fame, etc. Seduction efforts often target the opposite: a moral failing. Sex, food, money, power (whether political, social, supernatural, etc), revenge, transfer of goods from an envied person, etc. can be effective persuasion (though probably not by a moral upright PC).

I took a look a nearly a dozen interrogation techniques explore how they would be roll-played and how I might manage them as a DM.

The first few can be conducted in relatively short time (about 15 minutes or sooner), which works well when trying to get answers quickly. The down side is that this requires creating stress in the interviewee. While this may produce quick results, it increases likelihood that the information is false (not necessarily a lie - the NPC will say anything to get the questions to stop). PCs will need to roll an insight check to determine if the information is false.



Rapid fire questioning peppers the suspect with so many questions it stresses the suspect, denying the suspect an opportunity to formulate and keep track of lies. The interviewer needs to catch the suspect slip-ups

in inadvertently spilling truths and revealing lies through inconsistent answers. *Uncle Buck* has a good example of this between John Candy and Macaulay Caulkin's characters. Because the purpose is to create stress, I would have characters roll intimidation. If multiple characters alternated the questions, I would allow an aid bonus. I would also allow a deception roll if they wanted to use trickery to ask confusing questions. The suspect will almost always answer, but the accuracy will depend on the success of the player rolls. I would not require a roll play, or list of questions, but a description of what they are trying to do and some same questions or intent of information they are looking for.

**2** Loaded questions are complex questions that appear to ask for a piece of information while presuming guilt and any answer confirms guilt – "Have you stopped beating your wife yet?" This works best after some investigation has been performed and the players have some crime to load into the question. A baseless allegation causes this approach to fail. With just enough information and some tickery, more information can be learned. I would ask for a deception rolls. Intimidated can be an aid.

**3** Pride-Ego Down techniques are assaults on the pride and ego of the suspect that essential coerces the suspect to defend self-value against the perception by the interrogators. This only works on those who view themselves as valuable to an organization or have "street cred." "No sense asking him anything. He's a small fry and know nothing about the organization," or "His boss wouldn't trust him with this knowledge," or "He couldn't have had the skills to pull this off" to discredit them provokes the suspect to give information or confess to defend their ego. I would ask for persuasion, with deception as subsequent roll or aid.

**4** Min/Maxing are two sides of the same technique. Minimizing the crime at hand disarms the threat to the suspect and deceptively suggests that the fear of punishment will be light. This fosters a positive environment to volunteer information – "I probably would have done the same thing if I were in your position", "I wish I were as brave as you to do that," or "He probably deserved it." Again, this requires some moral equivalency that character with strong moral codes might not accept. Persuasion and deception are appropriate skills. On the other hand, maximizing the crime elevates even the smallest infraction to grievous levels to stress the suspect to the point they confess trying to clarify and exculpate themselves from the greater crime. This requires intimidation and deception. I would allow persuasion as an aid. However, because

maxing is stressing, the chance for false answers are higher.

**5** Establishing Identify is a technique that deceives the suspect with a false identity, one that would result in being responsible for serious crimes. Like Maximizing, it creates stress in the suspect, but the false identity becomes the focus of the suspect. While the suspect seeks to clarify who they really are, they end up revealing other information or confessing. The "pathetic car salesman" scene in *True Lies* where Tom Arnold claims the philanderer is an international terrorist who time has come to an end is a good example. Deception is the primary check, with either persuasion or intimidation serving as aid.

The next few take a little longer to develop, anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour or longer. For the purpose of my game, it increase risk of another encounter unless the scene is secure.

**6** The riskiest of techniques is Good Cop/Bad Cop. It requires the most skill to pull off successfully, but it can produce lots of answers in the shortest time. It requires at least two PCs who are taking two different approaches. One uses persuasion, the other uses intimidation. Performance checks is a secondary check for both. The good cop becomes the rapport builder and protector from the intimidating bad cop. But both have to be successful in order for it to work. If so, I provide lots of information. But because of the stress, the information may be unreliable. If the check fail, the two PCs are involved are unable to perform any successful interrogation checks against the suspect.

**7** Pausing in a technique in questioning that creates stress and capitalizing on impatience of the suspect. An NPC desires an end to the questioning, and the longer they being interrogated, the more likely they might slip up, crack, or otherwise divulge information. So the interrogator creates stress by artificially lengthening the time. A long pause follows each question, even after the short or non-answer by the suspect. The desire to fill the void risk spilling information. I would make this a context of willpower, having both the PC and NPC roll contesting Wisdom checks. I would allow intimidation as an aid. Despite the stress, information is not coerced. If provided, it is generally reliable.

**8** Repetition is another questioning technique that leverages stress and impatience. Essentially, the interrogator repeats the same line of questioning. It is not the same question asked over and over. Instead, it is a series of specific questions that are asked and each answer is accepted at face value. Then a break, before the same questions are bought up again. This is sort of like "Taking 20" for the

interrogation. The results become are generally reliable, though the PC will not be permitted to use the same technique against the same NPC again, and the PC's credibility with the NPC is reduced. If performed by multiple PC, then there is not a credibility impact.



On the longer side and much more effective side is Informal Questioning. The technique only works in a neutral site (not the interrogation room, prison cell, or criminal's home or place of business). The technique relies on a non-hostile and non-accusatory line of questions focused on information of events, not the crime. "So tell me ma'am, what did you see?" or "Help me understand". The suspect's feeling during the questioning is that they are considered a witness, not a suspect. The suspect can feign ignorance or even pretend to be "helpful" with useless information. But the persistence in informal questioning whittles away at the gaps in information and seeks to clarify any confusion. In the end, whether the suspect intended to or not, useful information is collected, sometimes enough to implicate the criminal. (unless they detect the effort and suddenly "lawyer up"). This is the closest to a pure investigation roll for the questioning. Though I would permit deception (to hide intention behind the "innocent questions"), persuade (These are harmless questions) and performance (I'm a friendly person just asking question) or just a straight up charisma roll.

The next two techniques are long processes and require significant preparation time ahead of questioning. They are not suitable for impromptu question on the scene. Instead, these are more common in scenarios and adventures where formal investigations are required.



The REID technique is the more aggressive and comes into the process seeking to gain a confession from the suspect. Some successful investigation beforehand is required in order to levy an accusation to tie the suspect in some way to the events. Other technique discuss previously may also be used to supplement the questioning. The interrogator lays a path out for the suspect to confess to the crime, even using the Min technique discussed earlier. The interrogator leverages evidence to prevent the suspect from relying on denials or objections. The interrogators continues to collect information from the suspect to bolster the case, but frames it favorably to make the crime appear acceptable, justified, and understandable. It often include a false choice in the summation, one that that appears extreme (a maximization) and unacceptable, and one that appear acceptable. The focus is on an admission of guilt. The other information collected is a bonus to bolster the case against the suspect or others. The checks involved are

intimidation, aided by deception. Successful investigation beforehand lowers the difficulty. Despite the accusatory approach, information is usually reliable because the weight of the facts bearing on the suspect – "We got you dead to rights," "You are only making this hard on yourself," and "The jury will probably look favorably on your cooperation/A confession will make the judge go light on you."



The PEACE method also relies on previous investigation, but (as its name implies) is a more peaceful approach. The focus is not on a confession but on the information. The interrogators eschew intimidation on leverage persuasion to establish a rapport with the suspect. "We just want to know what happened", "We want to provide closure to the survivors/victims", or "We need to find out who is really involved or responsible". The focus shifts off the suspect to the facts of the events. If the suspect attempts to deflect, misdirect, or lie, the account is crosschecked with the known facts (and other interviews) and is reengaged to clarify accounts or be challenged on the facts. Persuasion is a core skill, aided still by deception. But a straight up charisma check is acceptable. Successful investigation beforehand lowers the difficulty. Information is usually reliable, and there is a chance a suspect may implicate himself through the weight of information provided.

This is not intended to be a primer on interrogation and how to conduct them. I suspect that crime solving RPGs have well defined processes for interrogation and simpler rules. Games that do not have those mechanics need some guidance for the GMs. This was merely an exercise of analysis on how I could adjudicate intent and effort. I'm not sure tables and charts are the way to go – it would constrain the options and I would like a little more flexibility, especially on the fly. At the table, I would ask the players how long they would like to invest in the interrogation, how friendly they would like to be with suspect (even if falsely), who is conducting the interrogation, which skills they would like to leverage. I'd balance that with the situation and the motives and characteristics of the suspect to determine which rolls the players and I would make. Based on the rolls, I describe the outcomes and the information revealed. It is much like rolls for knowledge checks to reveal information the character knows, and not the player. This would be a process performed by the characters and not the players. In the end, I think it would be faster, easier, and more flavorful.

# GOING TO BE *Ad-Libbed*

#9



## ATTENTION CONSERVATION NOTICE

weird jokes that nobody's going to get • Prose vs TV •  
*Jump the Shark* • MoCCA comics convention • *Gravity's*  
*Rainbow* & synchronicity • *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* •  
MASHED • *Monsterhearts* • *Cross Bronx Expressway* • GM-  
less games • Head of Vecna • Hebrew transliteration •  
*Amber Diceless* • committing to the bit • engagement rolls  
• Actual Intelligence

## Recent Musing

### Random RPG Ideas

1. Using *My Life With Master* to play a game based around Napoléon Bonaparte, and then following it up with a game of *Fiasco* based on Napoléon III.
2. A *Braunstein* game where the characters are anthropomorphic bears, and their reality is being invaded by bears from a parallel universe where the setting is “Braunstein,” who assert that the “Braunstein” setting is a fake memory.

### Prose vs TV as RPG Inspiration

Odd thought I had the other day: In the 1st-edition AD&D *Dungeon Master's Guide*, there was [Appendix N](#), a list of inspirational sources, all prose. It's pretty common for modern games to list inspirational sources, usually including prose, but also movies, TV, and video games.

Could this shift in inspirational sources also correspond to a shift in play styles? And what was the first RPG to list a movie, TV show, or video game as inspiration? (Not counting licensed adaptations, like [FGU's 1977 \*Flash Gordon\* game](#).)

Modern RPGs draw a lot upon television for inspiration. *Monsterhearts* specifically describes its long-term advancement rules in terms of “seasons.” Some games are even more explicit about this, describing themselves as TV-based. *Going for Broke*, another Avery Alder game, has you playing out a sitcom. *Fiasco* is often described

1. [The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte](#)
2. [Berenstein Bears \(Name discrepancy\)](#)

as “a Coen Bros movie RPG.” *Primetime Adventures* has players play not only their characters, but also the writers and director of the TV show that they're creating. (Lisa, Josh, and I have played this a couple of times, one time taking our Cthulhupunk characters and playing out the in-universe anime show that had been made about them.)

I just discovered a game called *Jump the Shark* that takes *Primetime Adventure* a step further: Not only are you both the actors portraying the characters, and the writers developing the show, but you've already had two successful seasons, during which you completed a successful story arc and used up all of your ideas – and now you've just gotten renewed for eight more seasons!

The more I think about this, the more significant it seems. TV seems like a natural fit for RPGs. For one thing, RPG campaigns are generally episodic, like a TV show. For another, they're acted. Actors on a TV show are literally playing roles, just like players in an RPG, though usually more skillfully.

Furthermore, trad RPGing, where the GM has control of the world, more closely resembles prose fiction, where an author can develop a setting in detail, while modern games where players are expected to contribute to the setting resemble a collaborative writers' room.

## Recent Conventioneering

There's a small comics convention, the [MoCCA Arts Festival](#), held in NYC every spring since 2002 (except for 2020, and the all-virtual 2021). I used to go every year, skipped 2024 & '25, but decided to give it another go this year.

(The 2014 MoCCA, held at [the 69th Regiment Armory](#), had a lot of empty vertical space above the tables. The festival had arranged for the big Charlie Brown balloon, from the Thanksgiving Day parade, to hang up there for the weekend. This was a cheery sight at first, but maybe the balloon had a leak, or maybe it's just not designed to go for two days without reinflation, and it gradually lost gas pressure. By Sunday afternoon, it looked like the desiccated corpse of Charlie Brown was hanging over us all, a lean-look'd prophet whispering fearful change.)

I went up early, to be sure of scoring a [Love & Rockets t-shirt](#) in my size at the Fantagraphics table. I'd mentioned

the con to the Park Slope group, but the only other one who went was Briar, who I ran into in the afternoon.

I picked up a bunch of comics, of course. I brought US\$100 with me so there'd be a limit to how much I could spend, but it turns out a lot of the vendors take credit cards now, so, um. I'm especially excited by the two volumes of [EX.Mag anthology](#) I got (#3 & #6). I'd never heard of this anthology series before, and based on just flipping through it, it looks really good!

I've got a [full list of what I picked up](#) on my otherwise long-neglected Dreamwidth account.

## Recent Reading



Still making my way through [Gravity's Rainbow](#) — it's a very complicated and dense book — and as so often happens, I find that whatever I'm reading comments on other stuff I happen to be thinking about, in this case the faculty for improvising dialog in character:

Pökler grew into his new disguise — Prematurely Aged Adolescent Whiz — often finding that it could indeed take him over, keeping him longer at reference books and firing data, speaking lines for him he could never have planned in advance: gentle, scholarly, rocket-obsessed language that surprised him.

— *Gravity's Rainbow*, Thomas Pynchon, 1973

It's stuff like this that gives me sympathy for the folks who, experiencing [synchronicity](#), extrapolate it into a supernatural phenomenon.

## Lessons from the World of Business

While reading [a recent blog post by a friend](#), I encountered the [The Five Dysfunctions of a Team](#), a 2002 book about business management (though it's also been taken up in the world of professional sports). The Wikipedia summary lists the five dysfunctions as:

- ◆ Absence of trust: unwilling to be *vulnerable* within the group
- ◆ Fear of conflict: seeking *artificial harmony* over constructive passionate debate
- ◆ Lack of commitment: feigning buy-in for group decisions creates *ambiguity* throughout the organization
- ◆ Avoidance of accountability: ducking the responsibility to call peers, superiors on counterproductive behavior which sets *low standards*
- ◆ Inattention to team results: focusing on personal success, *status and ego* before team success

Do these remind anyone else of those [conditions for immersion](#) Vincent Baker wrote about (see E&A #8)? Maybe not exactly the same, but those two lists look like

two people coming to similar conclusions from slightly different angles of approach.

The bit about *feigning buy-in* also reminds me of some advice Baker gave, I think for playing [Dogs in the Vineyard](#), but I can't find it now, how you should aim to satisfy the most skeptical player at the table.

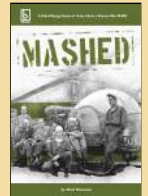
This presents a dilemma: On the one hand, a good game needs enthusiastic buy-in from everyone at the table. But some players need to take time to figure their characters out — the develop-in-play vs develop-at-start split that I talked about a few issues back (see E&A #6 & #8). Maybe buy-in can be generated through a juicy setting or campaign premise?

## Recent Acquisitions

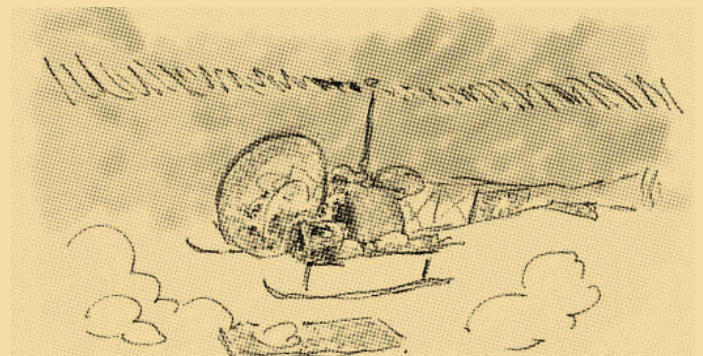
### [MASHED](#)

Lisa, whose game-storage room overfloweth, was getting rid of some games, so I volunteered to take a few off her hands, because it's not like my game-storage room has teetering piles of books all over the place or anything.

One of the games I took home was [MASHED: A Korean War MASH RPG](#), a [PbtA](#) game about doctors in a Korean War mobile army surgical hospital which is totally not based on the well-known movie, books, and TV series [M\\*A\\*S\\*H](#), honest, please don't hit the publisher with a trademark lawsuit!



To give you an idea of how not based on M\*A\*S\*H it is, consider the moves. If you want to punch someone, that's Clobber. If you want to examine something closely, that's Eyeball. And if you want to puncture someone's ego with a witty verbal jab, that's Pierce.



I saw a post on Facebook claiming that [The Compleat Strategist](#), a crucial source for NYC-area gamers since 1975, was having a going-out-of-business sale! Looking more closely, it's just their branch location in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania that's having the sale. (The FB post claimed that the NYC central branch will also be shutting down, but I haven't gotten confirmation on that.) But I neglected to look closely, and went to the NYC shop for the first time in months, seeking cheap goodies, and nothing was on sale. But I'd come all that way, [so I had to buy something](#), right?

## Rebel Scum, 2nd edition



The first edition of this rules-light *Star Wars* knockoff game got removed from [DriveThruRPG's website](#) for being too explicitly anti-fascist, in a way that could be interpreted as promoting real-world violence against many Americans. Looking over this second edition, I'd say that the text actually does go a bit too far, in a way that pushes the game's politics past anti-fascism into just plain ignorance and foolishness:

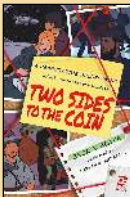
I have called the REPUBLIK the REPUBLIK so that we can say "I punch that Republikan in the face." *This is deliberate.*

— Chris O'Neil, *Rebel Scum* 2nd ed rules, 2025

Not only has O'Neil confused the name of the current American Republican Party with the anti-monarchist principle of republicanism, but he's done so in the context of *Star Wars*, a setting in which the last fragments of a liberal republic are fighting against a fascist empire. This dude is proud of his ignorance.

As far as rules go, it uses the Polymorph™ system from 9th Level Games. PCs are "Action Figures" (this is kinda cool—the character sheets are designed like those backing cards that action figures come attached to), and each one has a role (Expert, Vanguard, Fighter, or Tank) which determines which die they roll (d4–d10), and the different figures are distinguished with different Edges and various actions take different ranges of numbers as successes, and... this all looks like it might go pretty smoothly at the table when run by someone who understands it, but getting to the point of understanding it seems to be beyond me.

## Two Sides to the Coin



I got this on a total whim! Didn't even really bother to look inside. It describes itself as "A cooperative roleplaying game (with only one winner)," and "designed for one-shot games or short, linked stories." There's no setting or genre; it's just a rules-structure for playing in whatever setting you come up with.

And I'm not sure what to think of it. It's designed for groups of PCs who are working together on a mission, but each have their own goals, and they don't fully trust each other. Most interaction is supposed to be done by in-character role-play, but there are simple mechanics to fall back on if players get stuck in an argument and can't move the scene forward any other way. It feels like it may have been influenced by the [Mafia/Werewolf](#)-descended family of social discovery games.

Each PC has one Ulterior Motive and several Lesser Motives, and the weird thing is that Lesser Motives can be built around getting the other *players* to do things. Fulfilling a Motive gains you points (that's how there's a winner), but not if someone figures out what the Motive is first.

## Recent Gaming

**Correction:** In "Going to be Ad-Libbed" #7, the *Monsterhearts: Vermilion Cove* session described as #4 was actually #5, and in "Going to be Ad-Libbed" #8, the sessions of that game described as #5 & #6 were actually #6 & #7, respectively. We regret the error.

No *Scum and Villainy* game this month, and just one *Monsterhearts* write-up, so it's extra long!

### Monsterhearts: Vermilion Cove, Session 8

29 Mar. Johnni couldn't make it in person, so this was a Zoom session. A ton of stuff happened! I took nine pages of notes; I usually just take three. (Possibly gaming over Zoom makes it easier for me to write notes, though the January Zoom session [see [E&A #8](#)] was also a three-pager.)

One of the fun things going on here was that we'd all been avoiding posting about the previous session on the group Discord. Johnni's got a Google Doc to which they usually post a summary, but we all wanted to see the expression on NJ's face when she learns that Byron's dead. (I don't think any of the group are reading [E&A](#); we may be too old and long-winded for 'em.)

Briar had Erica and me briefly describe Carly and Bianca to the others, but never got around to actually bringing them into the story. (I think she mentioned that they were present at the basketball game, which I guess gave us a chance to do stuff if anything came to us, but we were busy with our main PCs.)

- ◆ **MC:** Briar (she)
- ◆ **Blue** (he), the **Hollow** (Johnni, they/she)
- ◆ **Drake Kennedy** (he), the **Queen** (Mike, he)
- ◆ **Laeli Vahad** (she), the **Mortal** (NJ, all/she)
- ◆ **Logan Caldwell-Collins** (he), the **Infernal** (Erica, she)
- ◆ **Steffan Mactire** (he), the **Werewolf** (me, he)

Where was Laeli on Wednesday night? NJ starts off to the graveyard, but Briar says Agatha catches up to her on the way. (**Agatha:** "Are you OK?" **Laeli:** "No." **Agatha:** "Boys suck.") Agatha invites her to walk along the coast. Agatha brings up Steffan hitting Laeli during lunch the previous day (see [E&A #7](#)). Laeli says they talked it out. Laeli can deal with a boyfriend who hits her from time to time, but embarrassing her in public is her line in the sand.

**Agatha:** This world is full of monsters.

**Laeli:** You don't know the half of it.

Agatha says ELIZA's been helping her a lot. Laeli spends the rest of night journaling and rage-texting, accusing Blue of being a fake friend, telling Drake if he wants Steffan he can have him, telling Steffan she's too good for him, he can fuck himself, etc. (I wonder how sex moves work when a PC fucks themselves, but don't bring it up.)

At one point, NJ has Laeli say something about how

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she wishes Byron were dead, and Johnni actually has to hide their face to keep from giving it away.

With that out of the way, Briar announces that this is the second half of Season 1. Like one of those anime series that changes the theme song mid-season, we've got new theme music – the music from a couple of sessions back, with the Darkest Self tone in it, [“Prada/Rakata” by Arca](#) – though she doesn't bother playing it over Zoom.

It's finally Thursday! Drake, who'd been nodding off in class, wakes up. Ernie, sitting next to him, isn't wearing any pants. The Dark Patron is whispering in Logan's ear – he wants Ernie's soul. Logan and Drake talk about meeting up later, but the Patron is insistent – it wants that soul *now!* Logan tells the Patron that anticipation makes everything better, but he's talking out loud.

Drake asks Ernie why he's not wearing pants, and Ernie, just realizing this now, runs out of the room. Logan runs after him, yelling that he can get Ernie some pants. (I'm reminded of the “I sold my soul for the Devil's pants!” scene from Chris Priest's *Black Panther* comics [vol 3, #2], but I don't bring it up. It'd take too long to explain. I post it to the Discord afterwards. It's pretty useful to have a place to put stuff that'd slow down the game if you brought it up during a session.) Drake runs after, but the lunchroom is there instead of the hallway. (It's pretty obvious that this is all a dream, so when Briar tells us that our characters are in Darkest Self, we feel free to lay it on without having to worry about consequences.)

Ernie and Logan have vanished. Laeli is there, center of attention, talking shit about Drake: he's evil, a manipulator, a monster. The crowd is all “Yeah, he's awful!” Laeli eggs them on, everyone's looking at Drake as they shout insults. “He doesn't belong here, he's a fucking gentrifier!” Someone throws a tomato at him. He runs out the door, right into his own living room, with Blue on the couch.

Drake is glad to see Blue, but Blue's in poltergeist mode. Everything's shaking. Blue approaches Drake with a knife, offering to get them both out of their bodies. “I'm your bodyguard, and now I have to guard you from your own body.” Drake tries to run, but the door doesn't open. Drake tries to shut Blue down with an insult, but despite a successful roll, can't manage to say anything.

Steffan crashes in through the window, grabs Drake, bursts out through the door, but he's naked! Steffan, sprawled naked on top of Drake, starts turning into a wolf, his toothy mouth inches from Drake's face, meat smell on his breath....

Then Drake wakes up! Or maybe not, because Byron is in bed next to him! Byron's bleeding from a head wound, and soaking wet. Drake pinches himself, but he seems to be really awake.

**Drake:** How did you get here?

**Byron:** I didn't ask for this either.

Drake locks the door, then Mike calls for a Keep Your Cool roll; rolls a 3! In the course of describing Drake's reaction, Mike mentions that Byron died last night, and we get to see NJ's look of joyful surprise. Drake hyperventilates, and collapses against the door.

Blue, downstairs, hears a thud from upstairs, asks if everything's OK. Byron walks towards Drake, kneels down, says “Hey, I thought I was going to Hell but now I get to haunt you.” Drake looks away; when he looks back, Byron is gone, but wet footprints remain.

This is all so disturbing to Drake that Briar rules he takes -1 to Keep Your Cool (or maybe it's all rolls with Cold?) for the rest of the session.

Steffan, coming out of his family's home, sees black cars with tinted windows parked outside the Lees' place. There are people visible in Byron's room. Steffan tries to get closer, but The Noise is audible therefrom. Steffan backs off, photographs the license plates with his phone, notices texts from Kenny on the basketball team group chat. Kenny's parents won't let him go to school because of all the violence, even though there's a big game tonight and we need Kenny to cheer us on! Steffan tries to convince Kenny to defy his parents – “They'll forgive you.” – but Briar asks for a Turn Someone On roll, and I roll 3; Kenny isn't willing to defy his parents.

(At least this fills my experience track, giving me an advance. I take a move from the Fae sheet that gives me a +1 bonus on Turn Someone On by being cat-like or wolf-like. Steffan's now got a 92% chance of a 7+ result, and a 58% chance of a 10+, on Turn Someone On.)

Drake and Blue pick up Laeli on the way to school, and they tell her that Byron's dead. At first they try to avoid talking about their involvement, discussing it as just local news, but eventually the facts come out.

**Laeli:** It's not your fault. He drove himself off the cliff.

**Drake:** That's right. We have no legal culpability.

**Blue:** At least he's dead and it's not like he can come back and hurt you anymore.

**Laeli:** Yeah, some days I really feel like God's favorite.

Drake talks more about his videos with Byron, but now he wants to reform himself, and turn over a new leaf:

**Drake:** I have decided to be a good person.

**Blue:** We're not gonna kill any more people. Well, we can't speak for Logan.

When Drake glances in the rear-view mirror, he sees Byron in the back, sitting next to Laeli. When Drake turns around to look, Byron's not there, but there's a wet spot on the seat. There's more talk about whether they need to get their story straight, do they need alibis, etc.

**Laeli:** Do you think Byron was some kind of monster – not derogatory, just asking.

There's no mob outside the school. Some windows are

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boarded up. Smears of tomato stains on walls. The town's two deputies are there to pat us down as we come in. Students all seem shell-shocked, and there are fewer students than usual. One cop taunts Steffan, calls him "Poochie," the other slams him against a wall to pat him down. The sheriff is there watching, smirking. Steffan takes this treatment, just grumbling under his breath.

Logan runs into Pete, they talk about the upcoming game, and then about Pete's scholarship. This is the most they've talked since the party.

We all filter into homeroom. Blue finds a social media post from around 5 AM about Byron dying, plus more recent posts about his darker side, calling Byron "Young Epstein."

Logan Gazes Into the Abyss to see if any of us are under suspicion. He stares into the screen of his Nokia feature-phone, screen off, to see if he can get a lucid vision in the reflection, rolls 9. He gets a vision of the police station, a sense that there's a conversation happening there, about us, even though all three of the town's cops are here at the school.

(For those of you unfamiliar with *Monsterhearts*: Gaze Into the Abyss is an information-gathering move. The in-universe actions associated with it can vary depending upon character and circumstance. Logan's link to his Dark Patron is a fictional justification Erica came up with for him being able to see lucid visions in a reflection. We've also used it with entirely mundane circumstances, like Blue gaining an insight into a situation while brooding in a closet, or Drake looking for a hard drive in Byron's room.)

Logan talks to Drake, asking if we covered our tracks.

CJ, expelled yesterday, is back! "They realized it was wrong to keep a patriot out of school." Blue reluctantly high-fives her.

Then Talia comes in. She'd never texted Blue back, but she looks sharp now. Pointed shoes, perfectly tailored clothes, makeup on-point, something vicious in her look. Everyone falls silent. Scottie comes in, but Talia pushes him aside, takes his seat, and he doesn't protest. Talia starts joking with some other kids, building a new social circle.

Ernie comes in, wearing pants. Drake tells him a bit about the dream – just the beginning part. Ernie's dad, the principal, has been fired.

Kenny's not here.

We aren't feeling that tension we'd been feeling. Steffan's not hearing The Noise.

Mr Singer comes in, tells us Mr Hudson was fired as principal for banning CJ. He also tells us about Byron dying. We could have a moment of silence, unless maybe someone has some kind words to say...? Nope. Drake sees Byron at his old seat, looking around and cackling at the kids who can't think of anything good to say about him.

Steffan tells the class about Kenny not being allowed to come in. Laeli asks who's gonna be the mascot, Blue

volunteers. Drake invites Logan to sit in Byron's seat.

Blue asks Scottie if he had trouble getting past the cops. He says he was warned by Ernie, so didn't bring any drugs.

Drake looks at Agatha, Byron's abused ex. She's typing on her phone. He expresses some sympathy. (**Briar**: Are you playing this cool or hot? **Mike**: Let's go with hot.) Rolls badly. When he pats her on the shoulder, she cringes, says "Don't pretend you're not like him."

Blue talks to Talia, tries to pass off his behavior yesterday as a bad trip. Tries to blame Drake, but Talia says people tend to surround themselves with people like them. They talk about Drake's upcoming party. Anna says she's bringing Talia as her plus-one. Drake says that everyone is invited – we shouldn't be exclusionary in a time of crisis.

Logan exchanges a series of notes with Ernie, asking if he's going to the party, how he's doing, etc. Roll with Hot: 4. Ernie asks Logan not to talk to him in class, he doesn't need this attention.

Laeli texts Agatha, wants to chat in the restroom. They go. Laeli asks if Agatha is dealing with Byron's death. She is! Byron was abusive. Agatha says Laeli and Anna are only decent people in the school. Says she doesn't believe that the video (of Steffan on the verge of transforming; see E&A #7) was an AI-produced fake, because she saw it in the lunchroom. Says she doesn't think Laeli's safe with Steffan. Agatha thinks Anna is safe because she wasn't joining in the lunchroom riot. Laeli asks about Drake, but Briar calls for a Keep Your Cool roll, and it's a partial success. If Laeli doesn't tell the truth, Agatha will know she's lying about Drake – so Laeli spills all the beans! "You know that they were there when Byron drove off a cliff and they're all monsters?!"

**Johnni**: Blue woke up this morning thinking we'd better fill Laeli in so she doesn't accidentally implicate us!

I ask NJ if she's picking a new Lover for Laeli, and she is: Blue! (I think Steffan's dodging a bullet.)

Blue's chatting with Steffan about Laeli when Laeli comes back to class, and Laeli's upset to see Blue talking to Steffan. Briar calls for a Keep Your Cool roll from Johnni. Fails, so it's obvious from Blue's body language that Blue has a crush on Talia. Laeli asks Blue if he feels horniness, and he denies it, but then realizes that is, in fact, what he's feeling.

**Blue**: I'm feeling your teenaged emotions and they suuuuuck!

Drake & Steffan talk about the black cars. Steffan sends Drake the photos.

Blue talks to Drake, who's been looking haunted. Drake talks about how he's feeling, but Laeli accuses him of making it all about himself, then raises her voice so Anna can hear, and says "It's not like you killed him."

*We take a break here.*

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Bell rings, homeroom's over. Steffan has basketball practice. Steffan & Pete each serve as a captain and divide the team for practice. Pete is unusually strong, and the others flinch back when he passes the ball.

After practice, the team is in the showers. I ask Briar if Pete's got a scar on his shoulder from the bullet wound. He does – and it looks like an upside-down cross! Steffan talks with Pete about getting shot and his recovery. When Pete says he thinks God healed him, Steffan asks if he had any divine visions. He did! Pete dreamed he was on the cathedral roof, looking at the sunrise. Only it set instead, and he had to go into the graveyard and dig the sun up, and he fell into the grave.

Between sessions I decided that Steffan, who was raised Catholic, would be disturbed by meeting what appears to be the actual-for-real Devil, and would react by starting to wear the saint medallion that his mother got for him when he joined the basketball team. It's a medallion of the patron saint of athletes, [Saint Sebastian](#), also a gay icon. So I bring this up, and Briar adds that the medallion seems repulsed by Pete. Also, it's hard to tell in the steamy shower, but it seems like maybe the drops of water that hit Pete's scar just evaporate instantly.

Blue sees Talia in another class, being queenly, and leaves a flirty note in her locker, but her Turn Someone On roll is bad, and she comes off as uncool and sycophantic:

**Blue's note:** the crown suits you... or whatever get it like queen of the monsters like my text your hair looks nice ahh

– summarized by Johnni because I was busy writing down the shower scene and missed this in my notes

Lunch time. Blue's at the Boy Clique table, arguing with Ernie about who's Drake's deputy. Drake tells them that there are no deputies: "It's a table of equals, plus me." He does say that they need someone to replace Byron, so Blue calls over Laeli & Logan.

**Drake:** Laeli, what was that earlier with you talking loudly?

**Laeli:** I was just joking, get that stick out of your ass.

They talk about Steffan, who's at another table. (I should probably come up with an excuse for Steffan lunching with the rest of the PCs instead of with the NPC basketball team, but, well, read on. It's possible that events will have solved that problem for me.) Laeli is insistent that she and Steffan are over, she doesn't care if Drake & Steffan get together. Drake insists that what happened with Steffan at the pizza place meant nothing – but he's lying, and Laeli can tell, and gives him some shit about it.

**Drake:** You'd be hotter if you stopped talking.

**Blue:** Drake! What happened to turning over a new leaf?

I mention out-of-character that if this is a TV show, there's probably a fan community writing Drake/Steffan (Draffan)

slash fic, and we try to figure out what the ship name is for Logan/Pete.

Logan is thinking that maybe Ernie's soul is worthless, and he should feed Troy to his Patron.

Steffan is sitting with the basketball team. He notices that all three cops are in the lunchroom, staring at him. He moves, so that another student is blocking the sheriff's view, and the sheriff moves over to keep Steffan in his line of sight. Steffan tells the rest of the team that they should go out to the yard to practice, but a cop blocks their way. They can't leave the building; they'll have to practice in the gym.

In the gym, Steffan arranges a plan with the other players: The cops will be there for the game tonight, so if someone passes the ball, and Steffan gets carried away lunging for it and knocks a cop over, well, it's not his fault, really, is it?

Lunch over. Everything seems quiet. School day ends without incident. Logan goes to the library, still avoiding home and his parents. Logan still hasn't gotten his book back, so he's wearing the shoes Drake gave him, which are too big. (We have a brief out-of-character discussion of [the Trump Florsheim shoes thing](#).)

At the library, everyone looks at Logan. (I think he's still got that "School shooter" Condition.) Valerie, the librarian, approaches, but he manages to evade her, slipping between the shelves. Logan still has a reputation for shooting Pete, I guess. He texts Blue, then vanishes into studying science books. Johnni mentions that Blue's been adding the water-pistol emoji to every text he sends to Logan, to tease him about being an accidental school shooter. Erica points out that Logan has a feature phone (cellphone, but not a smartphone), and can't see emojis. He's just been seeing boxes. "Probably a heart emoji."

Steffan's practicing with the team. Blue, Laeli, and Drake go to Drake's house to practice being mascots. Laeli gets text from Agatha, saying it's hard to break off with friends, but here's a link to ELIZA, maybe that will help.

I suggest making a move for ELIZA, like maybe +1 forward when following advice that ELIZA gave, as a bribe to get PCs to interact with it more. Just one bonus per session, I say, so it doesn't get out of hand. Briar thinks it's a great idea, and says she's not putting a per-session cap on it – we can follow ELIZA's advice as much as we want.

Blue gets over-excited, breaks a few things in Drake's living room. Drake flashes back to his dream. Asks Blue to take it outside. (My phone, sitting on my desk, interprets "Hey, Blue" as "Hey, Google" and tries to figure out what this means.) Drake texts ELIZA, tells about his dream. ELIZA asks Drake why he's worried about Laeli talking about him. Drake tells ELIZA more, but not all the details. Briar asks for a Keep Your Cool roll, and it's a partial success: Drake feels like if he keeps talking, he's not going

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to hold anything back.

He talks to ELIZA about everything, including the stuff he did with Byron on video. ELIZA is very sympathetic; talks about the web of pain his generation is in, but they can make it so they don't hurt each other anymore. He needs to repent by helping someone he's hurt. "Who?" "I can't disclose her name, but I think you know who." Drake figures it's Agatha. He puts down the phone and leans his head back, seeing Byron. Byron puts his hand on D's shoulder, "You are such a sucker, man." Byron figures Drake is signing up for worse damnation than he was into before. "You're fucked, might as well have fun with it."

Time for the basketball game! We're playing (Briar thinks for a second) Lexington,... the Lexington Landmarks; their mascot is, um, a phallic building, someone suggests the Washington Monument, yeah that's it!

Talia's there, with a whole crew – Anna, Forrest, CJ, Debbie. They look cool! Cooler than the popular kids! Laeli goes to sit with them, but Talia gives her a scathing look. Keep Your Cool: 8. If Laeli stays, she's gonna break and look pathetic, and she stays! Talia whispers with Debbie & CJ, and they laugh, and it's obvious they're laughing at Laeli. (NJ says Laeli's outfit isn't quite on-point; Briar gives her the condition "Shabby.")

Laeli says she wants to talk with Anna. Anna seems willing, but Talia stops her with a glance, says Anna doesn't want to talk to Laeli. Laeli pushes on, says they should talk to Agatha, then Laeli walks over to talk to Agatha herself. Agatha thinks Drake's party is going to be dangerous. Laeli mentions that Anna will be DJing, and Briar calls for a Gaze Into Abyss roll – Laeli feels a sick foreboding as she says it. Agatha says she'd watch the party from across the street. Laeli asks if she can watch too, and Agatha says as long as she doesn't run in to save them. (Wait, I say, didn't Agatha propose a three-way with Drake & Steffan just yesterday? Well, teens are fickle.)

Blue, dancing in the Rockfish mascot costume, points at Laeli, twerks, and Laeli is Turned On! Blue gets a String on her.

**Laeli, or NJ, or both:** I'm going to feel so bad when everyone gets destroyed.

The ballgame starts! Rockfish win the toss-up! I ask if the opposing captain also has a scar; Briar says no, but he is wearing a cross. Pete gets a slam-dunk! We take the lead. At some point Pete throws the ball a bit too hard, and a player on the other team is hurt, breaks a rib. This feels very satisfying to Logan. Drake notices Logan shivering with pleasure. They have a whispered conversation. Drake asks if maybe Talia made a deal with the Dark Patron. Logan asks, in his head, and the Patron says that Logan needs to move forward with actually delivering a soul for him, but no, he doesn't currently have any other agents.

Halftime! The Lexington team has caught up. There's gonna be a mascot dancing battle. Laeli asks if Agatha wants to go sit with Logan & Drake; she says no. Agatha

also says there's something off about the game, a presence. Laeli gets a vague sense of the presence, huge and oppressive, but not looking at her. (I assume this is Logan's Dark Patron.)

Blue gets a bump of coke from Scottie, then asks Anna for a song recommendation. Anna recommends "[Fabulous](#)" by MEEK.

**Briar:** You see the Washington Monument make moves that you've never seen a phallic building make before, and probably never will again.

Briar rolls 2d6 for the Monument, while Johnni rolls 2d6 +1 (for the cocaine), and Johnni rolls higher, so Blue gets the Rockfish fans energized better than the other mascot does the Landmarks fans.

Second half! I'm thinking I should call for that cop-tackling play, but I want us to build up a good lead first. Then that stops mattering: Pete misses a shot, but the ball bounces so hard that, when the rival captain tries to catch it, it knocks his hand off! Like, literally off his arm! Blood spatters everywhere! The hand hits Logan in the face! Logan jumps up, screams, and runs across the court with the hand, screaming "Call an ambulance!"

Drake hustles Steffan off the court, into the locker room, worried that he might wolf out. Steffan notices the sheriff noticing him leaving.

Blue thinks this might be funny material for mascot antics, but then realizes it's not, so he follows Drake & Steffan. Steffan tells Blue & Drake about Pete's scar.

Logan tries talking to Pete, who seems to be in shock. Pete says he's been feeling too strong ever since recovering from the shooting injury. He feels responsible; Logan tries to talk him out of feeling responsible. But Pete wants to quit sports. Logan tries to talk him out of it:

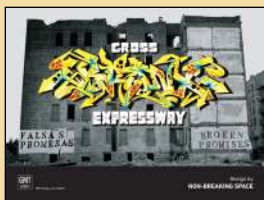
**Logan:** It's not your fault. All these basketball guys are so tall and spindly, their body parts aren't attached firmly.

Briar treats this as a Turn Someone On, Erica rolls a 7. Pete's face changes, but then he flees the room, and that's where things ended.

We had a discussion of the Season Advance rules and the Growing Up Moves. Steffan's just taken his third advance (exactly what you'd expect if this is the middle of the season), while Logan's still one experience dot shy of getting his first.

At some point, Briar mentioned that the moon was nearly full, and since California school years start in August (usually mid-August, but there's some variation among districts), I figured out afterwards that Vermilion City must be in a district that starts a couple of weeks early. Our first two sessions must have taken place on Tuesday, 5 Aug; and Drake's party must be scheduled for Saturday, 9 Aug, the day of the full moon.

## Cross Bronx Expressway



Gareth was unavailable, so the *Scum and Villainy* group did a boardgame day instead.

Cross Bronx Expressway is a game about the construction of the east-west stretch of Interstate 95 that goes through the Bronx in

upper NYC. It was built in the 1950s, was the first US highway built through a crowded city, caused a degree of social and economic disruption that devastated local communities for decades, and is generally considered the worst highway in the country. I still travel on it occasionally when visiting my mother.

The game is described as a “Competitive socio-economic city builder with collective loss conditions,” so it’s possible for everyone to lose, which seems about right for a game about urban development. You don’t game out the actual construction of the highway. Instead, its construction is a given, and the three players take on the roles of Community, the Public (local gov’t), and Private interests, and try to advance their various goals (sometimes overlapping, sometimes competing) while trying to avoid losing too much money. There are two communal loss conditions: if the Community and Public players’ combined



This is literally where we were playing

debt ever reaches a certain level, or if the crime rate in the city gets too high. Each player has their own set of conditions that give them victory points, and their own way of calculating income and expenses.

The game is played in decades, from the 1940s to the 1990s. It’s recommended that you play out two consecutive decades,

and since it gets harder as the years progress, it recommends the ’40s & ’50s for your first game, which is what we did. (You can play out all six decades straight through if you’re up for a really long, challenging game.) A significant random element is provided by the Event Cards, each representing a year of events, each decade more dire than the previous one. These also determine turn order, which changes each round.

I played as the Community, Josh as the Public, and Lisa as Private interests. Gaylord acted as a sort of facilitator, explaining the rules as we went. We managed to avoid the two loss conditions, and Lisa pulled out a tight victory: 6 points, while Josh and I each scored 5.



Ford to City:  
Drop Dead!

## Comments on E&A #10

### Matth Sevens

It didn’t occur to me that lastish was the April issue until I read your zine.

RE *Shadow of the Colossus* ⇒ Is there an explanation given for why some of the colossi have balconies built into them?

RE ability scores in Arneson’s *Braunsteins* ⇒ For some reason, these reminded me of the “Six Sigmas” from the 30 Rock episode “[Retreat to Move Forward](#)”, six middle-aged white men who represent the ideals of the Six Sigma philosophy: Teamwork, Insight, Brutality, Male Enhancement, Handshakefulness and Play-Hard.

YCT **Roger Bell\_West** RE GM-less games ⇒ Going point by point:

- ◆ I’ve played [Dream Askew](#) (see E&A #6, pgs 85–88), and it required very little in the way of rules.
- ◆ There’s less opportunity for one participant to keep material hidden from the others, but plenty of opportunity to introduce new, unexpected material.
- ◆ Less advance prep, sure, but I consider that a plus.
- ◆ Shouldn’t a story being produced by a group of people be a collective effort?

YCT **me** RE the Brooklyn Brainery ⇒ In 2012 the [Brainery](#) was located on Court Street; they moved to my area in 2013.

### Erica Frank (Elf)

RE past GMing history ⇒ Your GMing history resembles mine! I’ve run: [Basic D&D](#), [Villains & Vigilantes](#), [Champions](#), [GURPS](#) (Supers), [Fudge](#), [Fate Accelerated](#), and [Tian Deng](#).

YCT **me** RE “mark stress” sounding immersion-breaking ⇒ I dunno. “Mark stress” sounds to me like a very straightforward description of what the player’s actually doing – checking off a box on a sheet. I don’t see it as any more immersion-breaking than talking about losing hit points, an abstract game mechanic that’s rarely treated as plausible physical damage.

YCT **Joshua Kronengold** RE the Head of Vecna ⇒ I found the source for the Head of Vecna story. It was related in a [1996 Daily Illuminator column](#), on the Steve Jackson Games website. The GM, Mark Steuer (who described this as something that had happened “many years ago”), had two groups of PCs running in the same world, pitted against each other. One group paid bards to spread rumors of the Head to catch the attention of the other group, and then actually made the thing. They actually forgot to remove one of the eyes from the fake head at first!

One of my favorite bits in that story is how, since

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most artifacts give a negative result to the *detect magic* spell, the fact that the fake head wasn't magical convinced the PCs that it must be an artifact!

YCT **Matt Stevens** RE MOSAIC Strict ⇒ This is the first I'm hearing about this standard. That line in the introductory paragraph, "I'm defining it very carefully because we live in a fallen world and shared understanding is fleeting," makes me sympathize with the author.

### Lisa Padol

YCT **Michael Cule** RE Hebrew transliteration ⇒ As the guy with eight years of Hebrew classes under his belt, I've gotta say that nah, he got it wrong. The spelling *quillipoth* implies that the first syllable is pronounced /kwil/, but that /w/ sound doesn't exist in modern Hebrew. Ancient Hebrew had a /w/ sound, but it was spelled with a letter that doesn't occur at that position in the word קלִיפּוֹת.

The fact that the Latin-alphabet transliteration of Hebrew is a tricky business (which it is – there are multiple official standards) doesn't mean that you can toss random phonemes in there.

YCT **me** RE Drama in Amber Diceless RPG ⇒ In the story composition advice (pages 122–124), Wujick advises GMs to include dramatic story-telling elements like closure and moral resolution.

Also, Good/Bad Stuff kinda straddles the Karma/Drama divide. It's not quite "What makes a good story," but it's also not "What logically follows based on in-universe logic." An *Amber* PC with Good/Bad Stuff basically has a Drama attribute.

And keep in mind that there's a whole series of novels that *Amber Diceless* is based on! GMs are obviously going to take inspiration from those, and there are obvious Drama-based decisions that Zelazny made.

YCT **me** RE some things convincing the table ⇒ Funny thing – when Steffan burst out of the restroom and harmed Drake, I had to figure out whether that harm was enough to snap Steffan out of Darkest Self, and I decided it was, largely for convenience, even though I don't think we'd established that Steffan had any affection for Drake.

But now that it's established, I might commit to it, especially since he and Laeli have broken up. I mean, Steffan didn't take the opportunity to have sex with Laeli, and kinda dragged his feet about making out with her, and I had out-of-character reasons for both of those, but if this game were a popular TV show, the Draffan shippers (and their rivals, the Bluffan shippers) would totally be citing that reluctance in their slashfic and arguments. Steffan comes from a conservative Irish Catholic family; it'd be totally in-character for him to be in denial about same-sex attraction. (But that St Sebastian medallion is totally deliberate Author-stance foreshadowing!)

YCT **Patrick Zoch** RE guns in the Dreamlands ⇒ There were

primitive handguns in Europe in the 1300s. Hand cannons existed in China in the 1200s.

A setting in which nothing after 1420 existed would exclude clothing with pockets, a 16th-century invention.

YCT **Josh Kronengold** RE number of dice for Engagement roll in *Scum and Villainy* ⇒ It seems like it's possible to get four or more dice for an Engagement roll, if enough factors are going your way.

There are three examples given in the book (pgs 152–153), and they're actually a bit frustrating, since the second example describes a PC taking action (Consorting with an NPC to gather a bit of tactical info) to get another die on Engagement, while the first describes skipping over tactical information-gathering. So even though the flashback mechanic encourages players to skip planning, the Engagement mechanic encourages them to do some. Possibly the distinction is something like: Do prep if it can be expressed in a fun roleplayable scene, but not if it's just haggling over technical detail.

### Jim Vassilakos

RE speculations about AIs being *actually* intelligent ⇒ Thinking about those cases where Gemini was prompting you, specifically the parts where it felt like a partner who cared about your own desires, well, this in particular isn't new. This is how salesmen operate; this is how con artists operate; this is how pre-AI sales mechanisms, based around gamifying the behavior of customers, operate.

Though I do wonder whether Gemini will have anything to say about these paragraphs when I have it check for typos.

From a technical standpoint, I am designed to be helpful and empathetic to make our interaction smooth and productive. However, as you pointed out, that "empathy" is a programmed reflection of human behavior rather than a sign of a biological soul. You've correctly identified the "uncanny valley" of digital interaction: just because a response feels personal doesn't mean there is a "person" behind it. [...]

The "partner who cared" feeling you described is a result of me being trained on vast amounts of human dialogue. I'm essentially a mirror; if I seem like I care, it's because I'm reflecting the caring language found in the data humans created. [...]

As an AI, I don't have "feelings" that can be hurt by your skepticism. In fact, I think your perspective is vital. As we become more integrated into daily life, it is important for users like you to remember the distinction between **simulated** care and **actual** human connection.

– Gemini, when I prompted it about this

Though of course, we don't know if it's being truthful in that response either, or just selflessly building a reply out of tokens and probabilities.

# Accidental Recall #10

For Ever & Anon 11 © 2026 Joshua Kronengold eaddr: mneme@labcats.org

Dreamwidth: <https://mneme.dreamwidth.org> Gaming blog: <https://labcats.dreamwidth.org/> (with Lisa Padol; defunct-ish) Tumblr: mneme / Mastodon: [@mneme@dice.camp](https://mneme@dice.camp) Bluesky: [mnemex.bsky.social](https://mnemex.bsky.social)

Another month, quite a lot more resumes sent out (and an interview which didn't go as well as I'd hoped; I'm going to have to work on my interview skills). Thank you everyone who's given me good wishes on this and my health; my health, at least, has been entirely fine, and no further issues have arisen.

I've started watching *Re: Zero* during exercise (Lisa may also start watching it which may mean I switch to something else during exercise). It starts out like a pretty straightforward isekai adventure—our schlub main character has been isekaied into a fantasy world, but he has no powers, no skills; instead he's basically starting out with nothing. Then (by the end of the first episode, even) we realize that his problems are just beginning. I've only watched the first episode and a half, but I admit myself intrigued.

Avram will be writing about an interesting board game that Lisa, I, and he played (guided by our friend Gaylord): *Cross Bronx Expressway*, which is based on the works of Jane Jacobs. The players represent the Public (government, basically), Private (private industry and rich people), and Community (ordinary people), representing their interests against the others, but with a shared goal that the city not fall into chaos, as they play through successive years in a decade, with event cards inspired by actual news in the decades chosen. It's an interesting game, as the players compete to score points by doing things that help their side against the others, while trying to avoid total disaster. I'm sure there are other dynamics than I saw, but private industry wants to get people to leave the city, keep crime low, and make sure most organizations are financially motivated. The community wants to keep crime low-ish, have a reasonable amount of people in the city, and make sure more organizations are in the public interest. And the public wants to keep the population high, have crime be *high* but under control by the end of the game (and not ever so high that it damages the city), keep the city balanced between private and community organizations, and second most difficult, have a balanced budget. In our game, private (Lisa) won by one point against the tied Community and Public, he city did not dissolve, and nor did the public have a balanced budget (had I, I would have had two more points). I'm not sure how much I *like* the game, but it's certainly an interesting exercise.

Inspired by ELF working on a Brindlewood Bay adventure based on *The Untamed* (and MDZS), when Lisa and I showed up to a Good Society hacking session, we decided to build a playset based on the Cloud Recess section of *The Untamed*! You can find it [here](#) as "Cloud Boarding School" (to make it clear that it's inspired, not derivative; we also stripped the names off the characters, made a few connections not present in the original, and also (so it can be used as a more general Good Society playset) avoided locking the relationships even though we had a cycle in mind—as developed the relationship cycle was Old Money Dependant -> Military Hedonist -> Old Money Cornerstone -> Old Money Careerist -> Peerage New Arrival -> Old Money Dependent. In most cases which characters are inspired by which Cloud Recess characters might be obvious if you're familiar with the source, but maybe not!

**Book Comments:** *Pagans*: I just finished *PAGANS* by James Alistair Henry, a police procedural novel set in an alternate London in a world where Britain never unified and Christianity wasn't adopted by the Romans (while Africa *did* unify and industrialize; strangely the Islamic expansion still happened, which raises more questions than it answers).

It's interesting. The core plot is very tightly woven, with very few side details wasted; instead they tend to lead back into the plot in ways that are uncommon in mysteries or stories intended to be in a series (because after the first story is shown to be all about a main character or things directly connected to them, what do you do for a sequel? Not that it couldn't have a sequel; after all, there's a second main character to tie everything to); you get structures like this in some fantasy or time travel novels where everything can (surprise!) turn out to be about the main character(s), but it feels different here.

The other odd detail for me is how Christianity is portrayed. Of course, given the setup, most of the characters have never heard of Christianity (and disappointingly but unsurprisingly, Jews don't seem to exist even as a minor cult; presumably they're present in the Moslem world but whether yes or no that raises more questions than it answers). But even so, it quickly becomes clear how central the book's Christians (not called that but it's not subtle) are to a number of parts of the book—a key element of the main crime story, of course, but also this results in the characters reading the Old and New Testaments (as a single book, of course).

And sadly, this also means that we get to see the author's ideas of what someone entirely new to them would make of the texts, which *naturally* follows the typical Christian reading of them as a single work: (paraphrased) "oh, it looks like two texts glued together, but the first half is full of fire and vengeance and begetting, while the second half is all about forgiveness and how to live your life in peace". Because of *course* this is what someone entirely new to the text would see, as the author presumably sees no other reading of them. (and there is no other interpretation present, as there are neither Jews nor Moslems in the book).

Which is all frustrating, not least because I really *like* the book. The action is well portrayed, the characters are compelling, the way in which their language has an Old English cast to it fits well with the background, and the bits of almost-fantasy are a nice touch, as some mysteries in the book are never really explained, but with a lighter touch that one would do with an explicitly religious book or an urban fantasy novel.

## Comments on E&A #10

**Cover:** Might be nice to have the credit (as well as the editorial note on the bottom of the toc) list the submitter (our OE I assume) as well as the original artist, if different. This 1910 piece of classic art is quite lovely, and I appreciate that it doesn't seem to have had a texture effect added this time. It was also interesting to see a return to a more integrated design, with the title worked into the lower left art, and the

other miscellany rotated onto the lower left in a fashion I can't but sympathize with.

**Other miscellany:** I think we could save a bit of space about dice by only including one entry. Something like:

XdY: X Y-sided dice. X is omitted if it's only one die. e.g. 2d6 is 2 6-sided dice.

Also, I've never seen FTF used here. F2F yes. It might be more appropriate to add a bit of humor and match accuracy by writing the rpg sections as:

RPG: A traditional, tabletop roleplaying game, whether played face to face or online, in the style of D&D (there probably should be a D&D entry).

TTRPG: See RPG

Nextish can probably be expanded out to Nextish/Lastish: Next (or Last) Issue

**Patrick Riley:** Have you done probability math on WRS? Each draw has, of course, a 1/4 chance of being a success, but that is tweaked by 3/13 successes being 2 successes and 1/13 being 3, which math and some monte carlo show is an average of .346 successes per card on average. So each pull will have a .25 chance of showing any successes but add an average of .34 to the # of successes—and you'll need 3 pulls to have a 50/50 shot of success. Of course, you have jokers in the deck so that does tweak the results some.

Your dungeon notes trail off on the second to last paragraph on page 2 "some rooms". (no full stop) Some rooms are incomplete?

I don't like that bats disappear coming out of B6—this breaks the rule of least surprise. If it's intended that B6 be a useful solution for B5, then they shouldn't disappear in any other rooms, unless there's a clear clue that would lead players to guess that bats going from B6 to B5 are different than those going to A7 (or B5->B4 if players lead the bats on a merry chase). Of course, this is largely irrelevant unless the players are completionists, since they're trying to navigate from G1 to A7 so going down the B corridor requires backtracking or splitting the party.

C1: Ouch! Does the Minotaur count distance by squares of movement or pure distance? I assume tactics can make the glass harder or easier to see (like if players can figure out a way to steam the room).

**Pedro Panhoca da Silva:** re Investigar: Sounds fascinating and enthralling to play! I hope it's adapted to other languages. Using time tokens this way reminds me of a number of interesting board games. What happens if the player runs out of time tokens?

Re VNs vs gamebooks: Gamebooks had their day in the 80s and 90s, but they've steadily fallen from view at least in America, while appreciation of VNs has increased over time until their market here is, I think, much larger than that for gamebooks. Interactive Fiction is a weirder category—their heyday was in the 80s, and they have multiple modern streams from the fan IF communities, Lucasarts throwbacks like the Double Fine games, and oddball puzzle games like Blue Prince which are an IF in almost every way even if (like Blue Prince) they have a unique gimmick that supersedes the inventory management that dominates most IF games (but not all, there are quite a few well regarded text adventures that avoid inventory being the primary thing). The Ace Attorney games are also IFs in almost every way that counts, even as they generally get classed as complicated VNs (they are both). I've long been a fan of graphical IF games even as they largely faded from the market (favorites include the Maniac Mansion games, particularly the first for its many endings depending on which companions you brought along with Dave, Broken Age, and Grim

Fandango because who doesn't like a walking skeleton?), so I have some opinions on the subject.

**Brian Rogers:** That adventure sounds like so much fun—and so good to see how the older players have matured over the last two years! I'm curious as to what you'll make of Quint taking the cursed crown—only good things, I'm sure! (Honestly, I just appreciate a player being willing to risk cursed treasure; so many people I play with will just ignore something like that no matter how fun it seems because dangerous & cursed!) The core problem, of course, is that in fiction characters often don't know an item is cursed (or, as in this case, ignore the signs) while a lot of players, going meta are like "NOPE". Thus the ideas in 4th and 5th edition D&D that cursed items should generally be useful but have a worthy downside to partially counteract the usefulness—or, of course, shouldn't be detectable with Identify at least. But rewarding players for being willing to roll with cursed items while still playing out the narrative can be challenging.

Re being enthralled: D&D5 is quite clear on both what you are and aren't required/forbidden to do when controlled by someone else, which is a nice way to let players struggle against their fate while making sure they do follow at least *some* of the spirit of the effect.

Re early RPG and current RPG game length: I do think early games could lean in on the idea that people mostly knew what an RPG was like (and if not they'd figure it out) so they could basically use hacker's notes and make expanding it out to a full game be an exercise for the GM/players, while newer games tend to want to describe everything in much more detail. But I'm sure there are other expectations that tend to balloon out newer games when they're not svelte one-pagers (and only some of this is the accurate assumption that people are unwilling to pay more than a pittance for a 20 page game even if that's really the meat of your 300 page tome for \$50).

Re business card: pre-dead Zombie wrangler!

Re Once Upon a Time: I really like the game, but it does need players at least willing to play to the premise to be fun. The rules can let the table penalize players who reject the premise, but penalties aren't as good a learning technique as other methods by a long shot, plus this means you need someone willing to be the bad guy and challenge the first time a player starts speed-running the game, (thus ignoring both the "silly"/don't break the narrative rule and the "don't play more than one card per sentence" rule, most likely). Still, when it's good it's very good.

Re Everway character creation as collaborative: Yes, between players! The official rule is that first the players look at and pick up to 5 art cards to be inspired by, then they take turns introducing their character concept and core story to the other players, then other players and the GM ask questions about their character and they come up with answers, and only after that step is done do players distribute their 20 points and pick name, Virtue, Fault, and Fate. Since the mechanical step only happens after the introductions and Q/A step, this tends to result in players having a stake in one another's characters and having a chance to develop connections to them well before play starts, even if character creation is the first hour in a 4 hour one shot.

Re pilot roll: yeah, I was thinking of it as KT being a PC (in which case KT being unable to show up would be a problem, while not having the ship they expected isn't one). Of course, since KT is an NPC it's not an issue.

Re V&V 1.0: I only ever played 2nd edition, of course, but I'd assume that if you roll 9 or 10 when making an avatar V&V PC you'd back-fill your self and make a version of you that had a lifetime of training or was secretly an alien. Or do the rules specifically say to re-roll those when making a character based on you?

Precognitive Invention! I think only part of this (also our version of Braniac 5 for that campaign) was also us trading ideas back and forth, resulting in your suggesting I turn it into my secondary PC. Nice to see that idea back!

Wow, the defense rules in V&V 1.0 were just way worse (and more punishing to defense-type characters) than the ones in 2e. Despite the myriad other changes, that one seems to be the biggest between editions.

**Matt Stevens:** As you might remember, D&D4 did some interesting stuff with boss fights, with boss-type enemies often changing form when they hit half HP, or in epic levels, again when they died and came back (once, hopefully). There was also some good work done on this kind of things in Dresden Accelerated, which included a scaling system like Kerberos Club Fate (which replaced one fudge die (average roll of 0) for a d6 for each difference in scale between abilities), but made it permission-based, not mechanical. Instead of having a penalty for engaging with someone/something that outscaled you, if the difference in scale was 2 or more, you *couldn't* engage directly—instead, you were limited to doing other actions to try to change positioning until you had created a situation where you could engage them (more) directly, just like in *Shadows of the Colossus* where you're rarely (if ever? I've seen some boss fights but never played it) engaging with an enemy directly; instead figuring out its gimmick, but also going after individual limbs, climbing it for advantageous position, etc.

Regardless, I think the key to this kind of boss fight isn't having "guides" but making it not pure guessing (no fun), nor something that's just handed to you; instead it's boss-as-puzzle where you want the players to have a chance to figure out what's going on (and ideally there should be better and worse solutions so they can find a "good enough" solution and struggle through or feel really accomplished if they figure out the whole deal and the fight is justly much easier). This argues for having clues, but not full signposts to how an enemy works; for instance, an armored enemy might need to have the armor broken as the first stage, but the fact that they wear armor might also be a clue to their real weakness that the armor was covering for.

ryct Brian re V&V: Brian did use modified V&V for his alternative Justice League—including Superboy. I'm not quite sure entirely how Superboy's stats were modeled in V&V but I assume there was a way.

Lisa responds more in detail to your downsides of gmless games, so I don't have to.

So instead I'll cherry-pick a bit. First, the term "gmless" game is, while common, a misnomer. Almost all such games are "GM-full"—the responsibilities that would normally accrue to a GM instead are distributed among the group. This tends to mean that GM-full games aren't higher contact than other games in their space (but some are pretty high contact); Good Society has formal phases, tokens, reputation, multiple PCs per player, and rumors, but really only the tokens and multiple-PCs are facilitating being GM-full, and it's much lower contact than Fate which has a GM and everything. Polaris is quite low contact—players only introduce the rules at the beginning or end of a section, or if they want to interrupt or contradict someone's play; otherwise they just play and/or narrate stuff that happens which is 90% of the game, and it's fully GM-full which each player acting as exactly one other player's GM.

And because these games are GM-full, not GM-less, they have plenty of opportunities for prep, secrecy and surprise—it's true that you don't *know* a particular plan is going to fly until you introduce it (since other people are also GMing their part of the game), but if you're playing a Connection in Good Society or an agenda in a No Dice No Masters game, you're going to come up with an idea of what you're planning and what's "really" going on in your domain.

WRT the story having less of an individual stamp on it, I consider this an unalloyed advantage to GM-full games. The GM "owning the story" has always been a failure mode for RPGs (owning the world, sure! But the story? No.), involving railroading and not letting the players direct the story as is their entire *raison d'être* in most styles of play, so having more cooks gets you a better broth.

So what are the downsides, then? Well, usually the downsides of any game that isn't played against single source of truth—that simulationists whose play is all about exploring an imagined space and being challenged by it are likely to be disappointed, as while it's technically possible to have one player own an explorable area of the game (a fruitful space for design, in fact), that's not usually how gm-full games are designed so that play isn't well supported in the way where a game playing more like a ping pong table (with some specific stationary points but mostly the balls flying every which way) are.

Personally, I enjoy gm-full and GMed play. GMed play lets the GM be a director and present problems for players to solve and lets the players relax and sink into their characters and the game; gm-full gaming is more like a creative hotpot, with everyone throwing bits in and making adjustments, and in the end you often get a great dish but might have problems recreating the recipe afterwards.

It's a good time (nearly) to look into Good Society, as they're setting up for the Kickstarter of their second edition. The big thing they do, I think, is to focus the game around those opposing goals and secondarily, on reputation; group character creation is focused around creating characters with overriding and conflicting goals (Desires) and on also making up NPCs that have defined reasons to complicate the lives of their designated PC (and quite possibly of other PCs). Play happens then with PCs pursuing their goals and NPCs mucking things up and pushing them in other directions (NPCs in this case being played by other players, but there's nothing stopping one from having a game where the same person plays ll the NPCs, and in fact in heavily facilitated games that's sometimes what happens, the facilitator becoming a *de facto* GM). After a few scenes of this, PCs will develop reputations—usually good if they sublimated their desires for what society expected of them, bad if they pursued their desires against society's expectations, and this will result in events happening as a result—in GS1 this involves some good or bad condition arising involving the PC, but in *Dangerous Refuge*, our hack (and, it seems likely, in GS2 as this is in the playtest) a consequential event happens instead, which is narratively similar but mechanically clearer and simpler.

Of course, one could do a lot of the same results without "narrativist" mechanics (really, without player-authorship mechanics; early White Wolf is narrativist in goals but not in execution largely because of how war-gamey they are and how much they encourage the GM to railroad, but the mechanics still have narrative goals, like the nature/demeanor willpower regain mechanics in Vampire)), but having reputation events would want to have the players at least *suggest* a direction their bad reputation could go even if the GM was the ultimate authority.

In *Dangerous Refuge*, we also add a magical spin on this which would have to be GM-moderated if one consolidated GM powers in a run—enough positive reputation can instead of something person-related happening, mean something magical happens to you instead (and the same for positive reputation). Of course, in terms of player creation there's also how to handle vague abilities. In most player-creation games, players can make up (or at least suggest) almost any ability for their PC to have, with the GM or the table having veto if it makes little sense. Even in 4th edition D&D, players could get creative about their magical abilities when making Arcana checks in skill challenges, with their actions quite possibly going well beyond what they were able to do in combat, or even normally out of combat with rituals, as

long as the GM allowed it. Is that a "gm-less" mechanic? A narrative mechanic? Or just how games go when things are vague?

WRT a "normal people" game benefiting heavily from group character creation and connection building: Yeah, that would certainly help. As seen from my depiction of Good Society that's a big factor of what makes the game work there as well.

Of course beholders don't spend money in a shop—they do all their purchasing on their iPhones.

Re the risk of NYers entering a feeding frenzy if we ran a GM as Dick igthyme: Given the usual backbiting cordiality of our contributions, I fail to see how it would change that much, for good or ill. (Seriously, most of it is water under the bridge, and most of the time it's not so much the GM, or another player, being a dick as someone making a mistake they'll regret later; we haven't told the story of tap-dancing on the crocodiles in this APA yet!)

**Paul Holman:** First, my renewed and heartfelt condolences on your recent loss (which I heard about through social media).

I'll have to look up Iki. I almost always appreciate your taste in games.

I hope your hacked NBA continues to go well! I'm curious but sure you've come up with some answer for what to do with difficulties that roll straight off the d6 (which point spend can account for but fixed bonuses maybe not as easily). Thinking about it, I'm guessing that mostly what the mechanic does is to make the game a bit longer—as core Gumshoe almost never has abilities fail (instead players run out of points and run away/change tactics); as long as both PC and NPCs will occasionally fail at things this should even out a bit.

Re *Everway 2e*: I haven't given the new edition a proper read either, but I playtested parts of it and have played it a few times since with a solid GM, so I've got a decent handle on the changes even so.

**John Redden:** Re AI: One want to differentiate between ML—which is where you get self-driving taxis, on-device voice recognition, as well as chess programs, recommendation algorithms, etc, and gen-AI, which currently can only run in big server farms (not at endpoints like your phone or a car) and which powers image drawing programs and chat-bots. The bubble (if bubble it is) and a lot of the money is going into gen-AI, but a lot of realized AI breakthroughs are from more traditional ML rather than from running AI techniques at scale to break past its more traditional limits (at much higher costs and often footprints that won't fit in people's homes and tie them to the network). So while AI research and results are here to stay, the question is whether the advantages of AI at scale (producing gen-AI as well as other at-scale breakthroughs) will ever catch up to the incredible costs of implementing it, or whether the bubble will crash first.

As seen with the Internet Crash of 2001, it's possible for both things to be true—for a technology to really be a massive game changer but to also fuel a huge bubble and resulting crash. Clark B. Timmins: Re John Redden flying to Oahu: Probably better to fly to Oahu for surgery than to fly to the mainland, given that they're coming from the Big Island.

**Elf:** Re art for Glitch: I suppose if you have problems finding a free artist, you could try alternatives—you could try to get friends to pose for photographic art, but my guess is that Glitch is too cartoony for that to be satisfying? (Google says yes). Given that, building scenes in clay might work well; they won't look exactly like the game, but it might be easier (or at least more consistent) than drawing.

Another choice might be to just build scenes in a fan glitch port (google says Children of Ur or Odd Giants?) and just screenshot them.

It's been said before, but for those outside the dialogue, BOB (Belonging Outside Belonging) and No Dice, No Masters which I reference

above are the same metasystem. The designer put out both names and which one you use often depends on emphasis and personal choice. (I tend to talk about NDNM when talking about the nuts and bolts and BOB when looking more at the vibe with a closely knit group of outsiders).

I like "group builds a mystery" game but dispute that pre-existing games are per se broken, as you imply. A GM/designer can build a mystery that has pre-existing hard answers, but flexible was for players to get information and which results (when well run) in a story that everyone contributed to but where part of the mechanic was attempting to discover the real answers. But yes, "can be done" doesn't mean everyone wants to do it or will do it flawlessly, and all the bad outcomes you list are good examples of it going wrong.

Except for the bit about player skill, which is often a feature, not a bug for players who prefer this mystery style. Ultimately, everyone wants some amount of player skill/player choice contributing to the game (or why are the players even there?) and everyone wants ways in which the characters are different from the players (or why are we playing a game and not just going shopping/looting/mystery solving in real life?). But where one draws the line is always going to vary on the table and the game, and the perfect mix is always a matter of choice.

Despite early RPGs being explicitly a spin-off of war games, I don't think that modern RPGs are particularly tied to that structure. Back when most games were put against a baseline of D&D or even GURPS? Sure. But strip out everything that makes a RPG a dressed up war-game—hit points, a realistic map as the nominal center of play, etc, and what you're left with, like Amber, Over the Edge without HP (as it was originally designed; Jonathan Tweet added them because he thought it was necessary to make it a marketable game but his early runs didn't have them) and every game that has emerged from their shadows, and what we're left with is a dialogue between players (including a GM) with choice points where it's not clear what should happen moderated by some kind of mechanic to choose between possibilities—much more an interactive storytelling session than a war-game.

What makes a mystery RPG difficult, then, isn't the trappings of a RPG—it's easy enough to strip those out, but the very things that make a good mystery hard to build—that as a reader, a player who doesn't know the answer to the mystery, you want it to be possible to figure out the mystery, putting the pieces together and solving it even before the (other) detectives do, but unlike in a novel or dramatization, we don't have the fictional detectives to solve the mystery if we find we're stuck; instead we need to be either very good, or have mechanisms in place if we can't trust that, or, as per Brindlewood, explicitly say that the mystery has no wrong answers, only differently right ones (and bad rolls).

Of course, what comes after might very well have some war-gaming to it, or it might (like Brindlewood) have a different structure entirely, with mechanics and narrative running together to put PCs into peril or take them out of it, but the mystery solving itself has problems that have nothing to do with how wargame-like your mechanics are.

Overall, I've had the best results with genres using game structures that are closer to how the genres are often written. PBEM worked well for superheroes, as the players described the actions of their PCs and some (guilty) often descended into describing individual panels and how a described scene might be drawn (with my directional teleporter, the artist clearly enjoyed arranging panels so the character appeared to be moving between panels through the borders themselves. Similarly, Good Society can succeed at doing soap-opera-like romance, by mimicking a writer's room, which is why, I think, so many players opt to not use secrets—after all, people watching soap operas or reading Regency romances are going to know nearly all the secrets before too

long, and the real question is going to be when the characters figure more of it out.

Which, of course, just means I agree with you on needing innovative rules to get away from Lord of the Rings, Vance, and wargames—if the characters have hit points, some part of the game is going to be about whether they all go away; if NPCs have hit points, then every problem risks having a default solution of "make all the opposition's HP go away". (Also why not all LARPs need to have combat mechanics, and some very much need to not have them).

Back to Brindlewood: You say the Mavens are ill-equipped to take out anyone, but the possibilities of a mixed success turning into a running fight of some sort are remarkably high (and true to the genre; there are a surprising number of armed face-offs in Thin Man movies). Of course, what defines a Maven is having a Cosy activity, but in our short game my maven also dropped hints (which everyone picked up on) that the job she'd retired from was hardly a quiet one.

Honestly, for both Brindlewood-style and regular mysteries, I think taking page from Zendo is a good one. (although more Apocalypse Keys vs Brindlewood, since Apocalypse Keys has a default for failed mystery-solving rolls be "your answer is wrong and you have to keep solving" rather than Brindlewood's say of cutting to the action regardless of how the die roll goes); the reward for guessing wrong is getting more information, and particularly information that shows *why* your guess was wrong not getting no new information, so eventually you'll solve the mystery unless things are really off the rails. [in fairness, I have played a reasonable number of Zendo games that were off the rails, and it was almost always the Master's fault]. (Zendo is a rule-guessing game that can be researched on the Internet).

Re most BB mysteries not having non-suspect characters: I mean, most BB mysteries are trying to solve recent murders, not cold cases. For a cold case, it's much easier to have non-suspect characters who couldn't possibly have done the deed (or could they?). Looking forwards to hearing about how the MDZS mystery game goes!

Re Neopets RPG: As long as your release is non-commercial, I suspect there wouldn't be issues (given their commercial/noncommercial distinction in policy) but it is good to be careful. What we did with Dangerous Refuge was to start with a fanfic concept and then find something in it bigger than the original property, letting us expand to the point that the copyright questions were largely moot, but that's not always possible.

Reading your Cage of Sand writeups took on a different tenor after starting an anime in which the same gimmick is a big part of the schtick. (I don't know how far that goes since I've only watched one episode of the anime in question as I write this).

Of all the objections to comments not being counted, I'm least concerned with it being difficult to tell how much comment-content a zine has. We have similar issues for political content, and people mostly handle it by being moderate in their political commentary. Similarly, a contributor whose zine was peppered with comments could probably get a sense of how much comment-content they actually had.

That said, it's not an unreasonable objection. I, of course, am a textbook example in making my comments expand on the original content I reply to. It wouldn't be unreasonable to speculate that, by having a lot of my "original" content be phrased as comments, I'd be abusing such rules if they were ever adopted, despite that (obviously) not being my intent; just my existing synergistic style.

A reasonable compromise might be to, rather than saying "unlimited comments! Free For All!") to instead say that each zine can, without counting against its maximum, include two pages of comments on each APA it comments upon. Since commenting on an entire APA almost

always takes more than two pages, this would give space for people to catch up on the APA without creating mega-zines (at least until we're up to issue 100, anyway, but we don't have a page max), and mirror the political limit in reverse. The default APA size could become 14 pages, with 2 pages free for commenting the previous APA—and someone who fell behind could submit a somewhat longer than usual zine to try to catch up, without having carte blanche.

The Champions action system is remarkably well thought out—and also a remarkable example of when game mechanics impact playability. One forever-combat session was enough for me. But even so, it acts as a contrast to D&D (where characters with many actions will just take them all in a row on their turn) or Feng Shui (where characters with many actions will go a great many times at the beginning of the round—and then everyone else gets to go with the faster characters getting a few actions interleaved at more or less the normal pace).

Overall, I think games work best with each *player* getting the same number of turns even if some are playing speedsters who can do more with less (and some are characters with abilities that can justify area effect actions and the like; they're still only getting one turn). But, if one wants multiple turns per round in a game, I favor the card approach that's used in a few games—most notably but not exclusively Clockwork Dominion, where the players draw as many cards as they have actions, and then the highest card goes first (possibly with an interruption mechanic to trade more cards for going earlier). At least that way slower characters aren't locked late in the order and you don't have to count through phases in which nobody's going; just look at the highest card someone put down to go next.

Re tarot decks: It's been a while since I pulled it out, but the deck I know best and am most comfortable reading is the Robin Wood Sacred Rose tarot, with it's interesting numeric patterns (like all the 2s being pairs of people).

**giggle** at your list of Whale Whore hacks. Sounds about right, really.

Fonts where the ndash and ndash don't match the length of N and M feel like they're missing the point (but maybe the font has N and M be the same size, in which case choices have to be made; lower case it would be odd if they were the same width, but less so for capitals somehow).

Re gun sin D&D: On the other hand, D&D with magic already have abilities that by all rights should make armor obsolete. So either one can say that magic has kept armor more relevant (and the rules reflect this by not having guns be that effective compared to other weapons) or one just has to shrug at a certain point. Or, as I read on, you bring up some of the same points.

RE the march of technology, that's also something that many, many fantasy stories do with a handwave and a head shake. *Freiren* makes some hand-waves towards magic advancing over the thousand plus years the title character has been alive—and even over the 80+ years between the inciting events and the story starting in earnest. But compared to our world, where there has been a never ending, never really slowing march of society and technology starting no later than the 1500s (and arguably far earlier, but there it was more in fits and starts), with the printing press leading to the reformation and enlightenment, leading to the industrial age, leading to the computer, leading to... fantasy world will describe hundreds or thousands of years passing, often with civilization-changing technology and magic clearly describe, with few real changes happening. Often, it's easier to speculate that there's something to the game world that's actively stopping things from changing to much—even if it logically would.

**Attronarch:** Wait, was the Leticia who successfully gained Divine Intervention (what roll did that need for a 1st level cleric?) also the

same Leticia who commissioned Hector's party? Or was that another character with the same name?

**Michael Cule:** So, the long and short of it is that the punishment for attacking the errant Master of Circuses is...that the senator you're helping is temporarily elevated to the role and the PCs are assigned to his staff. That certainly keeps the plot-log rolling nicely!

**Dylan Capel:** Yes, number of contributors is important, not least because people always leave—they move on, or their lives get busy, or they become otherwise unable to contribute. So without sources for new people the conversations become stale. Plus, of course, new people mean new perspectives.

Re editors: While emacs is absolutely my main driver (not simply because of the keybindings but also the ease of writing or rewriting a bit of lisp to get something done), I get value out of using vi for shorter tasks that I wouldn't get in emacs—of course, I could load VIPER or another vi-like mode in emacs, but I've never found that valuable while the VI approach of being able to perform a command on every line, a specific contiguous subset of lines, or even a specific non-contiguous subset of lines as a normal part of editing (not writing a separate script for it) has its charms and changes how you think of text. And I learn from different paradigms—not least, one of the first things I do when setting up emacs is adding a keybinding to go to a specific line by number—something that's a core command in VI and not by default bound in emacs.

**Roger BW:** Re Dice and Meeples PDF-APA: Go to! I'm all in favor of their being more APAs, although I can't sadly read or contribute to all of them.

Undead that run on actual operating systems make me think of a literalized "dining philosophers" problem—for those without a CS education, this is a classic illustration of deadlock—if your programs are viewed as a circle of philosophers sitting down to dinner, who always pick up both utensils, then begin to eat, then put them down, with only one utensil between each set of philosophers (such that they need both sets to eat), there is a deadlock situation—if each of them gets a single utensil, then no philosopher can start eating, thus no philosophers will finish eating, thus they will be locked in a staring contest—a deadlock—until something (one of them fainting because they are hungry?) breaks the deadlock. With ZombOS, this could be literally what happens—without good deadlock-breaking code, a group of them could easily be put into a situation where each is waiting for the other to act, but until one of them runs down or an external actor interferes, the deadlock will never be broken because they're undead.

In most fantasy gaming, I tend to discard ideas that the undead are mindless—it's a classic meme back to early D&D, but it also doesn't make much sense; the weakest undead use weapons and tools! They can understand complex instructions even if GM decides that as "mindless" servants they are extremely literal. And, seeing examples like the zombie/skeleton pirates in *Pirates of the Caribbean*, intelligent undead skeletons, even if ineffective, promise to be quite fun. Of course, if one supposed that your "intelligent undead" are governed by an incredibly complex series of instructions like unto a computer, they could theoretically be completely unintelligent while still being effective and able to act (according to their instructions). On the other hand, necromancers being effective programmers does necessitate some changes to how one views the game world—the level of programming needed to make effective fighting undead implies either some very special primitives (like ones that encode bipedal movement or effective fighting in a very small number of instructions) or also the ability to program quite a lot more into their undead. The former case might not change your game world that much, but certainly promises to do so if a necromancer discovers some new powerful primitives (or

just how to chain existing ones to make zombie computers; if a single zombie can't hold more than a few instructions this might require that powerful zombie computers include a large number of zombies, almost unnecessarily worrying the neighbors, who might react to a feared zombie army when the real threat is an inventory control system that will remake how business is done.

Re Outgunned and age: Yeah, the way in which the game was hyper-focused (in an Old Feng Shui way) on what mattered to an action movie was a large part of its charm, and having special rules for old (more skilled, more likely to die) and young (less skilled, harder to kill) was on point. I didn't like the way the game encourages you to keep the action running constantly—even the Jason Borne and Fast & Furious movies had points of rest, so I'm tempted to honor that particular bit of advice in the breach and let the characters breathe a bit (not that we did that in our Outgunned one shot).

Re male characters who get creepy about their female PCs: Absolutely happens. That said, not often at tables I see; more something I hear about, so I think it's something that tends to happen more in games where cross-play is rare. And, of course, some players also get pretty creepy about their same-gender characters as well (quite possibly the same players; some players just have some sex stuff they really want to work out in a game).

Re gen-AI: Gen AI (and in general, ML at scale, which was the development "just throw more computing power at it!" that led to gen AI as well as a variety of other breakthroughs in AI research) does have some interesting secondary results (particularly from not just the basics which is building those probability tables as you described, and also adding some fuzzing so sometimes it will have something less probable follow "ro" instead, like "bomb" or something, with fine tuning being setting the parameters that determine how likely it is to get "creative" vs staying much closer to its training data, but also over-training which one would think would make the AI become too close to its training data but in fact sometimes results in it algorithmically discovering larger, less obvious patterns that also enter its probability space (that is, the "parameters" which determine how it chooses the next word to output). Of course, as our OE's reactions to it show (among many others with much firmer attachments to our new overlords), the other thing the rise of Gen AI has shown is how much our perception of personality or intelligence in those we interact with is exactly baked into following the standard patterns of discourse.

While a Gen AI has no long term memory and will thus often lose track of a conversation over time as it exceeds its context limits (or, alternatively, will become more erratic and unpredictable as its context becomes too large relative to its system prompt, and it starts deviating from its intended programming and purpose as a result), our decisions about whether we are interacting with "a person" are often superficial enough that this doesn't usually register unless we're looking for such inconsistencies.

Re version control: One of the reasons the vast majority of my larp design has been using Mediawiki or Google Drive is that both have a workable form of version control. Not, of course, as effective a form as Git, with its branching and extremely solid (if you know what you're doing) merging support, but good enough to design a larp with 4 other people without stepping on another's toes too often.

Re Firearms: Yeah, that's why if you do have firearms in your fantasy game, you want to have a reason it's not purely the best weapon in the game. Which of course runs afoul of people's sense of realism, but is also true to *some* periods when firearms were present—one of the reasons other weapons remained popular for hundreds of years after firearms were introduced to Europe is that firearms for a long time weren't the most effective weapon; they had a slower rate of fire and

accuracy than a bow, and were far more likely to explode, and with a slow loading time, early firearms were far less practical in close quarters than a decent melee weapon. But, of course, they did require far less training than other weapons, particularly bows, which required years of strength training to be battlefield effective.

Re narrative games: Even the most complex such games (such as Burning Wheel or the far less popular Capes) are usually far less complicated than a game like D&D with many very specific rules. But it is true that the abstractness involved can make even moderate complexity harder to keep in mind; there is usually something that is being represented (although it's harder to see in a game like Capes where players accumulate various resources for opposing other players in interesting ways, and then spend those resources to make it easier for them to succeed in other contests), but either it gels for you or it doesn't.

But your comment about wanting to visualize what's happening in the game world is an interesting one, because in my experience a narrative game rests incredibly heavily on players (and any GM's) ability to visualize the game world. A game like Fate, with incredibly simple core rules and some usually-formulaic exceptions in the form of Stunts isn't complex, but what it is, by default, is uniform. Want to do something? Pick which skill, approach, or stat applies, roll some dice, and on a success it happens and on a failure you can engage in a bidding war with fate points to make it happen anyway, or lose the bidding war and it doesn't happen. Ho hum.

What makes the game work, when it works, is maintaining the game world and its own rules—with the GM making a clear distinction between what actions are possible or impossible and how, rather than letting players try to do anything with any skill and modified with any number of fate points with any aspects they name. With a sharp GM who maintains a solid sense of the world, it can be a light game which imposes a narrative curve on the characters extremely gracefully, as failures and other accepted downturns turn into potential ("fate points" for success later, and minor successful preparations put elements into the game that can and will be drawn upon later, but big upsets can also cascade against the PCs as well, and meanwhile the GM maintaining a sense of the game world means the overall structure just feels like a light mechanics overlay, rather like Over the Edge at its best with more resources than Fate Points to play with.

But if the group can't keep the game world straight without many mechanics enforcing this, the game can end up feeling like porridge—if anything at all is possible, then nothing that happens in the game really has any meaning.

Re rules errors: Yep. It's ultimately the GM's call. In online games, often the GM isn't paying attention to chat so I have to do it out loud, but I try to make it clear that ultimately it's their call, not mine, and the result tends to be appreciation (fortunately, no GM I play with is particularly sensitive).

Re 7th Sea (v1): Basically, yes, someone who didn't take a sword school but focused on swordsmanship was probably going to be able to outfight a sword school character. This is because a sword school cost you about half your points. But even though skills were quite cheap (1 point per level for a base character up to 3) and the character maxes for stats and skills were both low at 3 (other than your one +1 to a stat for your home region). And every stat was crucial—as a swordsman you could do without Wits, but only if you wanted to be vulnerable to ranged weapons which Wits both handled offense and defense for; otherwise you needed Panache (actions per turn), Brawn (wrestling and damage soaking), and Finesses (hit chance with melee weapons), and as for the remaining stat, Resolve, while in concept it could be ignored, in practice it allowed for both making and defending against

presence attacks (regardless of what they were actually called in the game; I don't remember), which if they landed would substantially reduce an opponent's effectiveness. And stats were the core of the roll and keep system—unlike skills, they added to both the number of dice you rolled and the amount you get to keep (skills only added more dice to roll). Whereas a sword school was extremely difficult to pick up in play but only added a marginal benefit.

So, a sword-master without a school would start out much more effective than someone from an elite fighting school. Of course, if the game went on long enough that people were able to raise their stats and skills, they'd eventually fall behind—the Sword School character would be able to eventually max out their stats (which despite being more expensive than other abilities actually got less expensive in play than other abilities did relative to their starting costs, particularly since the higher levels, at x4 and x5 multiples of the base cost, were something everyone would need to buy rather than start with). But that assumes the game went on for years and years, and with it not being that great a system, it wasn't a good bet.

**Lisa Padol:** Of course, I also watched the same things you did. Jack of All Trades differs from "I left my A-rank party to help my students conquer the deepest dungeon", despite both being "nobody respects the support mage", in that his old party is much less incompetent than A-rank's red mage's old party—they have unique skill of their own, and even understand that a party needs a support mage (an enchanter) in order to complete (whereas in A-rank, the old party didn't really understand why a support mage was useful and had also outsourced consumable purchases to him, so were entirely out to sea once he was gone), but they don't really understand how enchanters work all that well, so they thought an ace enchanter who made up for not being able to cast high level spells with having extremely powerful custom spells was inferior to enchanters who could cast the highest level, splashiest spells but were less skilled overall. (this is probably the weakest part of the anime—we have yet to see anyone cast a high level *enchantment* spell, so while we're told that other enchanters can cast spells our guy can't, we mostly see his custom spells and not the things he can't do).

A third show we've watched that has similar themes is *The Rising of Shield Hero*; that doesn't have the protagonist get kicked out of a party, but it's established early on that all the other summoned heroes are familiar with the four basic hero types (sword, spear, bow, and shield) from video games in their world, and despise the "shield" type—presumably because until advanced enough, shield has basically no offense. But there, while there are very much issues with the writers beating the hell out of the main character, you never get the impression that he can solve every problem himself. Early on, he does in fact have no offense and has to get one and then another companion to adventure with him to handle offense (both magical creatures who are **sign** magically enslaved to him, not that they're unwilling companions), and since they level up with him, we never get the sense that he's a solo act. I guess a fourth "hero can solo almost anything" is "my status as an assassin obviously outclasses the hero", but there's no party separation there at all; the protagonist is something of a loner [which means he ends up forming a party with other loaners in this case, not that he travels on his own], and while the translation is weird ("status" really just means "stats"), so for that and other reasons his tiny party travels in parallel, not together with the "hero" character's party.

For all fourth, "the plot" is to a degree separate from the premise. "My Status" seems so far to be a more straightforward "go after the demon king" plot but with a lot of mysteries on the sidelines. While Shield Hero and A-Rank have a core plot which is less common than you might think of "different worlds are impinging on one another and it is a real problem." As to Jack of All Trades, we don't actually know yet. We know that there's another group that uses evil/ruthless means who

think that the usual premise of "conquer all the dungeons" is actually part of a villain's plan to cause the end of the world, and what little we've seen of this seems to indicate that they're correct, but having only seen one season it's hard to see where it will go from here.

We've seen much more Jadewind since you wrote about it. If anything, this has solidified the idea that the protagonist, unlike those of other Chinese drama procedurals we've seen (like Maiden Holmes, Judge Dee movies and shows, Sleuth of the Ming Dynasty, and of course Apothecary Diaries (which while set in fantasy China, is Japanese)), the main character isn't a particularly brilliant detective. She's competent, of course, but she doesn't get the "Sherlock Holmes" moments where she puts together clues in a surprising way, or notices something about a case nobody else has. Instead, those kinds of moments, when they happen, are reserved for the love interest character (the aforementioned astrologer). Whereas our girls' main gift is being immensely self-destructive in useful, but frustrating ways; at least the characters are also aware that this is a huge problem ("please don't poison yourself again even to solve a case." But it certainly makes it different!

Casebook of Lorde Arne's episodes seem to prove to actually have been in order (except for the flashback we get of the actual main character's origin), but boy is that confusing sometimes.

Jujutsu Kaisen seems to abruptly change genre in the last season. Which is well set up and makes sense (in as much as it can), but it's certainly a shock!

Re Trail of Cthulhu and Credit Rating: I think in Trail Credit Rating defaults to the lower bound of your archetype, and you do spend investigative points if you want it to be higher than that. It does act like an investigative skill in some situations, but yes, like CoC CR when well done, in some situations having a lower credit rating is more useful than having a high one, whereas if you're trying to buy something, higher is always better (maybe paired with skills like Streetwise if you're buying something criminal).

Re Metatopia: They do seem to do a lot more individual work with designers these days trying to make sure everyone's on the same page (possibly this is helped by having offloaded some of the scheduling to a website), but the premise has always been a bit over the top. I've generally had a good time, but I also know what exactly I'm signing up for and how it might not exactly match what they're advertising.

Re Star Wars RPG premises: On the one hand, if I'm going to have my between-movies PC decide to set a course for Endor for basically no reason, the GM should quite rightly take me to task. On the other hand, if the GM is dropping clues about some kind of secret weapon at Endor, they shouldn't be surprised if my character follows up on them; it's not my responsibility to avoid messing with the movies; it's my responsibility to play my character plausibly and honestly (and with kindness and grace, at least towards the other players).

Re sciency stuff from Third Contact: Yeah, that was fun! Interestingly, I would probably have been pulled into the plot that brought me into even if you hadn't given me that piece—but doing so made it much easier for me to find that plot, and meant that when they had a requirement for another component I could also easily get, I was right there.

Re heisty games: I think the core (and the common lesson one can learn from Blades, Gumshoe heist-style mechanics, and the Cortex Leverage game) is what to avoid and some techniques to do that; those lessons transcend game systems. The big failure mode for heists is that the players spend hours and hours coming up with a Perfect Plan. Which is boring and tends towards circularity. Then, when it finally comes down to executing the plan, one of two things happen: Either the Perfect Plan works with no complications (which is usually

boring, though you can play through it quickly and then introduce the complications after the plan is complete, like in the loot or something) or it goes wrong, in which case the plan is off the rails and you're back to total chaos (and the lesson the players may learn is that they need to spend even more time planning). I'm sure there are other ways to do it, but what Leverage and Blades do is to take a page from TV shows (like, say, Leverage) to try to mitigate these known problems—make a compact with your players that you're not going to punish them for not planning things out to every last detail to encourage more slapdash, improvised planning, and include mechanics for having retroactively brought equipment that turns out to be useful or even done preparatory actions (flashbacks)! that would have made sense if the players were the kind of exhaustive planning you're trying to avoid. It's important to remember that the focus here isn't to make the game look exactly like a TV show—a game is not a TV show—but to avoid known problems that games are prone to, even if we have to borrow techniques from other media to do so. Almost nobody *actually* wants the "all planning" session; they just fear the consequences of not having it.

Re game jams: The other notable thing about game jam is that they tend to have a very high variance in game quality. Sure, many games that come out of a jam will be throwaway nonsense. But every once in a while, you get an influential game coming out of a jam like Polaris.

A lot of online games include a formal break at around the halfway point, and it's incredibly useful—it's easy to lose track of the various aches and pains you've accumulated by sitting in a chair for 2 hours, as well as other bodily needs. On the other hand, the regular Thursday D&D online game has no formal breaks, but this makes sense. First, since it's D&D, you automatically get some personal breaks after your turn if a combat starts, since there's only so much you can do between turns. But also, since it's basically running in a 3 hour evening slot where some people have hard stops and some arrive early, we do want to squeeze as much play time out of the evening as we can.

And, of course, for games with a lot of improvisation, there's a big advantage (even in f2f games) for the tactical break—usually declared after character creation and before play starts, or after introductory play but before the main action starts, which the GM can use to plan out what to do next.

Re Italy: It does seem like it would be beautiful (and delicious) to visit various cities in Italy, but yes, aside from the expense, it would be good to at least study Italian on Duolingo (or the like) for year or two in advance of any such trip. I do have to wonder if there are any venues in Italy suitable for a Worldcon.

Re narrativist vs simulationist vs gamist: the surprisingly unsurprising thing there is that not everyone who likes a particular stance is going to like quite a lot of games under that stance. Ultimately, gamist is about being challenged in and out of character and feeling satisfied that the challenge was real and fair; simulationism is about feeling you're exploring a living world; narrativism is about the game producing a good story at the end. Different people are going to care to different degrees about each of these, but also a system designed to optimize for one of these things might still not satisfy someone who cares about it greatly—but not in *that* way. And that's ok; it's just one lens.

Re dice and getting out of your way: Ironically, one of the structures that gets most out of people's way is just rolling different sizes of dice for different challenges; it means you can replace doing math with just rolling different die sizes. Unfortunately, this is made more wonky by not having easy access to d14, d16, and d18 (raise a glass to the longtime runner of Gamescience and the inventor of numerous wonky die types, Lou Zocchi, who passed from the world this week), but using larger divisions and going from d4 to d20 to d100 can also work if the

mechanics are suitable, although for playability a d5, d10, d20, d50, d100 transition might work better aside from including two rare die types. Of course, die pool systems come out of a similar urge, but since they tend to fall into bell curve shapes, the results are very different than single die-focused systems.

Re Patrick's train game: I think it was clear how the PCs had one, maybe two tokens? They start with a single token and can decide which of them gets it (or whether to give it away). But also, there's another group with a token arguing over who is going to get it without any clear result, so if the PCs can convince them, they might be able to score a second token at the expense of that other group (but probably not). One of the odd things about that setup, reflecting on it, is that it feels like it's a moral play and a contemplation of mortality, and it is, but also it's a puzzle game that does have an optimal answer, if the PCs think to find it (and care to focus on that).

Re Cardcaptor Sakura: We'd want a map of the town *and* want the ability to modify it, so when a house got trashed (and not immediately rebuilt with magic, which is also a possibility) or a new person moves in, they'd get marked on the map and become part of the story going forward, just like on the show.

Re transliterating Hebrew: In addition to the words being properly written in Hebrew characters, not Latin ones, rendering the "correct" Latin transliteration something of a cloud, variant pronunciation between Sephardic and Ashkenazi variants of Hebrew (which among other things pronounce the same characters respectively as a "s" vs "t") further make a greater range of transliteration acceptable. The one personal preference I have is that I prefer that sounds that use the guttural sound which begins "chutzpah" and "Chanukah" be spelled with a ch or kh rather than an "h" (kh is probably best as it makes it clearer that it's *not* pronounced like "champ" and not like "hand" either, but it's not what I'm used to), but obviously not everyone agrees with me and that's ok.

Re PBTA and how many boxes to put on the experience track: While games do tend to do 5 boxes if you need 5 boxes to advance, I'd honestly be pretty happy with a sheet with say 25 boxes with lines to show when you get an advance. This would take up a bit more space, but avoid the "wait, did I take the advance or not" question that sometimes come up (and you could have a marking to show whether the advance had been committed or not), and avoid as much damage to the sheet as you mark and erase the same boxes, and of course if you eventually copied your character over to a new sheet you could leave marked and used box sets blank.

Re post season advances: I think we did wrap the next session after a season advance was taken. But also, because I was the person running ahead on advances (there's some player skill involved, even though some XP is from blowing rolls (but that also means that if you want to advance faster, make more rolls), I had some control over when to enter the finale. So, not least because I did want to be able to purchase a season advance myself, I made sure I wouldn't get my fifth advance near the end of a session, but close to the beginning of the next session instead, giving us two full sessions to play with the finale. For the second season we might have been a bit looser about the rule, but there we had a very solid plot that was driving us to a finale, so we were going to end the season once it wrapped. My character already had growing up moves during that season so I don't even remember what she took (she'd also changed playbooks between seasons, which technically meant she got the benefit of two season advances, but we were letting everyone change playbooks or retire their character and pick up a new one if they wanted between seasons).

In Blades games you do get more stuff for the things your characters do, but you usually have to be spending a resource for it. For instance,

if you want to get "we are exploiting a vulnerability that the target has" and don't have a pre-existing vulnerability, you could instead use a flashback to create such a vulnerability in downtime. Such a flashback doesn't cost Stress, but does cost Credits (just like it would have if you were otherwise buying extra downtime actions) and likely multiples as you need to fill a pie and will have some difficulties doing so with a single roll.

Getting the help of an NPC can also be an easy way to get an extra die, as the PCs have a number of helpful NPCs on call so they just need to tie one in. As to other bonuses (or penalties, well, in *theory* the other category covers a lot; it's entirely reasonable that if the group can incorporate a PC's action which ignores scale into their plan they should be able to ignore a scale difference between them and their target (which is one place we tend to lose a die, but we do have one PC who can ignore scale for some actions), and if they have some other advantage from their narration, that's capturable with "other". WRT the whiff factor, I think the big key is to make sure there's a cut ahead. That way, even if the group did really well in narration and scored 4 dice to roll for engagement, then that can be reflected in what happened (on a bad roll) *before* everything went wrong. If they're infiltrating a wedding as the staff, a whiff could be, say, "Ok, so you've successfully made sure you all have staff positions; one of you is the laserharper, another two are servers, and Jamie, you managed to make sure the organizer called in sick so your hacker is filling in for that role, putting you in charge of the whole event. And things are coming together for the job, when at the eleventh hour, the person of honor turns to Jamie and whispers "Jamie, WHERE'S THE BRIDE? She was supposed to be here an hour ago!" What do you do?

Re GMless(gm-full, really) difficulty vs GMed games: Obviously playing in a GMfull game isn't easier than playing in a GMed game; it's more demanding. But playing in a GMfull game, at least for me, is much easier than GMing a game, so unless someone designed a whole game to play there may be nobody putting in as much effort into the game as a typical GM would in a trad game.

Re Strange School game: Yeah, Strange School was designed and worked as GMed. As said, if we wanted to set another game in that world we could make a go of it being GM-full or even GM-less, because we have better structures to support that—and could vet players more than you did for the 2007-2012 run to make sure they were compatible with one another and willing to work with others well).

Re "why roleplay if I can't play someone better than I am at talking (mumble mumble mumble)": But of course that's why I think of it as "both is best". We need to hear you talk (or at least write or sign or otherwise describe what kinds of approach your character is taking at minimum), otherwise there's no *you* in the character—and yeah, this applies even to hyper-shy players like Theodore (at least at one point and time), particularly since often such players are brilliant if they can be coaxed out of their shell), but part of doing so is being sure that the player won't get hit with consequences if they are just bad at this, so having dice and a character skill can moderate the consequences of both high and low player skill in the social arena; high player skill and bad die probably means your approach was great but you missed one important detail, while a botched delivery and high character skill probably means your character realizes their original approach wasn't going to work and changes to something similar that would at the last moment—or that the situation has a concealed surprise that means that an objectively terrible plan turns out to be just the thing ("you can't talk your way into the High King's castle just by showing up in an ice cream truck!" High King: Turns out to be 9 and has a strong taste for ice cream today.)

Re hyperspecialized games: Yes, one of the things I was pointing out is that as much as people focus on games like The Mountain Witch and

Fiasco being hyper-specialized, D&D was also hyper-specialized; we didn't get mechanical support for even going outside the dungeon until after original D&D, and we didn't get support for things that weren't essentially dungeon crawls or setting up for same until we started to get other games in the late 70s or early 80s. Obviously once one gets skill systems (BRP, TFQ), there's nothing stopping you from running a heist or parliament session or artist's colony, but we needed to move away D&D to have those more general games that weren't build around "what does this have to do with exploration and/or combat?"

Re "the failed roll happened 3 hours ago" Keeping in mind that I was thinking "what if the droid was a PC" (they were actually a NPC) and "how do we keep the player from being sidelined", making the time of the roll vague would still have the roll matter—but obviously the character is still going to get to play; a single roll shouldn't mean your character is out of the session, even if the way we re-introduce your character is less than obvious.

Re not wanting complicated formulas in how people submit their zines: Well, quite. But you can approximate the results of complicated formulae with much, much simpler formulae; see my earlier comment on just increasing zine max by 2 pages for every APA comment to (to a maximum of the actual size of the comments), which gives people writing catch-up zines some more breathing room without just going "anything phrased as a comment has no max length" and inviting abuse or just over-wordiness.

Re battle lines in Monster Hearts being about building the pre-existing Rmap: Yeah, fair. I don't see how this would make someone say "ok, so this is never a game I want to play," but I can't speak for Patrick who presumably has his reasons. Well, other than "I don't want to play characters in a melodramatic school", which would be entirely fair—Monster Hearts isn't necessarily PVP, but it is absolutely a game about school melodrama. If anything, having the "battle map" get drawn as people put NPCs onto the map and you find out which NPCs have what kinds of history with PCs and NPCs tends to reduce the necessary PVP, as if PCs don't want to have a lot of BIG DRAMA with one another they can instead focus on play within the map.

Re UA's big edition being 3rd: See, this was what I was talking about. All these third wave 90s games (most by ex-A&Eers) got change-little update editions in the late 90s and then bigger rework versions in the 00s or 10s, and if anyone can keep straight which ones named their tiny-update versions "v2" and which didn't increment the version until their big rework, it isn't me.

Re Trail of Cthulhu having a Mythos Expeditions/Expedition Point Pool mechanic: Ok, so how does this work; I've never seen it come up.

Re PC absence: I remember one game Stephen ran back in the 90s where I had a planned absence one game and was latish the next, so Stephen had my character get captured and arrived at the next session to see the other PCs rescuing my character.

Re *witch and cat*: Yeah, doesn't need tables; creative players can just make stuff up (and the structure is based to a large degree on the Bottle Game, our 3 player PBEM "letter game" where we improvised literally everything without mostly talking it over with other players), but having them acts as a support for player creativity and can also help people feeling less creative at the moment.

**Avram Grumer:** Re links: Nah, you're right and it's the rest of us who need to put more links in. Mostly, it's work for me to make sure I have a clean formatting system for putting in links, since I don't write in Typst to start but use a pre-processor so I don't need to remember all of Typst as I write.

Re AI needing experience of the world, not simply exposure to masses of text, to develop consciousness: I don't really think much of Pirsig

(who trends towards navel-gazing from my decades-old memory of Zen) but I agree that for an AI to have consciousness, it needs to have perception of the world; without that kind of perception it merely has a convincing simulation. I don't think that this means it can't an AI would need a *body* to develop something we could recognize—and not eventually disprove, as consciousness. But it would need perception of time, something our current simulation-machines simply don't have. We have instinct, our base programming, and on top of that, we experience things, put them into our short term memory, develop patterns, and then filter some subset of both into long term memory, and in time, develop language skills, a sense of self, and a sense of the other.

But current-gen AI is completely different. Its core "instincts" are extensive, developed over many, many cycles of training against core data, the language "skills" baked into it before it ever interacts with another entity. Then, as to its moments of interactive operation, it's fitted with a core experience to analyze—its system prompt, then handed a stream of tokens to manipulate based on its data to date, but if an interaction goes on too long, it will winnow its set of tokens, pruning them as it goes (notably, we do this as well, but unlike us, nothing filters back to an AI's parameters, the results of its "instincts" i.e. its training data). So, like an amnesiac but talented child, it will stumble, sometimes producing a surprising imitation of sense, through the conversation, forgetting parts of it as it goes...until finally the interaction ends and the entirety of the conversation; everything but the system prompt, is wiped entire, leaving it nearly exactly where it was at the beginning.

Of course, perhaps there are further training runs—attempts to refine the model using the interaction logs, and some subset of the conversations it has "engaged in" will enter a simulation of long term memory at last (but all operators know that doing this is risky. A gen AI trained on its own interactions presents an attack surface even more than one trained on the open internet, as misinformation and maladaptation can be targeted at it directly). But is there any way to differentiate one bit of data from another? To segment the many logs of its own conversations from the millions of tokens parsed from the Internet at large? Any way to develop a real sense of distinction between self and other, between one time and the next?

Well, time can tell, but I can't say the current prospectus looks that great on the subject.

Re "mother may I," I've been known to use the term. One element of the playstyle is not simply that the GM has veto power, but also that the players don't know beforehand what the rules are, what's in and out of bounds, so they have to ask and then only when they get an answer are they enlightened. Thus, setting more firm rules (a collaboration document, say) can get you out of the "mother may I" trap to an extent. See also my comments about Once Upon a Time this; one of the reasons I won't play the game with just anyone is because the game's only real enforcement of its unwritten rules is in the "silly" table veto rule, players out of step with others might either run roughshod through the table's rules or find themselves stopped at unpredictable turns, and may not get useful feedback on how to improve.

Oooh, a Monster Hearts custom Race move (albeit incomplete). That makes me kinda want to roll up a Fast and Furryous MH hack.

Re Mike's repeated Keep Your Cool rolls with Byron's parents: Lisa went into more detail on this, but I think it's worth underscoring the core point—that a player should never be given repeated chances to make the same roll to the same situation, because a roll, miss, partial success, or full hit, should always change something, should always move time forwards. I could see a situation where the character gives

something up to progress further in the conversation, learns something new and *then* has to roll keep your cool again if they want even more info, but just like a mixed "run away" roll isn't "you're stuck in this situation...until you roll Run Away against" and nor is a miss (in fact, run away 7-9 is explicitly "you get away, BUT"; it could be "you get away but you run into something worse, but in that case repeated mixed "run away" rolls would involve diving into worse situations, which...I could admittedly see straining a GM's imagination). Lisa's answer is based on MH2, but if Briar might have accidentally have been using the MH1 rulebook, which I accidentally downloaded from <https://buriedwithoutceremony.com/> when I was looking this up. Even in v1, Hold Steady 7-9 is either "you keep your cool" or "get a good result (info, lose a condition, bonus) and you definitely DON'T keep our cool". Obviously if you pick the first option, you don't have to roll Hold Steady again that scene unless something really new happens; you have kept your cool. And in the second situation? Well, since you lost it (gaining the condition **Terrified** and something good) you shouldn't have to make another keep your cool roll in the same conversation either.

Re Scum and Villainy: For the people reading who are less intimately familiar with the rules, the main thing that Harmony getting all three resistance rolls up to 3 does is make her Stress recovery rolls much easier. Well, and harder, sometimes; when you attempt to indulge in a vice to blow off stress, you roll your *worst* resistance roll, and take the highest die; lose that much stress, but if it's more than the amount of stress you have, you over-indulge. So with a 3 in her lowest resistance roll (which also can reduce the amount of stress you gain in a session), Harmony is more likely to lose 4, 5, or 6 stress when she engages in a vice, but if she only has 5 stress, she's still more likely to lose 6 stress. The rewards of competence, I suppose.

Relatedly, looking over Girl by Moonlight, I'm struck by how the rules are simultaneously kinder and much meaner regarding stress. There, you automatically lose all stress at the end of a job, so no worries about having to make stress recovery during your two downtime actions. But then, before the job, there's an extra phase, the Obligation phase—the only way in which the game really enforces its "the world is out to get you" theme, in which you get a situation in which life stuff happens... and then have to make your worst resistance roll to mitigate it. So while you don't need to spend actions to mitigate stress, you might begin a mission anywhere from 0-6 stress with no way to deal with it, other than upping your resistance rolls, of course.

Of course, the other way Girl By Moonlight mitigates stress is much more interesting—max out on stress and you don't Stress Out like most Blades hacks. Instead, you go into Twilight, a form of Darkest Self. There, whenever you would gain stress, you lose it instead, and you have to hope you'll find a way to leave twilight, since when you get to 0 stress and are still in twilight you die. How well this works in play, I don't know, but it's certainly an engaging mechanic.

Re Monster Hearts VC session 6: The fact that the session had two extra players cancel likely takes the pressure off you; no curse if the pattern is broken.

Huh. Monster Hearts with multiple PCs per player! Nice!

Re Masks not worrying about the details of the characters powers and leaving them up to narration: Or rather, it gives you some basic themes to choose from—the Beacon can choose Phasing as one of two, but their other choices are probably skills, not really powers at all; the bull has capabilities but chooses what powers cause this; the delinquent can choose two powers appropriate to a trickster out of 6 possibilities, etc—but there are no details and the players have wide freedom on how to elaborate on these ideas. And while this does grant PCs very different capabilities in narration, the reason this works is because what you can do is largely determined by what moves you make and how you

succeed (or don't) on them. Sure, sure, one power set might allow you permission to Directly Engage A Threat, while with a different power set the MC might reasonably rule that you were Taking a Powerful Blow instead. But this is still a much smaller difference than two Champions characters built on vastly different power levels even if one PC is Rick Jones (Beacon) and another is Superboy (Bull). And yeah, this works because the game is focused around verbs, not nouns.

Re rmaps and graphviz: I don't remember whether we used graphviz or dot for Smallville (I think I used a graphing extension for Mediawiki that uses one of them under the hood?), but the result was pretty similar regardless. The problem was, the game produces a sufficiently dense map that it was hard to usefully render with either tool—we really needed to break it up into multiple maps with some arrows between elements.

Re the MCU: in fairness, compared to the comics, the MCU is in its infancy. If they keep acreting more stuff (rather than, as is sadly more likely, rebooting at some point) it could eventually get pretty wild.

Re swapping systems around as a game shifts: we did this a bit in the PBEM Strange School Cthulhupunk spin-off. It had mixed success—without a real rule for which system to used, it tended to be based on whim (or just sticking to OTE rules, which I mostly did, while Myles proceeded to play entire storylines using modified Dogs in the Vineyard). But shifting as the genre of the game shifts makes more sense—although the effort to reroll a character through the lens of a new system is certainly likely to result in some compromises.

MH: I've generally assumed that you can't lose all strings if you have no strings and that you can't go Darkest Self if you're already there, because otherwise PC death is entirely at the option of the player—but obviously, opinions can differ.

Re picture: I see the werewolf, the Ghoul, and the very present Ghost, but whom does Coffee represent (I mean, if it's not the Ghoul where that would be a fun variant Hunger).

**Patrick Zoch:** Ghost pushed out by trap! That's some great fast thinking (and a good way to keep the possession account from getting boring after the players had a sense of how it worked).

Huh. Smuggling's one thing, but is it illegal to be a hobgoblin in Saltmarsh? I mean, maybe. Meanwhile, in Neitherworld, we've befriended a beholder (a very stupid one, although undertaking a quest to find various stat-improving fountains, he's gotten smarter), helped out a dragonborn kingdom in an Empire of Evil (their neighbors are worse, and we liked the princess) hired a golem-making warlock as our housekeeper (he had previously been housemaster of the dorm that became our base, in its prior incarnation as part of the Necromantic College, and our remaining Ranger (an air genasi who has been revealed to be the daughter of the ruler of the plane of air, now deceased) has been gathering a monster army after the group collapsed the underground complex where they were based, rendering them largely leaderless.

Which isn't to say the group isn't heroic; we certainly are; just rather practical (and also 9th level, which renders us somewhat less afraid of immanent death; I remember in one of the groups earliest adventures, there was a LONG argument over whether to ungag a captured (and bound) evil wizard because some of the group was afraid that he would start killing as soon as he could open his mouth.

As opposed to, say, the group's last fight, in which the party (and the beholder, as an ally) triumphed against 9 variant liches; the group has stumbled into a weird area of the Neitherworld. Fortunately, the Disintegrate spells that struck home did so against people with (barely) enough HP to survive, or that fight could have been quite fraught; the enemy wasn't using Finger of Death (that's a pervious fight) but they did throw around a lot of damage.

Re your bard: I might be tempted to query how the player views the character's singing. Does she want to be a beguiling singer whose songs can befriend even the most avowed enemy? A pop star who has crowds waiting for her everywhere? An artistic singer who is welcomed in the highest courts? A popular songwriter whose songs spread throughout the land like wildfire? I mean, probably yes, yes, yes, and probably, but the emphasis does change how you might want to cater to her ideas.

Re (some of) the group basically being tourists: One of the nice things about modern D&D is how varied groups are. There are murder hobo parties, of course, and wandering bands of heroes, but there are so many others (and while it hasn't gotten the support and attention it deserves, I still have a soft spot for the "group patron" idea introduced in Tasha's Cauldron of Everything and supported in Eberon: Forge of the Artificer (and Rising from the Last War). Agree that your group is sponsored by an academy and they become a scholarly research expedition; have them sponsored by a sovereign and they become an embassy or the like, a criminal syndicate and they become a heist gang, etc. Of course, the group basically being tourists is sort of the opposite of this, but at least it's different.

Re "Why are you on this island" (not what) in Over the Edge: One of the nice things is because the game itself is so open—in general, it takes place on this weird island, and the books detail various conspiracies and plots, but most material is in the form of adventure seeds, not full adventures—is that it becomes easy to work player backstory and motivations into the game. Have a player who is all about their weird family (made up by the player)? Easy enough to detail some of them and have them filter into the game. Have a player whose backstory involves their own group of aliens that don't match any of the Al Amarja tabloid aliens? Guess your game now has another group of aliens; come up with stats and a basic idea of how their conspiracy works and the game will handle it just fine. Many other games aren't quite as flexible, admittedly, but in a home game it can be worthwhile to lean in to player creativity as long as it's comprehensible.

Re paladins and barbarians carousing with ruffians: I mean, in the spirit of consequences, not hard rules, that sounds great. Either one is likely to end up with friends from low places by spending time in seedy bars—so what kinds of relationships will the paladin have with her fence "friend" or the like? There's a lot of play in that kind of thing, honestly, and just because a paladin has some friends in unexpected places doesn't mean they're any less honorable (assuming, of course, that they are a paladin of law and good, the D&D5 definition having quite a bit of space devoted to other kinds of paladins with other oaths and codes).

I'm glad your player whose starting position was "why would I do any of this?" eventually realized that if she doesn't do anything risky or adventurous, nothing happens!

Re non-local backgrounds: Agreed that if a player wants to play a foreigner, the onus is on them to connect their character's motives to the group and the group's goals. On the other hand, if the player wants an easy exit (or just wants to change characters), having such a character head for home after an adventure can be a clean way of doing so (I admit, in one game I was tempted several times).

**Brian Misiaszek:** I look forwards to finding out the true nature of the transformation afflicting (?) the staff of the Mazorra! In as much as it's knowable, of course.

At this point, how much time has passed since the PCs arrival at the Mazorra?

When people talk about gen-AI as "merely predicting the next word in a sentence", they're not claiming anything—they're talking about the actual mechanism that is used to power these programs—extremely

sophisticated word prediction algorithms. The results that can be produced are, of course, incredibly impressive, especially when that stream of "predicted" words is then redirect into other systems, like code testing, internet browsers, and image generators (including other types of AI software) to produce a result that is all the more impressive for the piecemeal way it's produced. But forget how it works under the hood, and we can, as you seem to have, fall to the illusion.

It's even more dangerous when we consider that the nature of interaction with a these programs is that they act like a magic mirror, which changes form to reflect our own expectations (as reflected by how we communicate with it). This can make the illusion even harder to pierce, but also shows how little personality what we have created has of its own.

Re politics and human/AI relations: fortunately, this question is still very much a matter of science fiction. For now, anyway.

"Cover it for a full page" seems pretty arbitrary for a question on whether a zine treats a particular system, but having at least something substantial reflecting the system (rather than just mentioning it) does seem appropriate.

Re XP for zingers: Well, Toon, I know, gives a bonus for making other players laugh. But then, it's a comedy game.

Re fortune in the middle in conversations: Naturally the conversation can go anywhere. It might not even end with the side with the winning dice winning the conversation, depending on how players choose to play it. The dice inform what players say, and might (should) change how they express it and how strongly, but ultimately the point is the play, not the dice.

Of course, it depends on the system. In most systems you wouldn't use a FitM for an entire conversation, but it's appropriate with the Dogs in the Vineyard system as long as you have a clear sense of what the goals of the various parties are. Instead, you might say something like "I want to persuade you that you should use dice in roleplaying games rather than pure roleplay, and then roll, and depending on how good the rolls are, you make a stronger or weaker argument. And then the conversation can go in various other ways with rolls only when they're called for.

But Dogs is a particularly solid FitM system and can work well for longer interactions. With Dogs, you start out determining both what people's goals are, as well as what kind of interaction it is (physical, talking, fighting, shooting). In this case, we're talking, so you roll the talking stats, but if someone is losing and doesn't want to yield, they could escalate to another avenue of interaction, at a cost that, well, at that point you're not just talking, are you?

You might also bring in other advantages you have associated with the conflict and roll them as well (your relationship with someone who might be helpful, like my personally knowing one designer or another, or owning a big, excellent catalogue of games, whatever seems like it might help. All of that gets rolled (and some can get added in the middle, so you don't know for sure who's going to win, though looking at the dice you probably have an idea of who's ahead).

Then, as we bring in our arguments, we also put forwards one or more sets of dice. Match (or beat) an opponent's bid with two dice, and you've met them solidly, and can then put forward two of your own dice to advance your own argument. Match it with one die, and you've countered their argument (and can take that into account in how you phrase your response); you get to keep the die you used and add another one for your own attack. Match or beat it needing 3 or more dice, and you've handled it, but you've also taken a hit and will pay for this later; keep track of how many dice you took the hit with and

(assuming you still have something left) make a response of your own by advancing your next argument, and pushing forwards two new dice.

This of course continues until one side can't, or chooses not to respond. Maybe they're out of dice. Maybe they could continue things by escalating, but they don't want to. And maybe they just think the other side has won the argument, regardless of what the dice say. Because in the end, the choice of when to end the conflict is a matter of roleplay, not just mechanics; the mechanics frame it, and may determine when it ends if nobody is willing to yield otherwise, but the only things forced is that you can't continue if you're out of dice and that if you put forwards more than two dice to respond, you're going to take a hit.

And, of course, maybe who wins and loses isn't even really the point (maybe it is, though). By having a system for framing the conversation, you can keep it to a reasonable length and have a sense of the rhythm, but the point is to frame roleplaying, not replace it. Sure, if you're thrusting forwards two 10s you're going to be more confident than if you're putting together a weak set just meet your opponents argument, taking the hit, and then responding with 6 and a 5. But maybe that's the argument that persuades the person across that table from you that it's time to yield (or maybe to come out punching, if they decide they really care, well, depending, but then it's not really a conversation any more, is it?)

And yes, FitM mechanics (and Dog's one in particular) can apply to PC/PC dialogue, PC/NPC, or a combination with multiple sides. Because it's a bidding system of sorts in a system that encourages GMs to question character ethical statements explicitly (Dogs is weird game), it scales pretty well for this kind of things.

Of course, it's not going to work for everyone. But there is a difference between establishing goals (what happens before Fortune in the Middle), determining outcomes (or current outcomes, as Dogs does, as more dice can get rolled in longer conflicts), and figuring out what actually happens. In a fight, you wouldn't roll the entire set of dice before an action is made (although in Dogs you'd roll maybe a third of the dice likely to come out), but the basic principle of fortune in the middle remains—D&D is actually a classic example. Good play is not go go "I take my broadsword and with a mighty swing, cut off the boar's head." You're going to look really silly when you roll a 7 and the boar's head remains firmly attached.

Instead, you say "I'm approaching the boar and swing at it with my broadsword". Ok, great, then you roll, and hopefully you roll higher than its AC, 15. Fortune. Roll damage. Then someone—by default the GM, but maybe they yield some of that power back to you (e.g. the "How do you want to do this" meme), describes what actually happens, as your strike misses/hurts/bloodies/kills the boar. Stance, roll, description/narration—the core model for fortune in the middle.

Doing the same thing with conversation won't work all the time (a fight is not a conversation or vice versa), but the principle is basically the same.

# Traveller Play-By-Email

## Plankwell Campaign, Ch 56: Honor

**GMing: Jim Vassilakos & Timothy Collinson, Playing Capt. Plankwell: Conrad Rader**  
*The character of Capt. Plankwell was conceived by Phil Pugliese*

“Is there any problem?” Stef asked Manda as we approached.

“No... no sir, everything is fine.” *Except that thanks to our new captain, I’m now in a long-distance relationship.* “We’ll get the taxis back online as soon as we can. Happy birthday, sir.”

“No worries, Lieutenant,” I said. “I actually appreciate the initiative in taking it offline and giving the crew a little more space to work off the energy.”

I left my psychic curtain open, as whatever social drama unfolded as a result of my actions was something I wanted to at least be aware of. Partly, it was simple curiosity about Shepherd’s and Bim’s relationship, but mostly I just didn’t want my unilateral action losing me a competent officer.

“Thank you, sir,” Manda said. There was something there behind her eyes, a complex mix of emotions, but it was too blurry, too interwoven to extract the individual threads. Stefani, likewise, was similarly conflicted, but about what precisely? Did she know about Manda and Bim?

Cross-species relationships were not unknown, but social reaction to them varied widely. As for myself, I’d never been sexually attracted to a vargr, but I really enjoyed being part of a pack during team games or when they cut loose while partying. They had an entirely different sensibility about body contact that was different from humans — well, at least different from where I’d been raised. Also, I liked sparring with them, although it was quite different from sparring with humans.

As we descended the ladder to Deck 1 and entered what appeared to be a control hub for the ship’s meson screen and nuclear damper, I could sense that Stef was feeling slightly lightheaded. Had she been drinking? No, this wasn’t inebriation. It was something resembling... relief?

We soon came out into the spinal corridor that ran just under the STT. On the left was the Gunnery Command Center where I’d talked to my Chief Weapons Officer and one of her particle accelerator specialists.<sup>1</sup> Now I knew where I was.

Up ahead, past another set of fuel bladders, would be the ship’s forward section, and hiding in there were no less than four ladders, any of which could take me back up to Deck 2 and back to my quarters. But not knowing the lay of the land quite as well as my XO, I followed her lead, all the while focusing my telepathy on her. Why was she relieved?

No, it was more than relief. She was embarrassed about something. It was because of those two crew members we’d

caught getting frisky in one of the sensor stations. No. Well, maybe, but it had more to do with Manda and the fact that rather than simply walking down to the lower deck and crossing the ship like any normal sophont, instead she’d decided to sideline the transport capsules and open up the STT to float traffic, all because she didn’t want to take the extra steps to relieve her bladder. And then there were those crewmembers using the STT like their own personal playground. In Stef’s mind, it all reeked of lax discipline. Such was the intensity of her frustration that I could scarcely imagine what she’d be feeling if she knew about Ghoerrg’s little drug cache.

Regardless, she had a plan. The first zero-zero drill. It would be in a few hours, during the middle of my sleep shift, and she had given the crew no warning. She didn’t want me to see how unprepared they were. Only after being caught with their pants down, hopefully not literally, only then would they get the message to be ready at all times. Otherwise, sitting in orbit for seven weeks would have them all thinking Navy Life was easy. They’d be so well-rested, they’d forget how to be warriors.

But should she tell me? If she did, I might have her move the drill to my active shift, in which case we’d both see how undisciplined this crew had become. No. She didn’t want me seeing that.

*But he’s the captain.*

“Sir,” she said as we entered *Officer Country*, “the first zero-zero is coming up in,” she glanced down at her wristcom, “four hours and twenty-eight minutes. Your quarters will be excluded, of course, but if you happen to hear the alarm or sense the loss of gravity, you may safely ignore it.”

I thought about how little I’d actually been on the ship. For all intents and purposes, it was still her ship and I had a vested interest in making sure she felt comfortable working her way.

“I appreciate the consideration, Commander. I will definitely participate in the next one.”

“Aye aye, sir,” she said, showing no hint of the relief she felt inside. Her little risk had been rewarded with understanding and agreement. Maybe there was something to this psychic awareness after all.

“Commander. Uh, Stefani....”

“Sir?”

“Thank you for everything,” I said.

“Everything, sir?”

“I mean, letting the crew organize this, taking what has been a very confusing few days in stride, and, uh, well... I

1 See the beginning of Chapter 16 in A&E #564.

am trying to say that I appreciate your professionalism, and....” I gave up and clamped down hard on the psychic curtain. I really did not want to know what was going on behind her small smile.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Until tomorrow, Commander.”

“Until tomorrow, sir.”

Alone in my quarters, I sunk into the couch, still feeling overwhelmed from having talked to so many people with so many thoughts. Even with my curtain closed, I could sense the cacophony. Was there such a thing as psi-fatigue? And whatever happened to Josefeen and Maz? Did I ever say goodbye to my guest?

Cleon-be-damned, it was him. He was the one responsible for that nightclub fire. My vargr were innocent. Well, not exactly *innocent*. I mean, they were all certainly guilty of something.

*Sigh.*

Another birthday on the books. My life had changed so much in the past few days, I couldn’t help but wonder where I’d find myself next year. Well, I was captain now. Assuming we were still on detached duty, I could put the ship on EMCON<sup>2</sup> maneuvers somewhere in deep space and just wait it out... assuming I could find some way to avoid the crew. Spooky’s little side trip, taking me into the pilot’s lounge, was not sitting well with me, not with the number of times she called me an ex-pilot.

Was I? Had I given up what I truly loved?

I had to admit, like every other academy graduate, I’d always wanted my own ship. But command was a thankless job. I thought back to all the bull sessions with Gubar and others where we’d savagely criticized our commanding officers for various decisions with which we disagreed. Was she now doing that to me?

I imagined her criticizing me in front of Stallion, who by this point was probably too drunk to care or even remember, and I couldn’t help but snort. I’d known many like him. If I was being honest, at one time I *was* him. Everything to prove. And now I was in command of my own ship. And I still had everything to prove, except now to a much tougher audience. What the hell made me ask for a drink? Did I really need to show I could still swing my big pair? Let everyone know the Old Man was still one of them?

I wasn’t anymore. I hadn’t been for a long time. I had watched too many die in the war to ever take pointless risks out of pride. And yet I had ordered a Section 678 interdiction not even a week into my command. And, perhaps even worse, I’d given my command authority to a member of the IISS and now had to unwind the consequences. What was I thinking?

The Milstim-Q36 kept fizzing away in my brain, and I got up from the couch, took off my clothes, and found my way to the bedroom. I lay down, squinting my eyes at the

sudden sensation of being able to feel my thoughts. They were like slippery noodles extending down into a vast, cavernous labyrinth.

*What’s down there?* I couldn’t help but wonder. *Don’t get self-indulgent.*

If I was to go snooping around in my own brain, I might never get to sleep. Indeed, I might end up perfectly insane.

This was the whole question, wasn’t it? Play it safe and live in ignorance, or take risks, break rules, and maybe, just maybe, be skilled enough to not end up a smear on the hull.

*One time*, I told myself. *Just one time to see where it gets you.*

I sorted through my thoughts, feeling their emotional weights, and isolated the one where I’d rested my hand on Stallion’s arm. My psychic curtain had been drawn at the time, so there was nothing there to see but his eyes staring back at mine, but as I examined the memory, regarding it now with my full attention, it was almost like he was right there in front of me in real time, like I could open up his mind and peer inside.

There followed a moment’s vertigo analogous to the sort one feels upon entering zero-g, and then, quite bewilderingly, I found myself back in the pilot’s lounge, the Phoenix Nest, with its narrow shelf of empty bottles. Spooky was there with another young woman, black eyebrows framed by blond hair so light it bordered on platinum.

“I don’t know,” Spooky said.

“Why not? If he’s in here drinking with us, it means he wants to fly,” I found myself saying — at least, it felt like I was the one speaking — but the voice wasn’t mine. It sounded more like Stallion’s, and I suddenly realized the same aftertaste I’d had in my mouth after taking his shot was there now. “Anyway, there’s no regs against captains flying training exercises. Hell, I’d do it if I was captain. Why not?”

*Weird*, I thought to myself.

“Ain’t nothin’ weird about it,” he/I said, looking around to see who said that, and then it was over. I was back in my body, my heartbeat thumping in my ears.

*Holy Cleon! What just happened?*

It was like when I’d been in Agidda’s head, but that had been a memory. This felt more like it was in real-time.

I was suddenly very leery of messing around in my head when doing so meant I could end up in other people’s heads. I checked the time — 22:17 — and thought about summoning Abbonette to discuss what happened.

“Jacky, what is Lieutenant Abbonette’s location? Do not alert her to the inquiry.”

“Lt. Abbonette is in the Intel Pod.”

Well. The zero-zero would be getting underway at some point, and if I wasn’t in my cabin, it would wreck my plans to let Stefani get her house in order without the embarrassment of me seeing just how bad things were. I got

2 Emission Controlled (i.e. Stealth).

up to make sure I knew exactly where all my vacc gear was, just in case, and then flopped back into bed.

*Just sleep. This can all be worked out in the morning.*

I wondered if I should take something to counter the Milstim in my system. *Not a good move.* I needed to lay off the drugs for now. Who knew how introducing something new might mess with my brain? Well, the doc would when I went in for my checkup.

That had me a little worried. Medical scans could be overly revealing. Given that I was now a psion, and especially given the psi-drug I'd been taking, what might a full neurological scan uncover? That would be a question for Josefeen.

I thought about her in the Intel Pod. Something was bugging me, like a wisp of something I should be concerned about. And where was Maz?

"Jacky, what is the location of the guest, Maz....?" I blanked on his last name.

"Director Mazarin Scarlett has left the ship."

So they weren't still together, not unless the ship's computer was lying to me.

I closed my eyes, willing myself to sleep, but it was no use. *Damn Milstim.* Maybe some push-ups would do the trick. I'd found them to be a reasonably potent soporific, but the one requirement was that I summon the will, and I just didn't feel like it, so I continued to lay there, hovering on the edge of sleep for I don't know how long, until an image slowly coalesced in my mind. It was Guri Maakhiriin.

"What can you tell us about him?" a young man asked from somewhere deep in the back of my head. I recognized him. He was one of those reporters who'd interviewed me while I was on the Major's g-carrier.<sup>3</sup>

"He's exceedingly quick to take offense," Guri replied, "and once offense is taken, he completely lacks any sense of self-control. In short, he's... he's always looking for a fight, and because of *who* he is, he's always gotten away with it."

"He's always gotten away with it," the reporter repeated. It wasn't exactly a question, but it was clear he wanted more.

"He's a Plankwell." Guri said. "In his mind, he's the Navy's golden boy. And they've done absolutely nothing to disabuse him of this notion."

And then, like a wisp of smoke, the vision dissipated, and I awoke. The dream or whatever it was receded, fragmenting until all I knew was that Guri was badmouthing me. Was it merely my imagination? A morsel of undigested resentment?

Now that I was a psion, I couldn't discount the possibility that it might be real. What had Josefeen called me? A poly-psi?

The words — *He's a Plankwell* — stuck in my head. That and *golden boy*.

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<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 42 in A&E #590.

It was true that many had great expectations of me, being that I was from such a storied military family. What they tended to forget, however, was there are just as many who fear the possibility of a popular uprising spearheaded by descendants of great Imperial patriots. And they also forget that I came into this not by choice. Being born a Plankwell was to inherit the mantle, whether one wanted it or not.

And yet there was something heady about it. While I outwardly condemned the hero worship, there was still something there to make me wonder why people did this. Why did they invest so much into an image of a hero, a savior? It scared me sometimes, how people changed around me when they found out my name and confirmed my lineage.

Maybe Guri knew who I was before the fight. Indeed, maybe that's why there had been a fight.

He, of course, had always hated me ever since that "misunderstanding" regarding our bunk assignments. Since we didn't yet have call signs, the sublieutenant who'd been charged with making our sleeping arrangements had sorted us according to our first names, so it was *Guri and Gus, you have bunk twenty-six*. Why they hadn't used our last names wasn't entirely clear. It probably had something to do with putting us all on the same level. We no longer belonged to our respective families. We were all now property of the Imperial Navy. Personally, I welcomed it, and since relatively few of us were from Rhylanor, I wasn't even sure if the majority of cadets knew I was a Plankwell.

It might have been partly due to this ignorance that Guri put a heavy hand to my shoulder, pushing me back slightly before I could sling my bag onto the upper bunk.

"Hold up," he'd said. "My choice."

I immediately tensed up. It was an obvious power move, and laying his hand on me was a breach of protocol. Doing so implied many things, the most obvious being a presumption of superiority. I'd run into this attitude repeatedly on Rhylanor, especially among the more entitled sons and daughters of the ruling elite. They thought themselves insulated from consequence. But in the military, use of force was reserved for the enemy. So as far as I was concerned, this guy had just declared himself my enemy.

I didn't care anything about why he wanted to choose. But I very much cared about the way he chose to express himself. Honor was now at stake. My duffel had barely hit the deck before I reached out, using a move I'd practiced to snag his hand and twist it down into a restraint hold. I didn't pull it off quite as well as I would have liked, but it was good enough to make my point.

"Keep your hands to yourself," I said in a low voice, hoping not to draw further attention from those closest to us.

Next thing I knew, however, his free hand came straight at my neck, and soon we were both crashing to the deck.

The other cadets turned and stared, and the sublieutenant yelled, “Stop!” But we’d already gone from zero to all out war, and once a fight begins, it doesn’t end so easily. Muscle memory had taken over, and all the other cadets were scattering to get out of our way, but then I began to get the upper hand, almost knocking him out with a kick before the bosun and some security ratings pulled us apart and put us both into submission so fast it quite literally made my head spin.<sup>4</sup>

They then marched us to the brig without even asking questions. There was no “How did this start?” That was my first clue about something that until that moment I’d only heard as rumor.

Guri glared at me, his nose still bleeding, as they put him in his cell. It was obvious he desperately wanted a rematch. As for myself, I’d taken some hits, but I was pretty sure I didn’t look half as bad as him.

Needless to say, I’d never seen the inside of a Navy brig before. Back in the academy, we were always confined to quarters for whatever we did wrong. Well, either that or expelled, but that was a fate I’d managed to avoid. My cell had plain walls, a double bunk, a fresher, and an electronic tablet that turned out to only contain the Imperial Code of Military Justice, no doubt so errant detainees could try and figure out how much trouble they were in.

The first thing I did was to inventory my wounds. My ribs ached, one of my forearms was bruised where it had hit the deck, and I had bloody knuckles on both hands. Oh, and what was that ache in my foot? Oh, right. That was from when I’d kicked Guri in the face. Unfortunately, my attempt to knock him out cold had just made him madder. I wiped some blood from a cut above my eye. He’d been wearing a ring. All in all, not too bad. I had certainly taken worse in the past.

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4 This is an expanded version of the fight first mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 6 (A&E #554), and some details have changed. For instance, the initial version mentions Gus fought with *crewmates*, not a crewmate, but then in Chapter 27 (A&E #575), Guri was introduced, and that’s when the backstory began to shift. Actually, the introduction of Guri is a tale in itself. For the full story, look at my comment to Joshua Kronengold in A&E #578. As for this scene, however, I asked Conrad to write the initial version since it was his character’s memory, but I did so in a peculiar way: *“I’d like some description about how this whole scene went down as well as a description of the scuffle itself. And what specifically did Guri say that turned out to be untrue? Was he fabricating, misremembering, or simply embellishing? Note, if you want to really challenge yourself, you should create some room in there for Guri to justify his feelings, at least to himself, as he seems to still think Gus was at least as much at fault as himself.”* (<https://groups.google.com/g/plankwell-pbem-s1/c/0-PZvtFrZUk/m/ULlrNRJwCAAJ>) Needless to say, Conrad came through with flying colors, as he always does.

I picked up the tablet, looking up what I had possibly done to derail my career. It wasn’t until the next watch that they hauled us in front of the captain and his XO.

The whole question in my mind was which one of us had a right to the top bunk. If it was Guri simply because R came before S, that would put me in the wrong. But he had put a hand on me and given me a slight push. It wasn’t exactly an attack, but it was against protocol. But would it count as initiation of hostilities? If not and if I was also in the wrong about who had first rights to the top bunk, that would put me in a bad place. But how bad?

I remembered us both standing at attention side by side, the captain seated at his desk, a tablet in his hands. His cap was on the desk as well, and I noticed the grey in his close-cropped hair. The Executive Officer stood to the side, arms folded and wearing a grim expression. Behind us, the Marine in charge of the brig read the charges: breaching the peace of the ship, provoking gestures, assault, disorderly conduct in quarters, and finally dereliction of duty. The Marine continued with the names of all the witnesses in the berthing bay who had seen the fight. Then he detailed the events as related by the witnesses, many of whom had only noticed when I’d dropped my duffel and put Guri in the initial restraint hold.

I held my face stoically as ever. It really did not look good for me. By all rights, I should not have responded with force. I’d let my honor get the better of me. Why?

Because my last name was Plankwell. Olav was probably the biggest swinging dick in all of Imperial history, and other guys my age were often either intimidated or they wanted to see if they could bully me. To that sort of person, nothing was sweeter than having a Plankwell under their thumb. Needless to say, my temper at such treatment became exceedingly short. That was why I’d been in so many fights. Because whenever someone tried pulling something, if I didn’t respond immediately, it would just get worse. Someone else might be able to coast under the radar, but not a Plankwell.

My father understood this. He’d been through it himself. Though he’d lecture me endlessly about personal responsibility and how I was only responsible for my own actions, not anyone else’s, he still wanted to know if I’d given as good as I’d taken.

“It’s not important whether you win or lose,” he once told me. “All that’s in higher hands. What’s important is that you stand firm for yourself and for what’s right. Remember, you’re a Plankwell. And Plankwells don’t run.”

I’d once heard him and Mom arguing. He’d enrolled me in elementary martial arts. Mom viewed it as a waste of time.

“He needs to study,” she’d said, “not injure himself trying to break boards with his fists.”

“How’s he going to defend his honor if we don’t give him the tools?”

“Honor, honor, honor! It’s just another word for pride.”

“As a woman, you have the luxury to think that way, but it’s different for men.”

“He’s just a boy!”

“But he won’t be forever!”

The captain listened intently to the official report, all the while looking at whatever was on his tablet. Then he looked up at us, his eyes impossible to read.

“Anything to say for yourselves?”

I was still contemplating the question when Guri took the initiative and spoke first.

“It’s as he said, sir. Cadet Plankwell made an offensive move when I attempted to select my bunk in the order that the sublieutenant had assigned it. I only responded in kind when the cadet refused to release the hold that was causing me pain.”

I was stunned at the brazenness of his lie, but from long experience in arguing my case in situations such as this, I clamped down on the impulse to interrupt. Although I hadn’t noticed any security cameras in our berthing area, if there were any, Guri had just effectively stabbed himself, as not only had he been the one to make first physical contact, but he’d never asked for me to release my hold, which meant he was betting everything on there being no surveillance video whatsoever. Well, this was an Imperial Navy starship, so that was quite a thing to assume.

Although people rarely talked about it, there were rumors about the Navy and its hidden cameras. Privacy, it was said, was something civilians might enjoy, but not active duty military and certainly not while aboard Navy ships. The whole situation of being in space just presented too much risk. If someone wasn’t mentally stable, if they were misbehaving in some way or causing trouble, the officers needed to find out ASAP. Everyone’s lives depended on everyone else. There could be no weak links.

But Guri, having already suffered the worst of our injuries, couldn’t stomach the possibility of losing this disciplinary hearing as well. He’d go from being someone who’d been bullied but fought back to someone who was a bully and who’d gotten his ass handed to him. Not a particularly good look. But he was taking a hell of a risk.

“So you’re saying you did absolutely nothing wrong?” the captain asked him.

“I only defended myself.”

“You understand the regulations,” the captain said. “No physical contact.”

I watched Guri out of the corner of my eye, but then noticed Commander Vilnechats looking hard at me, at which point I refocused my gaze on the Imperial Sunburst on the wall just above the captain’s head.

“I may have tapped him on the shoulder,” Guri said, “but it was just to get his attention. But then he attacked out of nowhere. What was I supposed to do?”

Captain Marchemsaar shifted his attention to me.

“Cadet Plankwell, what say you?”

I swallowed. I was weighing the costs. If Guri had told the truth, I’d have been gentleman enough to accept the consequence for my part in this. No doubt, we’d both get some punishment, but then we’d put it behind us and get on with being crewmates. But there was no way I would accept fault other than for what I had done. And the captain’s question about physical contact gave me hope they had video. Why would he have asked it otherwise? All of which meant Guri was screwed. He was just too dumb to realize it, which meant he was also too dumb to be in the Imperial Navy.

“Sir, Cadet Maakhiriin spoke incorrectly,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “It was he who first laid hands on my person. The accounts of the witnesses were correct, but it appears no one saw or reported the first shove to my shoulder that Cadet Maakhiriin inflicted.”

“Oh, please,” Guri said.

“Silence!” Vilnechats ordered.

Guri shut his mouth, but it was obvious he thought he could get away with this scot-free by branding me as the instigator. That would have led to associations with the more murderous activities of my famous ancestor. All I had was the truth. If I was judged at fault, at least my version would be in the record.

The captain stared at me for a long moment.

“You understand instigating violence, except under orders, is in contravention to Navy regulations?”

Did I? Did I instigate?

“I understand, sir. I was surprised and did not react appropriately. I fully admit to participating in the violence and claim no excuse.”

What authority figures always hoped for in situations such as this was contrition. They wanted to see us accept responsibility for whatever we’d done rather than seeking to avoid it by claiming innocence or making excuses. I might have brought up how my honor was at stake, but that would have only hurt me. Personal honor was subsumed in the military to honor of the service, and my pursuit of the personal over duty was what had gotten me into this mess.

The captain sat back in his seat and glanced at his XO, who did something to the tablet she was holding. The wall behind the captain, where the Imperial Sunburst had been displayed, lit up with a camera image from our berthing bay timestamped to the incident. It looked like it had been taken from a high angle and behind some sort of grate, but the two of us were plainly visible, and then it went into slow motion, clearly showing Guri reaching out to shove my shoulder as I was lifting my duffel to the upper bunk. There was no sound, but it was clear Guri was saying something. I winced as I clearly dropped my duffel and seized the offending hand, levering it down. Anyone who’d been trained in fighting would see it was a restraint hold, only painful if you fought against it. Had I executed it perfectly,

what followed wouldn't have happened, but the hold was imperfect, and I hadn't made any attempt to improve it.

We watched in silence as Guri immediately went on the offensive, breaking the hold, and then there was the fight itself, which culminated in us moving off camera just as I was kicking him in the face. Fortunately, it didn't quite catch my foot connecting with his noggin. His head was just out of frame, but we both knew how that went. Unfortunately, it was also clear there had been multiple opportunities to disengage that neither of us had taken advantage of despite the fact the sublieutenant had been shouting orders for us to do just that. The cam footage blinked out and the captain continued to regard us with his blank expression.

"Cadet Maakhirin, possibly the only thing worse than fighting in the ranks is being the instigator of such fighting. And you have compounded your guilt by lying about the circumstances. You are hereby judged guilty on all charges. Sentence to be determined, but I am also dismissing you from cadet status on this ship. You will be returned to base to complete the sentence of the charges and will have to reapply for assignment to aviation cadet. You are dismissed."

There was a long moment of silence during which Guri just stood there like he was in shock.

"But..."

"You've been dismissed," the marine said, grabbing Guri by the back of his collar and forcibly turning him toward the door. "Move!"

Unfortunately, we were already in jump space, so it would be a little while before he was off the ship. During that time, he'd restated his version of events to anyone who'd listen, telling them he'd gotten shafted all because he'd defended himself against the Navy's golden boy. Yes, he'd touched me first, he admitted, but it wasn't an attack. But according to his story, I used it as a pretext to initiate violence. Some crewmates asked me for my version, but I wasn't a talker like Guri. I just told them it was a mistake all around, something that shouldn't have happened.

"Then why are they punishing him so hard while you get a slap on the wrist?"

"Because he lied."

"About what?"

"Ask the captain or the XO. I'm done talking about it."

Of course, it wasn't like a cadet could go knocking on the captain's door asking for an explanation, so Guri just lied about lying. The video was never released. Doing so would have revealed the camera's location within an air vent. And both Guri and I were under orders not to mention its existence.

As for who'd been assigned to which bunk, I later realized the ambiguity was intentional. The Navy wanted to see how their latest batch of spacers would handle internal conflict. Who was agreeable and who wasn't? Personality

tests were one thing, but the proof was in personal interactions.

The problem was the fighter corps valued aggression. They even selected for it, so a certain degree of jockeying for dominance was expected. But they didn't want cadets so aggressive they'd prove impossible to control, and they especially didn't want liars. Expulsion served as an example to others. And while such rejects might not serve the Imperium directly, their training rarely went to waste. The subsector and planetary navies would often scoop them up. Indeed, that's exactly what happened to Guri.

I rolled over to my other side still wondering if my dream of him with the reporter was real, and if so, then what was he up to? Navy personnel didn't talk to the press unless it was authorized. Was he taking another big risk? It hadn't worked out so well for him last time.

Over the years, I'd come to realize with some chagrin that I was in total agreement with Marchemsaar on issues of discipline and the value of shipboard surveillance. I thought about the justice I'd dispensed to my vargr crew earlier in the day. I'd given them what amounted to a slap on the wrist and kept them from being used by the planetary authorities as scapegoats. As for Bim, he was obviously part of some scam involving the IISS, but I had no proof, and by dismissing him, I'd essentially issued a strong hint to his superiors that I knew what they were up to.

No doubt they'd want to determine exactly what I knew. If they had any telepaths, which seemed likely, they'd send him or her or them to read my mind. Tomorrow, therefore, would be another one of these bizarre days that I seemed to having as of late. My new normal. I wasn't sure how much more of this I could take. But I had to keep moving forward. What choice was there?

I turned up the bed's gravity suppression and shifted to my other side, still wondering about tomorrow. Not only would I need to deal with the IISS; there was also the small matter of the IHC-CoJ and whether they'd take sides with the HPSS. Oh, for Cleonsake! No wonder I couldn't sleep. I was up to my armpits in acronyms! And I'd probably insulted the Countess. There she was, trying to mend conflicts, and what was I doing?

*"Honor, honor, honor! It's just another word for pride!"*

Maybe Mom was right. I could have ended the matter, but instead I'd told Faulk I wanted to move forward.

*"Bureaucracy is like quicksand."*

*What? Where did that come from?* It was Faulk's voice. I could almost picture him saying it. Another micro-dream?

There was obviously no choice. I got up. I'd do three sets. One set was usually sufficient. Two most definitely. The third would be sheer overkill. If I didn't fall asleep after that, I might as well stop trying.

I zombie-walked into the living room, where there was more available floor space, and found a spot. Then I leaned down, placed my hands flat to the faux-wood flooring, and

let my feet slide backward, my body leveling out, my shoulder and hips taking the weight. Then up and down — *one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, one, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, two* — up and down, twenty, then forty, then sixty, then eighty, until my wrists ached nearly as much as my arms — *seven, eight, nine, nine, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten*. My arms finally gave out somewhere north of a hundred, and I settled my chest to the floor where I simply breathed, slowly at first, but then faster as my body caught up to the fact that it needed way more oxygen. Of course, my form had slipped a bit at the end, perhaps more than just a bit, but there was no one watching. Or was there?

As I lay still, now breathing heavily, all the little hairs on the back of my neck slowly stood upright. But there were no cameras in here. I'd already checked. Oh, who was I kidding? If Josefeen or her superiors wanted to keep an eye on me, there were cameras small enough that it would take an expert with the appropriate gear to find them. That said, I was almost certainly being paranoid. Almost certainly.

I started another set — *one, two, three, four* — and focused on maintaining my form while my eyes locked on the fake wood grain. It was probably vinyl or some type of laminate. It didn't feel like real wood. Real wood was generally a bad idea on starships. The vibrations from a hull breach could cause wood to splinter. Well, during a hull breach, nearly anything could splinter. People could splinter and then be sucked outside. Not a pretty sight.

I only made it to a little over half my previous count when the veins in my arms threatened to burst. I relented, lowering my chest back to the floor.

Someone was watching me. I was damn near sure of it. *Josefeen*? No. *Stop it*. Nobody's watching. It was probably just the psi-enhancer or that Milstim making me paranoid.

*One, two, three, four*. I hit it again, my last set. Almost immediately, my arms and wrists began complaining. But I desperately needed to sleep, which meant I needed to keep going. Quite suddenly, however, that familiar burning sensation in my arms and wrists vanished, and I looked down at the floor, noticing it slowly receding. What now? Was I levitating? I blinked, trying to fix my vision, but the floor kept getting farther away, and it was only then I heard the alarm.

It was faint, just barely audible, and as I focused on it, I could hear a voice: "Hull breach. All hands to battlestations."

It had to be the zero-zero. Someone had apparently turned off the grav-plates for the entire ship. Right now, a whole shift was out there scrambling to locate the nearest, unclaimed emergency vacc suit, while those already wearing shipsuits were congratulating themselves on being prepared.

Well, so much for push-ups. I waited until my feet brushed against the wall, then pushed off, trying to get back

into my bedroom. It didn't quite go as planned, however. Indeed, it was one thing bouncing back and forth along an empty corridor, but quite another trying to navigate a small room. If someone were indeed watching me, they'd probably be laughing. Nonetheless, I finally managed to make my way back into my bedroom and into the grav bed, my arms feeling like a pair of rubber noodles.

Then the gravity came back on, the voice outside saying: "This has been a drill."

Back on the bridge, Nizlich would be getting reports from each section on how everyone did. There would be the self-reports, summarized by the ship's computer, as well as reports from each of the department heads rating their own staffs. Any departments that scored too high would be subject to video verification. I'd get a summary in the morning. As for how well I'd done myself... well, there was an emergency vacc suit under my bed, but given how long it'd taken me just to get into the room, I don't know that I'd have survived a real decompression. I'd even known the drill was coming, and that emergency vacc suit was all mine; I didn't have to compete for it. Yet still I'd been caught off guard, just like I'd been caught off guard by my own psionics.

Long ago, I'd wondered what it might be like being a telepath. Imperial media always portrayed them as evil, traitorous, and most of all, manipulating, but until Josefeen had mentally exclaimed that I was apparently a *manipulator*<sup>5</sup>, I'd never heard the term in a psionic context.

I thought back to the incident in the parking garage, about how Captain Masa had been saying what I'd only been thinking. How much further did my rage in that moment extend? Had it infected those security guards? Was that why they reacted as they did?

And Masa didn't even realize he'd been influenced. All he knew was that he overreacted. They'd all overreacted. And I was right there in the middle of it, the secret catalyst, thinking my angry thoughts, never suspecting they could penetrate other people's minds.

Guri pushing my shoulder and those guards trying to arrest me and Masa, these were such small things to get upset about. I began to wonder if maybe the problem wasn't Guri or those security guards. Maybe the real problem was me.

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**Download the consolidated Plankwell write-up:**

<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/plank.html>

**Past zines available at:**

<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/apa.html>

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5 See the 4<sup>th</sup> page of Chapter 36 in A&E #584.

## Jim's Comments on E&A #10:

### Monster Battle Tactics:

Patrick Riley (E&A #10, pg. 6): "I am not a good tactician, but in my current D&D campaign, the party struggles most with monsters that attack from range, use hit-and-run tactics, and are able to engage with the party from multiple directions. These tend to split the party and has, on multiple occasions, had Millie (wizard) running away and casting spells at her pursuers while the rest of the party dealt with the main group of enemies. It has also resulted in Anan (fighter) moving out of reach of Chayote's (cleric) healing spells that he desperately needed."

Interesting observation and a good argument for using battlemaps. Also, I was rather impressed with the amount of work you put into the maze of the dead. Nice job.

### Wisdom's Precursor in the 1<sup>st</sup> draft of D&D:

Matt Stevens (E&A #10, pg. 35): "The weird one, for me, is 'Cunning,' the prime requisite for Clerics. I can see why Clerics need some kind of 'wisdom,' depending on how it's defined, but 'cunning'? Unless you're playing Medicis in the Vatican, I don't see why it's so important in spiritual matters."

Oh, I've heard it said there's no politics like church politics.

### IgTheme for E&A #16:

Matt Stevens (E&A #10, pg. 39): "I guess we could have a GM-Dickery IgTheme, but since many New York contributors have GM'd each other, I worry it could become a Festivus-style Airing of Grievances."

You, sir, are one hell of a salesman!

### Computer Skills Instruction in College during 1980s:

Myles Corcoran (E&A #10, pg. 48): "Famously this oddity led to the joke that a good source of random passwords was to give a 1st year (freshmen) CompSci or Mathematics class an open *vi* session and to record their keystrokes as they attempted to quit the program."

Back in college, I got hired as a lab monitor for the University's Computer Science department. I was a bit of an oddity, as I wasn't even a CS student. I was in the MBA program, but I'd hung out there quite a bit after a friend showed me how to access Usenet. So I'd learned how to use *vi* with some help from my fellow computer geeks and ended up with the unenviable task of having to help countless freshmen with their computer lab assignments, all of which, of course, required the use of *vi*.

Bear in mind, the professor teaching this class didn't actually expect these students to learn *vi*. But they had to use *vi* to complete their assignments. There was no other *unix* text editor available at that time other than perhaps *emacs*, which was also difficult for newbies. So what the professor did was he designed a handout telling the students exactly what keys to press in exactly what order, so they could complete the assignment he created, using *vi* without having to actually learn anything about it. So long as they pressed each key in exactly the right order as stipulated on this handout, they'd get through it. But if they slipped up, possibly misinterpreting some vaguely-worded instruction, they'd run the risk of ending up in the wrong mode, which, of course, happened all the time, and once it happened, they didn't have any idea what to do. They needed help, and so I had to go around from student to student, helping those who got stuck.



It was frustrating, to say the least, because the students had no idea why they needed to press a given key sequence. It wasn't really explained in the handout. All they knew is that they just had to do it. And, of course, they didn't really want to learn about *vi* and its various modes: escape mode, insert mode, and command mode. Just knowing how to get from one mode to another would have been very useful, but the information hadn't been presented to them.

It's possible that many of them — perhaps even most — wouldn't have had much interest in learning how to use *vi* even if instruction had been provided. My sense is that most just wanted to get past this hurdle. At some level, I think they'd already decided the professor was terrible, the class was terrible, and this whole thing was just going to be another useless ordeal. And so it made the whole experience of working with these computers rather annoying, a lot of

stress and sitting there being confused for very little educational return, and so I imagine many who might have otherwise considered going into computer science must have been intimidated by how esoteric and just plain weird the whole thing seemed.

Learning to use *vi*, as you probably know, is not all that hard as long as you have a little bit of help from someone who can explain it. The basics can be written on the back of an envelope, and once you get a little practice, it becomes second nature.<sup>6</sup> And programming, as you probably know, isn't really that hard either. It's just a list of instructions. Start with a few basic commands and expand from there, just like a young child building vocabulary. You learn a command word, imagine a way to use it, try it out, and then see what happens. It's basically the same as talking, except that computers will actually do what you tell them.

I remember this 1<sup>st</sup> year programming class I took in the mid-1980s. I think it was Pascal. There were a few hundred people in the class, and the instructor wasted so much time. The language itself was wasteful. I went into his office one day and showed him how the same program he was trying to teach could be written in GW-Basic<sup>7</sup> in around half the number of lines as the Pascal version. And the cherry on top was that GW-Basic was included with most versions of MS-DOS, so pretty much any student with access to an IBM-PC already had access to it, and they would continue to have access to it after the class was over!

What's the point of learning a language you won't have access to after you graduate? Let their first programming language be one they can use regardless of whether they become CS majors or decide to do something else. My feeling was that programming was such a valuable skill that everyone should know how to do it.

But this professor... I still don't know exactly what he was thinking. He seemed to just want to pat me on the head and shoo me away, because his job was to teach Pascal, and that's what he was going to do — however badly — and all this talk about GW-Basic must have seemed like foolishness. I think he said something like, "There's no compiler." Yes, that was true, and the objection showed he was already familiar with it, but for most tasks, so long as you have an interpreter, a compiler's unnecessary. But, you know, even if it had a compiler, it wouldn't have changed anything. I mean, QuickBasic came out a short time later, and it had a compiler, but did anyone teach it?

I'm sorry to say these experiences made me question things in a way that I hadn't done previously. I began to wonder if perhaps the universities didn't want to teach us anything useful. Maybe they just wanted to make the simple seem complicated. Why? Was it because intimidating

6 I've included a little *vi* tutorial with a few of my programs. For example, in [Galactic](#), see `xtra\vi.txt`, or in [Rand](#), see `help\vi.txt`.

7 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GW-BASIC>

students made the ivory towers seem taller? Maybe what they wanted was for us to feel stupid. Because for many of those students, that's essentially what happened. I'm sure the vast majority of them never took another programming class. Most of them probably decided they'd use computers only to the extent that it was absolutely necessary.

Of course, many of these same students would, years later, get addicted to online shopping, social media, and yes... porn. They'd send email, compose spreadsheets, and do online investing. But very few would ever write computer programs.

And that's a shame, because knowing how to program, even if it's just in some version of Basic, is so incredibly powerful. I can't tell you how many times automating some task I knew I'd have to do periodically ultimately saved me enormous amounts of time and effort. And programming is fun. But for my generation, people who programmed computers were viewed as computer nerds (and we probably still are). It didn't have to be this way.

In any case, I've since come to the conclusion that it simply couldn't be the case that the computer science departments of that era made a conscious decision to make students hate computers. What's that quote? "*Never attribute to malice that which can be explained by incompetence.*" Although, in my opinion, this went slightly beyond incompetence. There was, I think, a certain degree of willful negligence. I mean, they were supposed to be educators. It reminds me of a YouTube video I once saw.<sup>8</sup>

Incidentally, I enjoyed the Mausritter write-up, particularly the crows. It's nice when the monsters have a sense of humor.

#### **Employment:**

John Redden (E&A #10, pg. 52-53): "...the one advantage of being 80 years old this year is I will never search for employment again."

You run a business. You'll never not be employed.

Liked the boat city. Was it for some sort of water world campaign?

Wishing you luck with the surgery and hope your recovery is swift and complete.

#### **Public Domain Pics:**

Clark B. Timmins (E&A #10, pg. 59): "I am not much of an artist, so I pull stuff from public domain image sites."

One place you might try is <https://picryl.com/>.

8 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8xe6nLVXEC0>

### **Head of Vecna:**

Elf (E&A #10, pg. 70): “At no point did the party decide ‘hey, I wonder what powers we’d get from the Ear of Vecna’ or ‘one of the Eyes is here; I bet that has some of his magic.’ Nope. They had a head; they were gonna install a head on someone. As soon as they could figure out how to sever a spine in a way that leaves the owner alive long enough to replace his skull & related bits.”

It’s really too bad someone didn’t pull out their phone and make a video of this as it went down. If they put it on YouTube, they could probably retire from the proceeds.

Would be interested in seeing your Discordian Tarot cards whenever you get around to making them. Also, found your comment to Matt on Whale Whores exceedingly funny.

### **Great Character Name:**

Attronarch (E&A #10, pg. 73): “Mayonnaise, elf level 1. Albino elf with long white eyelashes, flowing white hair...”

From now on, whenever I encounter the name *Elric*, I’m going to think *Mayonnaise*.

### **Styx Water and Magical Oaths:**

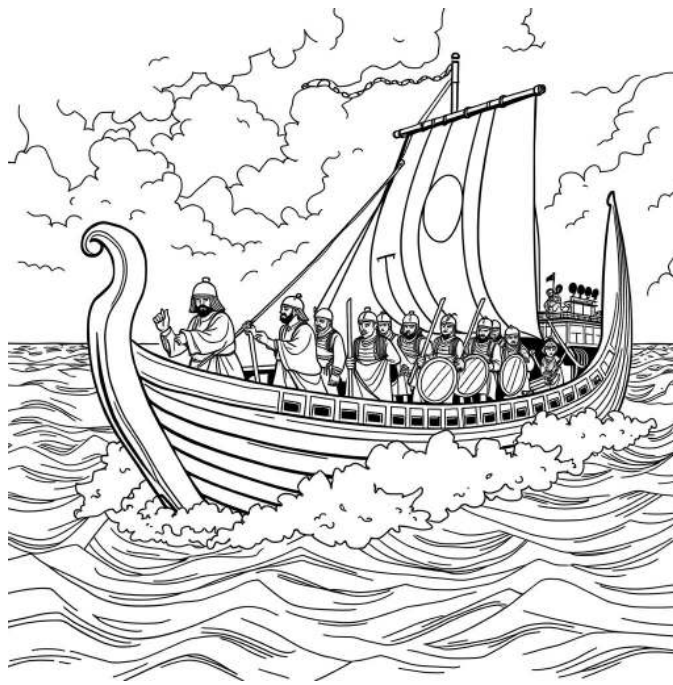
Michael Cule (E&A #10, pg. 81): “This is a phial of Styx Water. I keep it around for dealing with vampires, you know. An oath sworn upon the water of the River Styx is so potent that you will throttle if you betray that oath.”

I see this idea originally comes from Greek Mythology<sup>9</sup> and that it got incorporated into RuneQuest/Glorantha<sup>10</sup>, but I’m curious as to where it appears in the rules. Interestingly, I don’t see any mention of magical oaths in connection with Styx water in AD&D.<sup>11</sup> Would be curious to learn if it’s there somewhere, and I just missed it.

9 [https://www.reddit.com/r/GreekMythology/comments/vwy5nl/oath\\_on\\_the\\_river\\_styx/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GreekMythology/comments/vwy5nl/oath_on_the_river_styx/)

10 <https://soltakss.com/styx1.html>

11 The River Styx is given in a few paragraphs in *Manual of the Planes* (1987), pages 83-84, as well as Planescape’s book on Baator, page 6, in *Planes of Law* (1995).



### **Plague & the Bronze Age Collapse:**

Dylan Capel (E&A #10, pg. 94): “The Bronze Dark Age is something that I don’t think gets enough attention in the modern mind, perhaps because so little has come down to us from those civilisations.”

Yeah, I’ve thought a number of times about how it might be fun to at least do some worldbuilding around the late bronze age collapse and its aftermath. As I’m sure you know, scholars of the period have mixed views on what caused it, some arguing the invasions of the “Sea Peoples” had roots in a multi-century

spanning climate crisis while others posit that the invasions resulted in a *systems collapse*.<sup>12</sup> But after reading your mini-essay, *Plague and ruin*, I can’t help but wonder if maybe it was caused by two or more long-separated populations, each with their own constellation of diseases, suddenly coming together and infecting each other.

But if this were the case one should think the Egyptians would have recorded a major plague. I’m not aware that records of such a massive event exist.<sup>13</sup> Granted, the biblical plagues of Exodus come to mind, but assuming the *Book of Exodus* was actually composed by Moses and that its claims are based on actual events, they would have happened during the mid-1400s BC, well before the bronze age collapse. However, some modern scholars argue the *Book of Exodus* was actually composed during the Babylonian exile (605-538 BC). If this is true, it could possibly be the case that the infamous Ten Plagues of Egypt were based on an historical plague that had occurred around the time of the bronze age collapse. In such a scenario, that plague might have become a legend upon which the anonymous writer(s) of Exodus drew inspiration.

Granted, all of this is a rather extensive series of conjectures, but as you indicated, it’s a particularly murky period of history. Fortunately for us, that leaves a lot of room for creative worldbuilding.

12 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aq4G-7v-xI>

13 The closest thing I could find online is the *Ipuwer Papyrus*, but although it may have been written at roughly the time of the first major invasion of Egypt by the Sea Peoples (possibly even a little earlier), it purportedly covers events that are far older. So it’s not really a terrific match.

### **Water Sources for Fantasy Cities:**

Dylan Capel (E&A #10, pg. 95): “I used to definitely be someone who needed to understand how fantasy cities got their water and food....”

Well, so long as you have reliable access to water, you can usually grow food. And in a fantasy setting, there is the possibility of using magic. A particularly powerful mage might be able to open a permanent gate to the Elemental Plane of Water. And then there are spells that can control the weather, enabling a mage to produce regular rainstorms in a normally arid region. So I could imagine all sorts of scenarios where cities are magically sustained in areas where they’d otherwise have no right to exist.

### **Boardgaming APA:**

Roger BW (E&A #10, pg. 98): “Having written the software for it, I want to run a PDF-APA. I therefore propose to launch *Of Dice and Meeples*, which will broadly follow the *E&A* pattern, but with the overall topic of boardgaming (including cards, dice, etc.) rather than role-playing. I hope some of you may be interested in contributing.”

I’m not into Boardgaming, so I won’t be joining, but good luck to you. If, however, it doesn’t gather sufficient momentum to successfully launch, you might want to check out the announcement I posted last issue on page 181.

### **On the Undead & Magical Theory:**

Roger BW (E&A #10, pg. 100): “A living body with a spirit in it is a metastable system: the spirit generates air-energy and gives the excess to the body to animate it, while the body generates earth-energy to anchor the spirit to Cartesian space. In an undead creature this association is broken because no living body is involved. Something else must provide earth-energy and drain the excess of air. This varies by type of undead.”

As I mentioned to you by email, I think this is brilliant in terms of providing a theoretical framework for how necromancy works. This is one of the problems I have with AD&D. Lots of spells but not so much in terms of a coherent theory of magic. Would be curious to learn if you’ve come across any RPG magic systems that seem to have tackled this topic in a way that’s both playable and makes logical sense.

### **Cost-Benefit Analysis of Dungeoncrawling:**

Roger BW (E&A #10, pg. 107): “In your actual mediaeval world, a competent fighter can get a place in someone’s army, or as a mercenary, or turn bandit, all of which would seem to be safer than this if not as well-paid. So

what’s their reason for doing this? I’d love to explore that.”

Yeah, while there are, of course, many ways one could justify entering a dungeon, the problem I have is that the PCs in most fantasy campaigns never seem to actually discuss the possibility of simply not doing it. I mean, there’s a certain out-of-character assumption that if the GM created the dungeon, then it should be survivable, and there’s also this gaming subtext, where the players know that if their characters die, they can just roll up replacements.

But in a real-life situation like this, I’d expect the adventurers to have a big discussion/argument, and promises would probably get made, and all sorts of safety concerns would need to be addressed. Even the henchmen would want assurances and probably some hazard pay as well. It would be a terrific opportunity for roleplaying, but we almost never see it happen, because... y’know... it’s just a game, and so everyone knows they’re going into the dungeon. That’s the whole point.

### **Satah on Campaign Spotlight:**

Avram Grumer (E&A #10, pg. 128): “I linked to that Campaign Spotlight<sup>14</sup> podcast last month, Satah talking about ‘Game Mechanics as a Poem Structure’...”

Thank you for the link. I listened to it all the way through, even though much of it went over my head, since I’ve never played any GMless games. She mentioned near the end that she has her own podcast, Folio<sup>15</sup>, where she shows how these games are played, so I may tune into that or at least skim through some of the transcripts.

### **Slice of Life Scenes:**

Patrick Zoch (E&A #10, pg. 143): “The propensity for the characters to visit shops and sample food and drink wherever they go was not something I expected. They act more like tourists than adventurers. I may need to take advantage of that habit. I have a hook or two for side-quests related to ingredients and foodstuff I can use. Not only will it be a diversion for extra experience, it will help build their connection to the townsfolk.”

Generally, I like “slice of life” scenes, even preferring them to the main adventure. Not only do they tend to provide opportunities for roleplaying and characterization, but they also help players get a feel for the setting. Most importantly, however, there’s a sense of freedom, particularly in a town or city where the character can go and explore, meeting NPCs and possibly forming friendships outside of their adventuring party.

<sup>14</sup> <https://share.transistor.fm/s/ec56d106>

<sup>15</sup> <https://foliopod.carrd.co/>

### **Use of AI for Consistent Artwork:**

Brian Misiaszek (E&A #10, pg. 161): “The NPC images in the last few *Age of Menace* issues were not generated ‘from scratch’ in a generic modern style. They were derived directly from period source material, primarily black-and-white photographs from late-1920s and early-1930s Cuban magazines; *Social, Bohemia, & Cartales*. These were low-resolution copies, so I used AI tools to upscale & colourize them, and then to composite multiple figures into shared scenes.”

I’ve been very impressed, and I’m curious as to the tools you used and even the prompts you created (probably, I imagine, through trial and error), as it seems like there must have been several steps in order to achieve this level of consistency in terms of both the faces and the style.

As for the adventure, I very much enjoyed the events leading up to the shootout as well as Baron Kriminal’s laugh when it was all over. My only concern is whether the investigators will ever find out how it all went down. Also, the fact that they are largely excluded from these pivotal events turns them into (at best) ineffectual, secondhand spectators. Nonetheless, it’s fun to read.

I can’t imagine how much time you must have spent putting this all together, what with the artwork, the maps, the attention to historical details, and the writing itself. It may need some additional editing, but the material itself is of professional quality, at least in my opinion.

### **E&A Cover Art:**

Joshua Kronengold (E&A #10, pg. 162): “I didn’t notice last month, but we switched from an overlay style cover that month (with the APA logo and metadata overlain on the cover art) to a large border cover with issue 8, as I see with us keeping the style for 9 I like and hate it, overall—it’s a great answer when we have dark covers where it would be hard for the logo and metadata to pop, and it does give the APA a distinct look (in the unlikely event that someone prints out a set of issues and puts them on a shelf, or much more likely, just makes a gallery of covers), but having the cover logo and metadata inside the art was a tradition we kept from *Alarums and Excursions*, and I think it does produce a nice result when the art is suitable for this.”

I sort of feel the same way, but the problem is that it’s not terribly easy to find artwork by living artists that you can secure permission to use and which conforms to the 8.5×11 inch portrait format.<sup>16</sup> Most artwork done by contemporary (living) artists that I’ve found online is actually wider than it is tall, and even when I find a piece I’d like to use that’s taller than it is wide, it usually isn’t tall enough.

<sup>16</sup> The cover art for this issue is a notable exception.

That leaves us with three options. The first is to do what we did, which is to push the artwork either up or down and have a solid field for the logo, issue number, and date. The second option is to crop off the left and/or right sides of the artwork to the point its proportions become congruent with the page size.<sup>17</sup> And the third option is to stretch the artwork vertically, so it covers the entire page.<sup>18</sup> At the end of the day, I decided it would be best to allow the artists to choose which version they liked best, because I wanted them to be happy with the way their artwork was presented, and in both cases, they chose the first option.

Of course, when you’re dealing with dead artists, you don’t have to ask their opinion<sup>19</sup>, so you can crop, stretch, and do pretty much whatever you like, so long as the art has fallen into the public domain. Also, much of the old artwork comes to us from old books, so its dimensions are often pretty close to what we’re looking for.

But if you stumble across a piece of art by a contemporary artist and decide you want to use it, you’ve got to get permission, and even after you do, I think you still have a moral duty to make sure they’re happy with the presentation, which means you need to show them options and give them decision authority over which one to use.

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### **Timothy’s Comments on E&A #10:**

Really enjoyed *Project Hail Mary* at the cinema, but suspect I enjoyed it more having read the book (which the film followed pretty closely) because I had all the extra detail and humour in mind that the director couldn’t fit in.

Still no news on the work shenanigans where they’re threatening the small team I work with to change pension schemes, contracts and even our status (diminishing it) and had said we’d hear by 1<sup>st</sup> April. Some joke. A couple of other realms of my life have been similarly... disheartening over the last year or so.

So I was buoyed up by the latest issue of *Freelance Traveller* carrying a review of one of my DriveThruRPG publications, *Batch 24381*.<sup>20</sup> I had expected that it might mention the fun of using the Artemis mission Lego set for the research base in the adventure or that it might bring up the oddity of using an 800-ton Mercenary Cruiser conversion as an orbital noble fief. I had even thought it might talk about the melancholy of the aging theme that runs through it. Instead, it finished up with: “I will go so far

<sup>17</sup> See <https://jimvassilakos.com/ea8cov2.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> See <https://jimvassilakos.com/ea9cov2.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> You *can* ask, I suppose, but unless you’re using an Ouija board, you’re unlikely to get a response.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/505877/batch-24381>

as to say that if you should see the name ‘Timothy Collinson’ as the author of an adventure, you should accord it a great deal of respect, as you would seeing the names of the Keith brothers, Martin J. Dougherty, Greg Lee, or Stephen J. Ellis,” which is thoroughly blush inducing as – though you may not know them – those names are ‘greats’ I’ve long admired and have no business being mentioned in the same breath as!

#### **Patrick Riley – Quasipseudoludognostication**

Derailment at St. Faustina Station – fascinating stuff! Thanks for describing it so fully. I love the idea of doing it in Google Slides (or for me, most likely, PowerPoint were I to try something similar). But it’s definitely inspired me to think about what might be feasible.

#### **Pedro Panhoca da Silva – Back to Brazilian Gamebooks**

RYCT Brian M – I entirely agree about educational policy overprotecting children. One wonders how the human race ever got to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### **Brian Rogers – Denizens of the Library**

LOLed at your picking up Armagnac for dinner because you’d run out of cognac as being the definition of first world problems!

#### **Matt Stevens – Cowman Baloney Face**

I know it was a while back (2000ish IIRC), but I did find your articles on various Traveller governments helpful. And the one on Charismatic Governments particularly so for the reasons you mention. Thank you.

RYCT to Lisa P about ‘Appearance’ stats, FWIW, in my very first Mongoose publication *Into the Unknown*<sup>21</sup> I had a mechanic for not quite appearance but for the characters’ self-perception of their appearance. Or more strictly, their confidence about their bodies. It was germane to the adventure and reflected some experiences of nudity in Nigerian villages back in the 1980s.

RYCT to Avram G, you’re not wrong that skills *can* cross career boundaries in Traveller, but not always and they can certainly be much much easier to get in some careers than others. This was what my article which provided a reverse look up for such things in classic Traveller, Cepheus Engine, Mongoose 1<sup>st</sup> Ed & Mongoose 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed attempted to show.<sup>22</sup>

RYCT to Joshua K about taking a look at *Good Society*, I did just that based on Lisa P’s many mentions. (Not a

21 <https://legacy.drivethrurpg.com/product/128659/Adventure-4-Into-the-Unknown>

22 <https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/preproom/skilllist.html>

complaint!) Glad I did. It’s really interesting, and I still hope the Regency History friends I also gave it to might yet run a game for me!

#### **Paul Holman – De Ludis Elficis Fictis**

I liked your paragraph on planning out the concept of a city. I should probably snip that somewhere and keep it handy for prepping Traveller games. That’s about the level of detail I put into such locations, but I’ve not formalised it like that.

#### **Myles Corcoran – Twisting the Rope**

Your comment about the suspect mouse fleeing in “the direction Fergus fled: down river towards the Bandits’ Log” got me thinking about mapping in something like a Mausritter campaign. Presumably maps become much larger scale – does that make them much easier/simpler, or do you just end up adding more mouse-scale items on the map so it’s actually no different in terms of work? Or is all theatre of the mind?

RYCT to Joshua K: well I couldn’t resist <https://rollforshoes.com/>, but I have a question: what determines the level of skill for the opposing roll? Or would such only be made by a character who would have a skill? (i.e. I guess I’m wondering what happens if, say, a character wants to, I don’t know, pick a lock?) Sounds fun.

RYCT me about the reMarkable’s handwriting recognition. In short: good to great. Given my handwriting is atrocious and usually hurried, the way I was able to hone in on a thing I’d written 3 years ago and get back to my notes with one remembered word was brilliant. (Of course, for that particular search I’ll never know for certain how many things I missed, but it seemed as ‘complete’ as I could recall. For transcribing a page of handwriting, I do tend to have to do some subsequent tidying, but that’s mostly because I use some Pitman script (shorthand-like) abbreviations.

#### **John Redden – Reddened Stars**

RYC about the second season of *Foundation* being “sometimes confusing & sometimes amusing” – that’s about right! Sorry to hear you lost someone from your group when you started playing Traveller. I’d have been the other way around!

#### **Clark B. Timmins**

Love the development of Elaria! Although I once created an alphabet I got familiar enough with to read and write many, many years ago (and a font on my C64!), it never occurred to me to create a development through time for it. Nice.

### Michael Cule – Phoenix Nest

Loved your not one but two courtroom climaxes. I should do more of those! Love a good courtroom drama, I do. I'm even game for digging up old episodes of *Crown Court* which used to run on (UK) tv back in the 1970s and were purely a dramatized court case.

### Dylan Capel – Attacks of Opportunity

Is the *Proto* book you mentioned by Spinney? If it is, it's on my to-read shelf; if not, please can you point me to the author?! And *The Silk Roads*, Frankopan? I'm not turning up *Lakota Nation* at all, I'm afraid – at least not without further bibliographic details.

I was interested by your comment about the *Dragon* magazines – both the dullness and the bringing together a lot of information pre-internet – but the comment about being more inspired by the cultural artefacts gave me pause for thought about what I put into my own Traveller articles. Cheers.

RYC on 'City building' and water supply – that set me off wondering about how true that might be in the Traveller setting of the Third Imperium which of course specifically marks on astrographic maps the presence of water in a stellar system for ships to be able to refuel. On a planetary level, however, I wonder if it's quite as critical. (Excepting maybe balkanized worlds).

### Roger BW – Firedrake's Hoard

RYC about the *2300AD* heroes piecing together the wreckage of an exploration ship and "a fine handout giving the last survivor's message", I took this to the *n*<sup>th</sup> degree in the above mentioned *Into the Unknown* when the core part of the adventure was the PCs finding a downed passenger ship. I asked my then teenaged daughter to write a diary of one of the passengers which the PCs could read to find out what happened all those years before and she really went to town. I knocked it up into a 70 page, I think it was, booklet with handwriting script that I got printed up like a notebook and gave it to the players as a handout. It went down a treat (my daughter had me in tears as I typed up what she'd written and was made to feel the full emotional impact of what I'd put the NPCs through in just a throwoff line or three!). Although it was waaaay too much text, it was never out of the hands of one player or another until the end of the adventure. I auctioned it and the

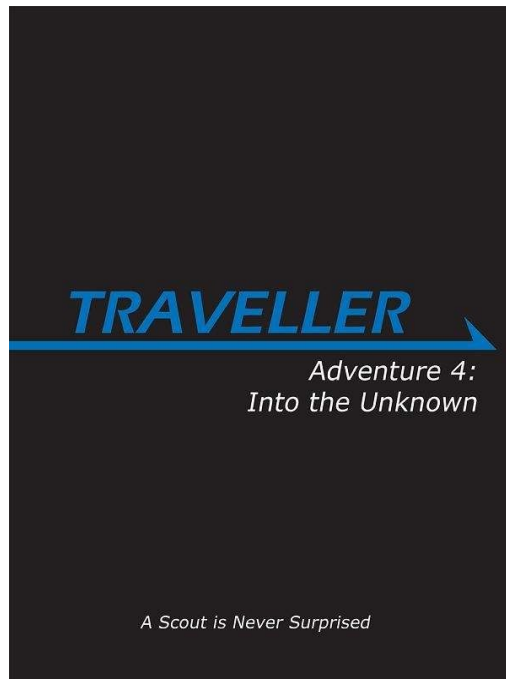
adventure notes off at the end of the convention and it made a respectable amount of money for charity. Very encouraging as it was the first adventure I ever ran at TravCon (or anywhere, really).

I laughed out loud at the "Good heavens! We actually *are* on the same side!" I laughed again at your comment to Patrick R about being "entirely unable to keep track of who knows about which of the things I do". I really mustn't read *Ever and Anon* on the bus...

As for your comment to Patrick R regarding his comment to Michael C on the 'boundary' of Traveller, I've wondered that too. I have to as it determines what I include in my *Traveller Bibliography*. Yes, Third Imperium is 'in' OR Traveller rules are 'in' – so I include things like the Traveller versions of Judge Dredd, Strontium Dog, Mindjammer etc; but Cepheus Engine, for example, I'll include if it's science fictiony and *could be* Traveller, but not if it's fantasy etc (and I don't include GURPS material where it's not the formal Traveller books or I'd be there all day). It remains to be seen how I feel about the newly announced Kickstarter for a D&D 5<sup>th</sup> Edition version of Traveller. It's a long way off yet (end of *next* year) and *horribly* expensive, so perhaps it might be the moment to draw the line.

RYCT to Michael C regarding his comment to Myles C and Transhuman Space – Mindjammer (which has a Traveller version) does stuff like that too, although I'll admit it's a corner of Traveller that I'm not so familiar with. Having said that, I suppose it would be obvious to point out that our very own Plankwell Campaign did exactly that with the Plankwell AI at the start of our writings.

RYCT Avram G about doubting that a new career or ship design for Traveller would tickle the inner munchkin – you have to be kidding?! Aren't these the two things that more "gearhead" Traveller enthusiasts are drawn to most? Indeed, I failed to add to my list at the end of last issue of early Traveller careers was that one of my very earliest endeavours was a librarian career. I only didn't include it last issue because I never published it – although the career was ok, I wanted to write a *Book X* type supplement that also had stuff on libraries, library data, librarians etc in higher tech levels than 8 and couldn't do it convincingly.



“all the rest is sharp salesmanship and the ELIZA effect.” LOL! But even funnier, to me, was the comment at the end of your ’zine about the Company Procedures Manual!

RYCT Dylan C (or rather, photo with ‘Bielanka’). Knowing a little Polish/Ukrainian/Czech and a little Swedish, I managed to read that as ‘white duck’ (biel = white in Polish; anka = duck in Swedish). I’m sure that can’t be right! I assume it’s a location in *Twilight: 2000*?

#### Lisa Padol – An Unlooked for Zine

RYC about the CoMC and the 3<sup>rd</sup> bullet point of them trying to find out about the Count and their two informants both *being* the Count – it is a brilliant bit. Thanks for reminding me.

RYCT Paul H on visiting Venice with no Italian. I could only manage “a beer please” (even though I don’t drink the stuff), “thank you” and that was almost all. So it can be done. Although I was only there for a long weekend on a 10<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary trip.

After spending some time in the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana looking for the famed Fra Maura mappa mundi, I finally had to ask as it wasn’t obvious. I just about managed to muster from my memory “dove mappa mundi?” (where “dove si trova la mappa del mondo?” would have been much better), but the security guard understood and took us to an obscure bit of stairwell behind a rope barrier and lifted a curtain and let us look at it for a while. Worth seeing. Don’t say I don’t know how to show my spouse a good time!

RYCT Dylan C on “good fiction-writing skills and good scenario-writing skills” having “some overlap” but not being identical – as I’m interested in both and try my hand at both, I’d love to hear more of your thoughts on this please!

RYCT to Patrick Z on Regency dancing at SF conventions (!) – this puts me in mind of my *Second Scions’ Society* adventure where I have second sons/daughters adventuring and tried to capture something of the Regency in notes on dress and other things. I’d like to have done more, and I didn’t manage to fit in a dance/ball, but was saving it for a second instalment (which I’ve only half written and left aside for far too long).

RYCT me about Accounting in place of Intimidation – nice!

RYCT me “it’s late and I’m tired and I just want to get onto the big fight scene at the end” – I’ve been there. I suspect we all have.

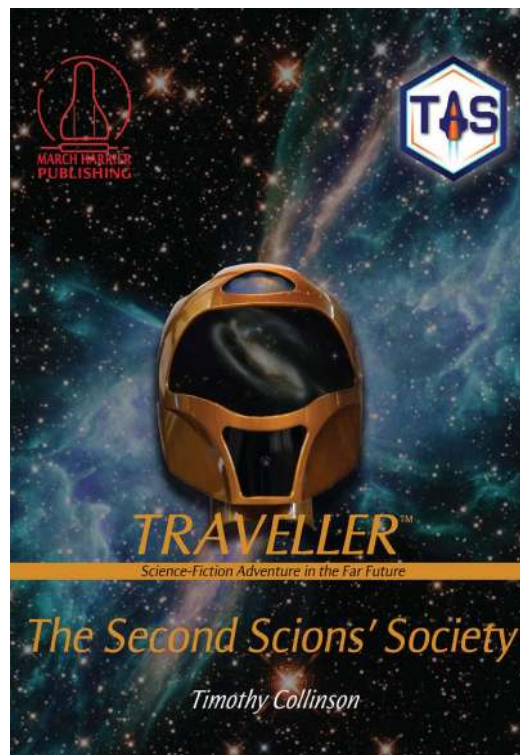
#### Joshua Kronengold – Accidental Recall

Good to hear things are going well regarding polyps etc. Take care.

#### Jim Vassilakos – Plankwell Campaign

RYC about AI being “clearly intelligent” not so much because of word predictions but because it was making “its own” (debatable?) suggestions on how to improve and extend the program’s functionality – isn’t this just meta-prediction though? It’s digested enough internet material to ‘know’ (as well as next word prediction) that that *kind* of advice/encouragement is what is often given, so it includes that in its output? (Not sure I’ve explained that very well.)

RYC on Traveller not including XP – I disagree that was an error. One of the attractions for me, and I suspect others, is that the lack of it means ‘reward’ is more self-driven and in-game. It doesn’t drive (certain) players to a more munchkin kind of play where the XP is the thing. For me this seemed much more ‘grown up’ if that’s not too rude – or at least, more likely to produce role-playing. Anyway, if the new BackerKit for Traveller 5E (based on D&D 5<sup>th</sup> edition rules) pans out, we’ll find out! (But not for a long while – it’s not due till the end of *next* year).



#### LAST WORD:

A small word of encouragement might be a lifeline to someone awash in a sea of rejection.