



EVER & ANON

Issue #12 June 2026

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

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

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

Issue #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

Issue #17 – October 21st: Negotiating with Monsters

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 #12 (ver. 1) – June 2026

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This issue’s IgTheme:

Gods, Demigods, and Other Riffraff / Religion, Spirituality, and the Cosmic Order

The cover art for this issue was downloaded from <https://www.oldbookillustrations.com/>. The picture on page 5 was generated and converted into a sketch by [Canva](#). 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 *Lisa Padol: blah-blah-blah...*, if there are no quotes around the *blah-blah-blah*, that's probably a comment to Lisa.

Q: And everyone is doing all this for free?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Q: Who is Lee Gold?

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

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

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

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

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

I Want YOU!

to join our flippant fellowship



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

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

Abbreviations & Acronyms You Need to Know:

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

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

Brazilian Interactive fiction – part II: *Coração Acelerando* (1998)
by Pedro Panhoca da Silva <ppanhoca@yahoo.com.br> and Maira Zucolotto
<maira_zuc@hotmail.com>

A few years ago, we reviewed a series of four solo adventure booklets, written by Rosana Rios and Maria Sílvia Gonçalves, published by the now-defunct *Alarums & Excursions*, all in 1997. Just one year later, Brazil would possibly see its first interactive fiction: *Coração Acelerando* (1998) – “Accelerating Heart”, in free translation. This book was written by Lilian Sypriano (1951–), a native of Rio de Janeiro and author of dozens of children’s and young adult books.

Before the story begins, the narrator offers the reader a choice of items: “very useful things” (water, a handkerchief, medicine and even luck itself – as if it were an object to be carried), “convenient things to have” (money, an adult nearby, a bookmark, warm clothing), “things to avoid” (reading whilst listening to funeral music, reading on a stormy night or under a full moon, reading whilst home alone, dimly lit and enclosed spaces) and “absolutely unnecessary” (dice, notepads, pencils, pens, pocket knives, nail files, hairbrushes, compasses, scout uniforms). These items make up the book’s false interactivity, as whether or not you start the adventure with them has no bearing on the narrative; the narrator simply asks if the reader has a particular item at certain points in the story, and if they do, he uses it at that moment. If they do not, the story continues in exactly the same way.

The story is quite simple: the protagonist is a young man on his last day of holiday at his Aunt Eva’s house, in a small country town. Wanting to make the most of it before returning home and to his school routine, he decides to take his bike out and explore a nearby forest. He wades into a river, has a good time and relaxes more than he should. His bike tyre goes flat and it’s already very late. It will be impossible for him to return before 7 pm, as agreed. To make matters worse, he can’t remember the route he took, having cycled so far. It’s up to the reader to use their intuition and have a bit of luck too.

The narrative is effective because it closely mirrors an everyday situation. It is divided into five stages or fewer (which represent the possible choices during the adventure, making the narrative quite short—practically a solo adventure in book form), all indicated by vignettes. When the reader reaches ‘stage 5’, they will discover the outcome of their choices. The interior illustrations by Cláudia Jussan are excellent and aid immersion in the reading experience. After reading each chosen paragraphs, the reader encounters the ‘technical stop’, which is simply the moment when they must decide which direction to take or how to act in the face of people or situations, which can be helpful for novice readers. Metalinguistic elements feature prominently in the work, with the narrator so present that it almost feels as though they are right beside the reader—an intimacy that goes far beyond simply asking how the story should proceed.

However, *Coração Acelerando* suffers from a few issues typical of this genre. For example, the paragraphs are far too long (they can run to 4–5 pages of text), which detracts from the interactivity of the reading experience. Another issue is that every choice the reader makes at a fork in the narrative offers one of three options: to give up reading. This constant “encouragement” to put the book down can be exhausting, as it wears the reader down. Furthermore, the length of the adventure is predictable because, if the reader persists with their choices and does not give up on the mission, the most they will experience of the narrative are the five stages of the story. Finally, the vignettes used in the stages are the only elements that do not contribute to the dark atmosphere, as they are far too comical.

Coração Acelerando is notable for its pioneering spirit at the time, as it was neither a copy of *Choose Your Own Adventure* nor a Brazilianised version of *Fighting Fantasy*. It was the first interactive book in the *Coleção Adrenalina* (“Adrenaline Collection”, in free translation), which would later see the release of one more title: *Sobressalto!* (2000).

COMMENTS #11

JOHN REDDEN: Yes! It might disappoint some, but please others. Honestly, after playing for a while, I didn’t miss the combat at all.

ROGER BW: Exactly! In *Investigar*, the combat system is similar to *Falcon* in that respect: it’s down to luck.

ERICA L. FRANK: I’ve studied visual novels very little, not even the Asian ones. In my PhD dissertation I used *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* (2017) as an example, but I only devoted a few pages to it.

LISA PADOL: We opted for ‘megalomaniac’ because it’s VERY ambitious.

BRIAN CHRISTOPHER MISIASZEK: I’ve never played it, but the Brazilian version is called *Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective: Os Assassinatos Do Tâmbisa E Outros Casos*.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: If the reader-player runs out of time tokens, the adventure ends in failure, as they don’t have enough clues even for a suspicion, let alone a formal accusation. In my doctoral thesis, I devoted a few pages to *Day of the Tentacle* (1987), which I found great fun. But my (still short) academic career is devoted to gamebooks themselves, which, as you rightly observed, have enjoyed greater success in Europe, whilst in the United States interactive fiction is more in demand, and in Japan it is Visual Novels that are gaining popularity with consumers.

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: God knows how many jobs I’ve been sacked from for suggesting “inappropriate content” to students. They looked more like snowflakes than teenagers...

Cowman Baloney Face

THE NEVERENDING SAGA #8

SPRING IS IN THE AIR, AND SO ARE BOMBS

BY MATT STEVENS

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ALL ART BY ME (WITH HELP FROM RUBENS ON P. 5)

We have a vacation planned! We're going to Iceland in late August. I have to reread many of those Icelandic sagas on my shelf, but that's something I'd be happy to do anyway.



A DIVERSE BUT UNIFIED WORLD MYTHOLOGY (IGTHEME)

The Multi-Pantheon Problem

Throughout recorded history, different people have worshipped different gods, and they've wondered what to make of that fact.

One common presumption is that the gods *they* grew up with are real, while the others are obvious fakes. "You're saying Ra is the sun god? Naw, man, Helios is the sun god. What are ya, stupid?" That "explanation" only works on people who refuse to, or aren't allowed to, think about it much.

Another belief is that all the different gods coexist. Zeus and Apollo, Ra and Osiris, Marduk and Ishtar and so forth all have their followers and territories and glare at each other across national boundaries. This is a common trope in RPGs, probably beginning soon after *Gods, Demigods and Heroes* (1976); it was made explicit in videogames like *Age of Mythology* (2002), and in *Hackmaster's "Garweeze Wurld,"* among others.

This system works when deities have localized jurisdictions, such as specific cities, rivers or mountains, but not with more general portfolios. Obviously Greece, Egypt and Mesopotamia have the same sky, sun, moon and stars, and storms don't stop at national borders; this wouldn't be the case if different deities managed them. Also, there's rarely any mythological record of these inter-pantheon smack-downs, at least not under their local names. So the coexistence hypothesis has issues, too.

That brings us to the third paradigm: Everyone worships the same gods, more or less, but they go under different names and have slightly different characteristics. This is the famous "interpretatio graeca" and "interpretatio romana": When they met cultures with different pantheons, they would see these gods (most of them, anyway) as Greek or Roman deities under pseudonyms.¹

As I developed my fantasy world, I decided I'd use this framework to build its many belief systems.

¹ I think some of our language confuses this issue. We'll say "Mercury is the Roman name for Hermes," for example, but not "Mercury was the Roman name for Wotan." They aren't exactly equivalent -- Mercury *had* picked up some Hermes imagery, but nothing from Wotan -- but it still hides the thinking behind it.

There *were* real deities, anti-deities, and deified heroes, but they were fairly small in number. Different cultures worshiped (or acknowledged) different combinations of these beings, and their names, portfolios and mythologies drifted over time. After thousands of years their commonality was no longer recognizable.

Gods, Anti-Gods and Heroes

So how do you build a World Mythology, Stevens Style? You start by writing your own mythology, the *real* history of your world.

In my case, I began with a conventional story of a “divine family.” (You’re welcome to start with something else.) Create a dozen or so deities, and worry more about their personalities, their looks, and their interactions than strict “domains” per se.

Many mythologies will have ongoing conflicts between “gods” and “anti-gods” of some sort: Olympians versus Titans, Aesir versus Giants, Devas versus Asuras. The latter can be primordial beings, who came before the gods; they can be factions within the original divine family; or they may have been created *by* the gods, and then rebelled against them.

Note that boundaries between these two groups can be fluid, with some “anti-gods” joining the “gods” or theoretically doing the reverse. (I say “theoretically” because I can’t think of examples of the latter.) Also note that the two sides can switch places! Famously the “Deva” of India were the demons of Iranian Zoroastrianism, while Zarathustra’s god, Ahura Mazda, has a name cognate with the demons of Hinduism (“asuras”).

After gods and anti-gods you get to humans (or other races) and their ancestors, heroic or not. These may be of strictly historical (or mythological) interest, or they may have cults of their own, whether they were literally deified or they have some other spiritual connection to their communities.

Epithets, Aspects and Avatars

After you generate your list of deities (broadly defined), you can fill in more of their details. They can be quite complicated if you want them to be.

For example, each of your figures probably has a name (a *theonym*), and popular ones tend to have more than one, often called **epithets**. Some deities, like the Norse god Odin, had dozens of them. This is especially likely if the deity’s name is taboo, which is why Hades (for example) was often referred to as Plouton, “the rich one.” (“Pluto” is a Latinization of Plouton; the Latin gods of death were Dis Pater and Orcus.)

Gods can also change their appearance, often depending on what they’re doing; these forms can have their own epithets, and as such can be seen as different **aspects** of the deity. Perhaps the most famous example would be the Hindu god Shiva (“the Auspicious”), originally an aspect of the Vedic god Rudra (“the Howler”); today Rudra is seen as an aspect of Shiva, showing that deities and their aspects can switch positions.

One special aspect is the **avatar**. Avatar is a Sanskrit word meaning “descent,” indicating a god that descends to Earth in a new incarnation, typically (but not always) a human form. The avatar isn’t just

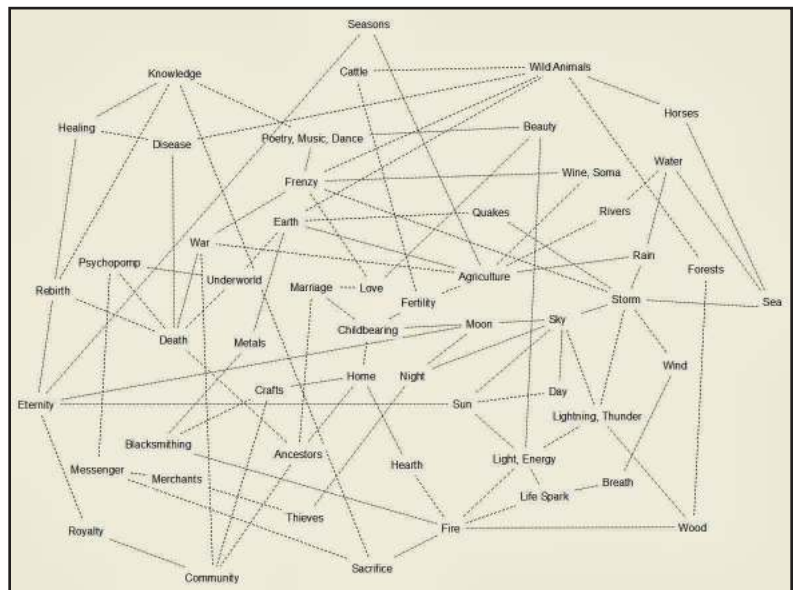
the son or daughter of a god -- like your standard mythological hero -- but a living embodiment of one. The ten avatars of Vishnu are obvious examples, but the Christian Jesus can also be seen as an avatar of God, although don't quote me on that one!

Drifting Dialects, Domains and Narratives

All of this might help you build a single pantheon, but how do you get multiple pantheons out of it? How do you solve the Multi-Patheon Problem?

The first step is to recognize that just as sounds shift over time and place, theonyms (and associated epithets) change in the same fashion. To see how this might work, check out [sound change applications like Mark Rosenfelder's SCA²](#). Figure out how your sounds changed as your primal language split into families; and then when the families split into distinct languages; then apply those rules to the divine names. This is how the Indo-European god Dyeus Phater became the Greek Zeus, the Vedic Dyaus Pitar, and the Roman god Jupiter.

Not only do the names change, but the "domains" and myths associated with them shift as well. Sometimes domains change based on conceptual relationships: e.g. a smith god like Vulcan can become the god of fire. (My chart on the right shows some potential connections.) Other times, though, they change for inexplicable reasons: No one knows why Soma, Vedic god of a psychedelic drug, became the Hindu god of the moon, or Mitra, the Vedic god of contracts, became whatever the heck the Roman Mithras was.²



Synthesizing a Pantheon

So as people spread out across your world, the deities they worship will shift, and that will bring some variety. Even more will be introduced as these people conquer each other and trade with one another. As a result, a region's pantheon can be a synthesis of deities from different sources: A *substrate* of old gods, a *superstrate* brought in by the conquerors, and an *adstrate* of cults imported from neighbors.

The classical Greek pantheon can be used as an example. Some gods, like Zeus and Eos, have clear Indo-European origins, so they probably came in through migration. Others like Aphrodite are obvious imports from the East. (She's almost certainly the Semitic goddess Asarte.) The rest, for the most part, were probably worshipped by the Pelasgian natives, though without any Pelasgian sources it's impossible to say.

² We know Mithras was a creator god with astrological associations, and that he sacrificed a bull, but how he picked up these characteristics is a mystery. One book suggested he syncretized with the cult of the Greek hero Perseus (!?!). Others point to similarities with the Zoroastrian devil Ahriman.

Obviously, only the most obsessive world builder could create more than a couple pantheons through these processes. Hell, even I haven't done so as systematically as written here. My essay is meant to describe an ideal, naturalistic way to create multiple mythologies from a single historical source. Use it whatever way you like!

I drew on many sources for this essay, and it would take a loong time to track them all down. For now I'll recommend Jaan Puhvel's Comparative Mythology (1987). A bit heavy going but well worth it if you love mythology.

COMMENTS E & A # 11

Mark A. Wilson

I'm interested in your thoughts on WoW mechanics in tabletop. I know D&D 4E helped fighters "hold aggro," and that was a big part of WoW combat, but I'd like to hear about other issues, too. (Personally I loved hunter aggro tricks like Feign Death and Misdirection, particularly the latter. "No, I didn't shoot you, my *cat* shot you"; always cracked me up. None of that would work against NPCs with an ounce of sentience, of course.)

Clark B. Timmins

"If the setting is too big, too dense, or too complicated..." I understand, and largely agree with you, but wouldn't *any* world have (ultimately) infinite size, density and complexity? I think what you mean is the setting needs to be *well summarized*. Also, in my experience, you only have to tell players about their local environment; they can learn more about the wider world as play progresses.

John Redden

Dang. Good luck in surgery!

Brian Rogers (See, I finally got it right!)

I continue to enjoy the regrettable superheroes. Speaking of which, have you thought of stating up Funnyman? For those who don't know, *Funnyman* was Siegel & Shuster's follow-up to Superman, about a vaudeville comedian who fought crime. The humor was painfully dated by the time it came out (the mid-40s), and the title was a complete flop. I thought of playing Funnyman's great-granddaughter, who inherited the mantle but kept her identity secret, more out of embarrassment than anything else.

Roger B-W

Ah, *Traveller: New Era*. I think GDW paid too much attention to those who said the Third Imperium was "boring." Of course it was, and that's what made it a good foundation. It was generic enough you could be a tourist one week, fight pirates the next, and solve a murder mystery the week after that. The Third Imperium was *relatable*, and the New Era universe was not.

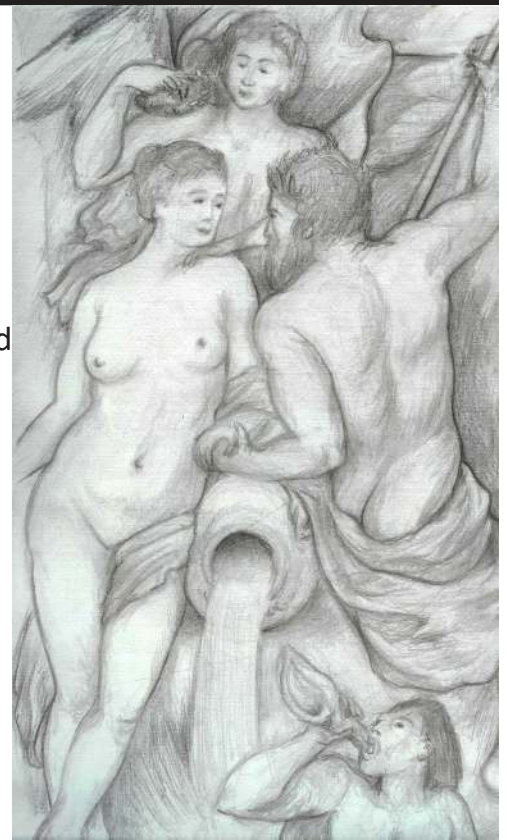
Erica Frank

"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." That's my game-design philosophy in a nutshell!

We Are But Worms: Thanks for the offer, but you paid the whole dollar for it, you're allowed to keep that secret and cherish it. :) "How Many Arms Does Human Leader Have?" We don't know, we're still debating how many of our president's hands are real.

Ah yes, I remember the *Champions* stats, Comliness and Presence, and like them. (I thought of including them in my list, but felt they weren't unique enough.) I like them because they suggest a four quadrant classification, where a high COM/high PRE character could look like a Greek god, a high COM/low PRE could be cute & cuddly, low COM/low PRE would be kind of gross, and low COM/high PRE would be terrifying.

Stat names: For the record, these are the stats in *Two-Fisted Tales*: Brains, Luck, Mind, Muscle, Reflexes, Savvy, Status, Wealth and Weird. Not a D&Dism among them. I don't object to using different names, but I don't like the *amount of time we spend inventing new ones*. I say "we" deliberately, because I doodled on many systems before 2FT was published, and coming up with a perfect stat list was always part of the process.



Michael Cule

I agree with your take on politics. Don't hide it by any means, but introducing yourself as "I'm a Labour man, and you Tory motherf*ckers better watch yourselves!!" would be a bit rude.

"My currently running campaigns have pretty obvious political themes ... both of which have some echoes of the current world situation and how I feel about it." One advantage of fictional analogues is their partisans *may not see the resemblance*, so they won't be offended. "You're saying the King is a loudmouth, racist rapist? Well *of course* we should blow up his castle! But let's do that next session, I've got a Trump rally to go to..."

Thanks for the summary on Keir Starmer's troubles. I'll take your word for it that Starmer is better than a leadership fight; we learned that the hard way in the Biden/Harris switcheroo. You mention trans issues: We're surprised that the anti-trans sentiment seems stronger in the UK than in the US, enough that even the moderate left seems to push anti-trans policy. (There was some talk, among Democratic moderates, of compromising on trans issues in early 2025, but you don't hear it anymore.)

Lisa Padol

Thanks for the link to *Hollows*. It seems more inspired by the *Dark Souls* games than WoW directly. I haven't played *Dark Souls* because it's supposed to be very, very hard, and Kimberly has no patience for me howling and screaming with frustrated rage over video games. A tabletop game that doesn't rely on quick reflexes wouldn't have that issue, so I'll check it out!

Appearance in James Bond 007: My only issue is that good looks have some advantages, such as better chances in seduction rolls (obviously important in a 007 game). It should cost a little bit more than ugliness, which provides no benefits at all.

GM-less games: OK, this will be a response to you, and **Avram and Josh** as well.

Obviously, I have to defer to your personal experiences. My thoughts come from a simple thought experiment: What if you took games *with Game Masters*, and removed them? (I guess you'd be playing with random encounter tables or something.) You would have to rely more on rules than hand-waving; hand-waving decisions would have to be made by consensus; and so forth.

A game *designed for GM-less play* would be very different, and I think that explains differences between logic and experience. Now would a collective story be *better* than one by a single author? Impossible to say, especially as even a railroaded D&D group has *some* collective input, with players creating dialogue and making different tactical decisions. The question is whether it's better if player contributions are better focused narrowly, on their own characters, than on the wider world, and I don't have the answer.

Good Society: I bought the PDF, and will read through it more thoroughly. My initial skim revealed things that made me cringe a bit, but I know that's my problem, not necessarily the game's.³ I also have to grapple with the fact that *I don't like Jane Austen's world* and the social conventions of her society, which she arches her eyebrows at but more or less accepts. I prefer Mary Shelley, who told the stuck-up prigs of her time to shove off.

Heath Row

Thank you so much for the kind words! I'm glad someone shares my sense of humor. I often wonder if people realize when I'm joking around here.

Patrick Zoch

Very much liked your Ideas on Interrogations. In the 90s my favorite TV show was *Homicide: Life on the Street*, which prominently featured Det. Frank Pembleton (Andre Braugher) as master of "[The Box](#)." One episode, "Three Men and Adena," was nothing but a lengthy interrogation. Intense stuff!

And I don't blame players for immediately reaching for truncheons and cigarette burns. Many of us find it hard to call a plumber, let alone convince somebody to incriminate themselves. Honestly, it was only after the torture debates of 9/11 that I saw how blinkered I was, and how that kind of thinking had real world consequences.

How to handle this in a game? I have many thoughts, but no systematic conclusion. My immediate suggestion would be to present interrogators with your 11 strategies, ask them to pick one, and then roll, but I feel we can do something more dynamic.

Because interrogations seem to be balancing acts: You either want them relaxed enough to talk freely, or so stressed out that they'll say *anything* to get out of The Box, but obviously can't do both. And if

³ For example, "Austen's work is not about race, and doesn't grapple with racial prejudice. For this reason, we take the approach that in the world of *Good Society*, racial prejudice does not exist." Yeah, Austen didn't talk about race because she was *a cossetted rich Englishwoman* and *everyone she met* was a pasty-faced white person. She may not have been a hateful bigot like Lovecraft but let's not over-romanticize.

you're law enforcement you have to read them their rights, but trick them into thinking they're better off talking than STFU and calling a lawyer. (That *Homicide* video touches on this.) I wouldn't ask players to roleplay the whole thing -- it could take hours! -- but reducing it all to a few die rolls seems like a waste.

Avram Grumer

Why do Colossi have balconies? I don't know, maybe there are little people inside, like [the hats in the Big Brim Bar](#), and they like to stretch their legs a bit. (If they make Orcs Mexican I want to play a Half-Orc with a giant sombrero and a Gnome Sorcerer in his hat.)

The Six Sigmas: Damn, I saw that episode, but have no memory of anything but the Tracy Jordan parts (which I didn't like!). The Sigmas sound like a perfect pantheon for guys who see *Glengarry Glen Ross* as a lifestyle guide.

GM-less games: See my comment to Lisa, above.

Joshua Kronengold

You're right about D&D 4E being inspired by video game fights, in fact I remember it as a common criticism at the time ("They turned D&D into a goddamn video game!!"). (For the record, I thought 4E got a bit of a bad rap, and liked many of its changes. Ultimately my conclusion was that 4E's biggest problem was easy to fix: Fights were too long because PCs and monsters had *too many hit points*. Cutting them in half across the board would have solved that.)

I never played *Colossus* either, but I watched the CUGC crowd do so, and the fights were pretty simple and straightforward. Light from the sword told you where you could find the colossi, and once you did, that light also told you where its weak spot was located; you crawled to that spot and stabbed it until the colossus died. I wouldn't build an entire system around that combat mechanic! More variety would be needed. You're right that some kind of clues would be necessary, but I haven't worked out good, systematic ways to present the possibilities.

Good point about "Narrativism" as a goal including the White Wolf games that clearly had standard, wargaming-derived mechanics. I'm thinking in terms of genealogy, those games from Hogshead and Forge in the late 90s/early 2000s and their descendants today, the kind of stuff **Erica** gets in her bundles.

Tap-dancing crocodiles: Damn, I completely forgot about that one! It was my fault for having a death trap without a clear idea how to get you out of it. That's when I got the Flying Buffalo *Traps* books and found out *they* were unusable too...



Timothy Collinson

Ah, you remember my Government series! I was proud of that. I talked to Loren Wiseman (RIP) about working them into a complete *GURPS Traveller* supplement, which I wanted to call *Traveller: Leviathan* and an updated [Leviathan cover image](#) (with the Emperor made up of futuristic dudes). Alas the name was taken by the classic adventure, as you know, and the project never got off the ground.

If I did it today I'd add stuff on Law Level, crime and economics, since many *Traveller* fans have primitive ideas on those topics. For example, they seem to think a world's GDP is a simple function of their mineral wealth, never having heard of Dutch Disease; that high Law Levels mean draconian punishments (oftentimes the opposite is true); and that an independent civil service is a drag of growth (it's much better than the alternatives!).

That reverse skill table looks useful, and it's something I often thought *Traveller* needed. If you advertise for (say) an engineer, you should be able to roll on a table and see which careers an engineer might come from. (I was amused to see "Barbarian" on that list!)

"Reflected experiences of nudity in Nigerian villages in the 1980s." Whoa, that sounds interesting! Tell us more.

SEE YOU NEXT MONTH, COMRADES!



Firedrake's Hoard

Number 10: 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.



Congratulations to *E&A* on reaching its twelfth issue!

What I've been up to

Launching *Of Dice and Meeples*, a boardgaming APA. Yup, issue 1 has come out, and you get it from [its own site](https://tekeli.li/of-dice-and-meeples/) (https://tekeli.li/of-dice-and-meeples/). Contributions for issue 2 are welcome!

And getting Typst to read the XML format of GCA5 *GURPS* character files. It's only in the very early days, but it has potential.

And I've sent this in early because for the last ten days or so before deadline I'll be travelling to Finland and back.

Recent Games

Outgunned / Project Medusa:¹ In two more sessions, we got to the end of the sample adventure, and it felt increasingly like a rail shooter: here's the situation, resolve the situation, now watch the animation as we move automatically to the next situation. I'm still liking the system and I patched round many of the problems in the adventure; but I think the core difficulty is that the authors had ideas for specific set-piece scenes, but not so much how

¹Again I mis-titled this. It's "the adventure that starts in the core rulebook and ends in a separate product" anyway.

to weave multiple paths between them so that the players retained agency *and* the set-piece prep wasn't wasted.² My current feeling is that I quite like the system (though it takes a bit of learning), I love the character generation, but the play can get a bit samey; I intend to run it again, but with adventures written in my style. In particular the adventure was very much about fighting-type challenges rather than stealthy investigation or interpersonal stuff, and I like PCs to be able to follow clue paths that suit what they're good at.



GURPS WWII / Lions, Tigers & Dragons: From Iraq, via home in Delhi, to Iran, where a German operator we last met at the Afghan court seems to be up to his old tricks. We got him PNGed³ there; we may have

²I mean my goodness Robin Laws wrote up clue webs in 2002 and he wasn't the first. People have been conceived, born, and learned to role-play since then.

³Declared *Persona Non Grata*, i.e. invited to leave the country.

to be a bit more firm this time,⁴ since he has the ear of the Shah who has just announced a new oil pipeline into Turkey (pro-Nazi though nominally neutral). But first we have to get close-up access to these people. It doesn't help that even in a party full of linguists (remember, our home is India) few of us actually speak Persian.

GURPS / The Day After Ragnarok: we get hold of a local copper to do the formalities of arrest, as seems likely to be needed, then confront the professor. As we'd more or less hoped, he opens hostilities when gently pushed; he protects himself, throws storm effects at us, and summons two giant pythons. We shoot down one of the snakes with Marconi guns, and Don intimidates the other into backing down then makes friends with it, while the rest of the team knocks down the magical protection and arrests the prof. Back to Brisbane General and a fuller decontamination for him than we can manage in the field.

"The trick is in making the snake think that you're a bigger snake."

After some admin back in Sydney, we're called to make haste (by jet-pack!) to RAAF Richmond, the nearby air force base. A DC-3 that vanished after takeoff from Auckland has just reappeared, several weeks later and off the coast, and it's being sent to the base while they work out what to do with it. They're expecting us just to fly to the base to meet it, but Don thinks it *obviously* it makes more sense to catch it in the air. It looks pretty ratty, but there's no obvious reason to wave it off. The crew think they've made the flight in only an hour or so (it's normally more than six), the passengers are looking rough and talking about monsters, and

there are suspicious-looking parallel slashes on the wings and body.

After a lot of calming down and interviewing, a story emerges. A couple of "creatures", with varying descriptions but definitely wings and claws, grabbed on to the wings and started to move towards the fuselage. The pilot tried to shake them off, without success. Then the sky went silvery-blue ("moonlight" gets mentioned), the plane was violently shaken, and this dislodged the attackers. Once things calmed down a bit, the crew found themselves off the Australian coast.

A middle-aged Englishwoman, Dr Belinda Fletcher, thinks she knows what the creatures wanted. She thinks someone sent the creatures after "the Taonga statue", specifically Hina-i-kamalama, something like a goddess of the moon. She'd been wanting to get it out of New Zealand, and others had been taking an interest.

While Don is retrieving the statue from the cargo hold, a couple of flying shapes appear; we get the civilians off the tarmac and ready weapons as they get closer.

"Also we don't actually *know* they're hostile. Not that I'm taking any bets."

There's some bat wing, some great ape, some toad, and the lieutenant gets a bit wibbly. But Marconi guns to the rescue again (and we are quite good shots). The smoke from the burning creatures seems to be flowing away from the crate.

In any case, we sort out what's left on the tarmac, agree that most of the passengers and their luggage can be released, and take Dr Fletcher and ourselves back to Top Men in Sydney. It turns out with a bit of calculation that the plane jumped forward one lunar month...

⁴PNV, perhaps, *Persona Non Viva*.



GURPS WWII / Neutral Currents:

thanks to the magic of scheduling, both of the WWII games (alternating months) get writeups this time. (And neither next month.) Still on Ascension: the Soviet ship vanished overnight. We later get a fragmentary radio call, and end up doing some search and (potentially) rescue, tracking down an armed merchant of the Royal Navy that has tangled with what turns out to be the German commerce raider *Thor*. (Actual historical battle.) This means that our next leg, hauling across the South Atlantic to the coast of Brazil, is delayed further, but we feel it was worth doing.

GURPS Traveller / The Pirates of

Drinax: this is a game with some history for us at Whartson Hall. We started it ten years ago and had a good initial run, but went very adrift when we came back to it (none of us, players or GM, could see an in-character way not to follow through on the obviously fatal plan we'd concocted). But Dirk the Dice mentioned it recently on [The Grogard Files](https://thegrogardfiles.com/) (https://thegrogardfiles.com/) and we all had some enthusiasm for giving it another go. Now of course it's a huge multi-book campaign rather than a bunch of promo PDFs, and the GM has been having great fun not only getting the feel of it but working up *GURPS* conversions for things that need to be converted, while the rest of us fiddle with character design.

Anyway, we've had our session 0, or more like session ½ really: we'd already talked about what we wanted to play, negotiated various shipboard roles, and so on. Being a sober gentleman I am playing a Vargr corsair based somewhere in the intersection of Lord Flashheart from *Blackadder* and Adam Ant's Dandy Highwayman. Woof! And after some discussion our ship will be called the *Pride of Innsmouth*. (And when one of us gets some Artist (Holography) we'll set the camouflage skin to do waving tentacles...)

Hidden Magic and Historical Realism

"It's just like our world, only there's always been hidden magic." This gets said about settings, and it irks me.

I think it's because it views the world, history, technology, as essentially a black box. We don't *need* to posit hidden magic to understand how WWI happened, or WWII, or the moon landings, or historical events in general. There aren't any great big unanswerable questions as to why a person might have done this or how that technology works. If magic has always existed, then it's what we call "antibiotics" and "electronics"; you can't keep things secret.⁵ What's worse, this approach devalues the real actions, good and bad, of real people that led to things that actually happened. Alternatively, the hidden magic hasn't had any effect, in which case what good is it?

But because I like gaming in historical periods with hidden magic, I've had to find some answers to this. My favourite is that *magic has*

⁵This is also why I don't believe that the USAF has a crashed alien spacecraft. The number of people who would have been involved over the years is so large that some of them would have talked, unless they were all assassinated, and *that* would be a statistically significant cause of death.

not worked until recently. There may have been people who believed in it, as there are in the real world, but you couldn't get a reliable magical effect until... something recent enough that magic feels *new*, it isn't in the power structures yet, and the PCs are among the few people who've developed it. (They may not even know at first what's happened to them, and discovering why things have changed may be significant in itself.) This caters to my liking for putting games at points of great change: whatever the new world looks like, the first magicians will probably have a fair old influence on it.

This means that you can keep historical accuracy at least for a while. In *Irresponsible and Right* the divergence point... well, it was a little complex because of shenanigans with time, but it was something like 1920, and it took about twenty years to have any noticeable effects. Which meant that my few original PCs were a majority of Allied magical strength, the opposition had similar levels of occult capability, and for much of the war in time and place there simply weren't enough magicians to make more than a local difference.⁶

Gods, Demigods, and Other Riffraff

“Religion, Spirituality, and the Cosmic Order”

For me, if gods are going to be gods, they have to be *qualitatively* different from humans. They're not just bigger, you *can't* beat them up, no matter how macho you are.

⁶It did *end* quite differently from what happened in the real world, not least because Roosevelt had been cured of his polio and one of the PCs won a iaijutsu duel against Hirohito with the fate of Japan at stake. That was Hirohito's idea; he'd been granted a glimpse of the alternative future.

I am well aware that there are competing approaches: the last developments of original (non-Advanced) *D&D* let a sufficiently powerful character become a minor deity and ultimately climb the ranks. But for me there are already lots of things that are tougher than the PCs but that they can toughen up to fight; ultimately I'm more interested in conflict resolution by persuasion than ditto by physical force. Even an Achilles or an Ajax, while preeminent among men, cannot ever compete directly with a god.

I remain curious about how the shape of religion, by which I mean the things humans construct in relation to the idea of a god, changes when faith goes out of the window. Nobody in a traditional fantasy game argues about whether the gods *exist*; their priests can communicate with them! Nobody needs to write long tracts on ethics when they can ask the god what is a right action. They may fight about whose god is *stronger* but that's a different class of argument.

So a temple becomes less a side note to temporal power and more a different arm of it. You give your military service to the king, and he protects you from foreign kings; you pay the temple of healing and mutter some words about how great the goddess is, and Her power tapes your arm back on. The aspects of religion that can descend into the confidence trick (“be nice to people now, especially priests, or go to this thing we've invented called hell later”) go away when people can actually bring back their dead relatives from hell and ask them what it was like.

Modern fantasy has evolved a thing I call the Church of No Redeeming Virtues, based perhaps on memories of puritanism in America or the Inquisition: no fun, just work, a stern

abuser-god who will condemn you to hell for looking at him funny, priests who take what they want when they want it and everyone else just has to shut up and let them. The problem with this is that it doesn't last; people get irked, they form schisms or rebellions, or they just go away. Puritanism had to settle a whole new continent in order to grow beyond a small community of fanatics. The fantasy version of this tends to be very old and very stable and, well, why? What does it offer to those outside the priesthood except for soft slavery? *Especially* when other gods and other religions are right there across the border... The monolithic mediæval Catholicism *was not that bad* in most places and at most times, and when it was the Reformation happened.



Arthur Rackham, 1924

We Also Heard From

Comments on E&A number 11

Cover: the Skull Spider is a bit like the hermit crab, seeking out the discarded hard shell of another creature to grow into rather than developing one of its own. It is found particularly near the abodes of mind flayers and the Face-Eating Woodlouse.

Pedro Panhoca da Silva & Maira

Zucolotto: I've been collecting paper-IF mechanics, because nobody else seems to be doing it. There's a lot out there, tick-boxes and keywords and so on...

Pum: I've seen several TV shows in recent decades answer every question with another question (see e.g. *Alias*, *Lost*, *Battlestar Galactica*), which can be spun out for several seasons but eventually comes crashing down.

Sympathies. Condolences.

Matt Stevens: I suppose it depends on what you want. You can build a perfectly gameable world by taking the big box of D&D Stuff and scattering things out of it onto the map; that's not to my taste, but players and GMs who are happy with it are Not Wrong.

RYCT Lisa: some early pulps are the technothrillers of their day. I've recently read George Allan England's *The Flying Legion* (1920), which is a strange blend of stuff that he clearly had to put a lot of effort into finding out about (Arabic and Islamic customs as well as the physical layout at Mecca) and stuff that he's just half-arsed (hypothetical aviation, including vacuum balloons).

RYCT Elf: yeah, having "lots of little religions" (which the poly-pantheon model seems to imply) doesn't produce the same sort

of spiritual life as “one big religion that drives out the competition”.

Clark B. Timmins: for me, complexity can be OK *if there's a way in*. I've been intimidated by the amount of *stuff* in Glorantha or Tékumel, but not by the Third Imperium; I got the *Traveller* Library Data supplements when I was of an age to have time and enthusiasm to read them cover to cover, so I just soaked that stuff up without effort. My rule of thumb now is that players will read no more than one A4 page of background without complaining.

Thinking of tensions, I always try to remember that this is a setting *to game in*, not a Wikipedia entry. (Especially if it's a description of a real place or time!) Don't just tell me that these guys are at odds, tell me what they hire street-level operators to do to each other.

John Redden: good fortune with the surgery, which by the time you see this etc. so I hope it went well.

RYCTM, I may not have laid this out fully, but there have been three strands of the magical-WWII campaign. The first was *Irresponsible & Right*, which I ran, and which lasted from 2007 until 2021 (roughly monthly sessions). That was primarily based in Europe, with the PCs as British occult agents working for MI5. Once that ended, two of the players wanted to run spinoffs; so now we have *Neutral Currents* (the PCs are the crew of an Empire-class flying boat doing “route proving” flights and espionage in neutral countries) and *Lions, Tigers & Dragons* (the PCs are occult agents in India, aligned with the Allies but definitely more Indian than British). That last is the group that was sent to Iraq.

RYCT Joshua: “Once you introduce magic historical accuracy goes out the window” — up

to a point, but it doesn't have to be total. I have Feelings about this. See above, in fact.

Brian Rogers: Very nifty multipurpose scenery! Also: Gorillas!

They summoned the enchantress to kill the hero,

They summoned the hero to kill the medusa,

They summoned the medusa to kill the caterwaul...

Myles Corcoran: because of a role-playing-adjacent exercise elsewhere, dunnocks in my head talk like East End gangsters. Nice sack you got there, be a shame if sunnink was to [sniff] *'appen* to it.

RYCTM, no Vilani in *2300AD*, it's completely separate from *Traveller*.

RYCTM RMCT Michael: Jack McDevitt's Alex Benedict series starts with *A Talent for War*, in which our protagonist's uncle has vanished in hyperspace but his eidolon (called a “sponder” in this book, an “avatar” later) is around to answer some, but not all, questions about what he was up to (because he didn't tell it everything before he left). It's clearly a plot device for that particular story, and similarly clearly not really meant to make much sense in a social context. Many books later, even the characters are wondering why these things were ever invented...

Michael Cule: Depending on the culture, you might add to the Mother: Odious Personal Habit (Matchmaker).

Well, I shall see you at Summer Stabcon, but it'll be a shame not to at the next one. Can't argue with your decision though.

Re *2300AD*: there's a term they have for bold brave Scouts. It's “on the Memorial Wall, learn

from their example”. You can always lie about how bold and brave you were in the bar later. For what it’s worth, you have (as of this’s writeup) completed section 12 out of 17 (though they are of wildly differing lengths), and Whartson Hall is currently one section behind you. I’m hoping someone else will run something afterwards... do you fancy running more *Traveller*? Colonel of Marines the Baron Rafe Tikhonov is getting bored; nobody’s tried to kill him for *weeks*.

Re *RuneQuest*: Progress! Progress?

RYCT Lisa/9: and for the record I was more amused than irked.

RYCTM: well as far as I’m concerned the zombie enchantment does all the thinking bit, essentially the job that a spirit would do but without being an actual spirit, and the body does the shambling bit...



Harry Clarke, 1923?

Elf: I very often find myself thinking “what does this world/setting offer that isn’t already in (some other world I know better)?”

A script is just a small program. (A program is just a large script.) Some people talk disparagingly of “scripting languages” but while some languages make some sorts of programming easier there really isn’t any hard boundary.

Dylan Capel: RYCTM yes, “build a new thing here where we can see that the new thing needs to be built” vs “chance it all for the possibility of getting to what’s left of home” feels like a genuine and interesting dilemma.

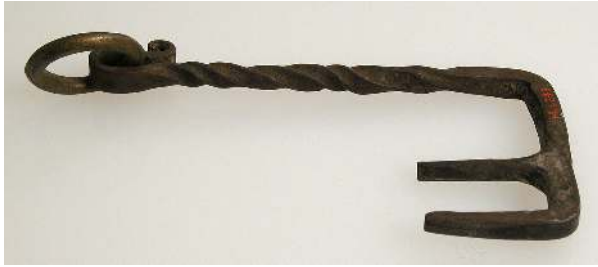
Lisa Padol: RYCT Brian Rogers RHCT Patrick Riley RHCTM (I think): I lose all my sense of humour about possession given the sorts of abuse it’s been used to cover up. I have trouble using it even in settings where it is a genuine supernatural threat.

RYCT Dylan Capel: I bought the CD edition of *Dragon 1-150* when that was released.⁷ But while I look back at those quite often, I haven’t felt any urge to pick up anything more recent; they were always a house organ, of course, but in the days when they covered other companies’ games as well I found them more interesting even in their discussion of *D&D*.

RYCTM and *The Day After Ragnarok*: although we have done downtime things with these players and this GM (Phil Masters!) in other games, and we aren’t opposed to it, we aren’t doing it at the moment.

⁷I gather this was legally iffy because they hadn’t paid the authors for those particular anthology rights, but I’d rather it be out there like that than be the equivalent of early *White Dwarf*, which would be lost were it not for illicit amateur scans some of which omit the advertisements.

RYCT Patrick Zoch RHCTM: ooh, I like that key approach. It feels somewhat analogous to the way some games give you benefits for making your disadvantage actually be disadvantageous to you, while having a built-in method for getting rid of it as the character changes. Do characters have multiple keys, or is it usually one at a time?



Lovely game writeup for Lady Susan van Helsing! Thank you; it was genuinely enjoyable even at this remove.

Patrick Riley: regarding the mice, on one occasion in the WWII game (which was mostly “track down and deal with this magical weirdness affecting the course of the war”) I had some entirely non-magical problems and opposition⁸, though since they were being quite sneaky the few indications that leaked of something weird going on looked as if they *might* point to the sort of weirdness that the Magic Agents (don’t call them the Magic Agents) usually worked on. I think it’s good to change things around sometimes.

I’m afraid those different square grid sizes between base terrain and printed map make me itch, just a little bit. (Yes, I know just how hard it can be to make stuff match up!)

⁸A group of German agents planting a homing beacon on the one drop-forge in England that could make Merlin engine crankshafts. I haven’t found any evidence of a historical attempt on this high-value target, though one must assume that German high command was aware of it.

RYCTM/9: I have not yet written the conversion code to make easily-fiddlable graphs, sorry!

Re NPCs surrendering: to me a lot depends on whether it’s in character, both to surrender and to accept it. It probably makes a difference that I play a lot of **GURPS**, in which a combatant is usually unconscious and out of the fight well before they’re dead.

RYCT Lisa Padol/9 RHCT Elf: when I’ve run games at conventions I’ve usually had a set array of pregens, enough for my maximum signup count, and the systems I favour aren’t good for running up more on the fly. So there’s a practical limit to the number of players (I usually set up for six).

RYCT Lisa Padol/9 and character sex, really the only time I think it should matter is if the setting is one with strong gender roles, and then at least I’d try to offer some choices rather than insist that “you’re all men because only men get to have fun”. The woman secretly living as a man may have slightly different stats and skills from the male character in that role, but...

RYCT Elf: in an ideal world what I aim for is *in-character* comedy, like the entirely realistic quips that people will make to each other to relieve the tension of the tough situation they’re in.

RYCT Joshua Kronengold RHCT Michael: running *Outgunned* (in which all die rolling is by the players) has felt *weird* to me as a fairly old-fashioned sort of GM. Not only do I like to make skill rolls for NPCs to guide actions that the PCs aren’t directly involved in, the dice are a nice thing to fiddle with. But you mention *Outgunned Superheroes* so you’ve presumably met this.

RYCT Patrick Zoch: it can be a very interesting story when the kids realise that those with a duty of care over them *really aren't doing their job*, but often it's not the story that was intended. (I've seen this in some fanfic about magical school settings.)

Brian Christopher Misiaszek: This whole sequence of the collapse of the Mazorra seems tremendously challenging to run, but very rewarding if pulled off.

RYCTM, thanks, I'm trying not to nitpick and mostly I can make sense of things.

Jim Eckman: RYCT Elf, even more I think a lot of players don't know (and don't think to find out) what has been done before by other games, what worked and what didn't, but rather stick to whatever game they meet and the way it says things should be done. We E&Aers are probably more likely to be exceptions to that than most.

Heath Row: RYCTM yes, I might as well be Known. By the time this is published, the first issue should be out...

Patrick Zoch: The way interrogation generally ends up happening in games I'm in is as a form of persuasion: you were working for those guys, we've pretty much steamrolled this part of their plan and they aren't coming to help you, help us understand what's going on and we can get you out of this horrible situation. (Yes, this is often done to people who don't have much ongoing reason to be loyal to the nefarious organisation they were working for.) None of my regular players has any great enthusiasm for playing out the sort of adversarial technique you discuss, though I'll keep that handy...



Avram Grumer: I've been muttering for some years about the *telenovela* form as a template for the sort of size of RPG campaign I like to run, not so much in genre but in format: a single "season" with a defined ending point. If the players and GM want to, they can run a sequel, but each chunk is intended to stand alone, a sequel won't have all the same cast, and so on. This strikes me as much more satisfying than "until the GM gets bored", which was my early experience of the ends of campaigns.

Though when it comes down to it I feel I get much more out of a good book than I do a good film, and I read a great deal more than I watch.

Re buy-in: the gaming groups I've liked best have been ones that were friends too, often first though not always. More specifically, I'm happy to spend time with these people even when we aren't gaming; the game is something we do because we all enjoy it, not the one thing that binds us together. With that precondition, and I realise it's not one all groups can manage, we all feel much freer to step back and speak up if part of a game isn't working for us.

Your *Monsterhearts* writeup reminds me of why I want to play it (though I don't know players

who'd be up for it, and I'm not sure I'd do a good job myself).

Re Gemini: not so much selfless as mindless. This is a randomly-generated chunk of text which matches the sort of text that has been written in response to prompts a bit like the one you just gave. (And in some cases the dice on the random generation are loaded.)

Joshua Kronengold: Re *Pagans* I am reminded that Barbara Hambly's original title for *The Quirinal Hill Affair/Search the Seven Hills*, a mystery set in early-CE Rome in which the underground Christians play a big part, was *The Baby Eaters*.

RYCT Elf, I've noticed that the most wargamey bits of **GURPS** (the original dungeon-bashy magic system, the optional intricacies of combat) are the ones I'm least likely to use as a GM or a player. I live much more in the skill system.

RYCTM, this is how you tell the difference between a dedicated hobbyist necromancer who writes and polishes their own code and one who just copied the examples out of Master's grimoire.

Redundant Array of Inexpensive Zombies? You heard it here first.

GenAI has two effective back doors into the human cognitive platform: the ELIZA effect (if it writes more or less like a human, we tend subconsciously to treat it as one) and the addiction paradox (an irregular reward is the most effective way of getting people to come back and try again, see *Flappy Bird* for example). I think this accounts for a large part of its popularity.

Re narrative games and visualisation: the oversimplified insult to this style goes

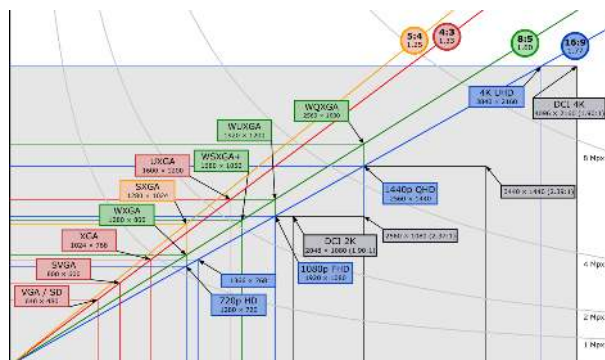
something like: Player A: "This is my father's sword, which I took from his body when your raiders slew him; I have trained with it every day since then, and now I will sheathe it in your black heart!" GM: "OK, you get +2." Player B: "And I have Sharp Sword." GM: "OK, you get +2." It can work but it relies on *not* thinking that way, in a manner that I find very fragile and hard to recover from if anyone breaks it.

RYCT Lisa: *if* all the players and GM enjoy putting together the perfect plan, well, here's where I don't mind diverging from the linear fiction (book, film, TV) model: we don't need something to Go Wrong every time, sometimes we can have the competence porn of having done the research, made the plan, and it works. (But this may just be another way I'm blessed in the players I play with regularly, that we can make this work without boring each other.)

RYCT Patrick Zoch: well, once it becomes *possible* for people to travel to exotic foreign lands without being killed by disease, locals, etc., some people will want to do it.

RYCT Brian Misiaszek: I think we may not yet have proper RPG rules vocabulary for what I think of as the "resolution" or "grain size" of the system. In a traditional game like **GURPS** or *Call of Cthulhu* you're expected to make a separate roll for each thing you do: attack, defend, stay conscious, fast-talk, lockpick. In some of those cases you might be able to try again later, in others you'll take multiple rolls to do a thing (e.g. an extended contest of Diplomacy). In something like *Hero Wars/ HeroQuest/QuestWorld* or *PbtA* it seems to me that you're expected to step back and do the single game-mechanical process which will fully resolve this whole interaction/scene/conflict, or at the very least will change it to the point that trying again in the same way is meaningless,

and detail is then filled in with narration using that as a guide. Not being able to say in brief form “this is a game with *that* sort of level of resolution” seems to cause much confusion and unhappiness.



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Vassilakos, Collinson and Rader:

Several pages of someone lying awake. This should not be interesting. And yet...

Jim Vassilakos: RYCT Miles, I have always felt that describing vi as a modal editor misrepresents it. It has commands. Some of those commands (like insert and append) can take very long arguments. But that's not a separate mode, it's simply a convenience method. That vim canonicalised the modal view is a major reason why I don't get on with it.

I'm no lover of Pascal, but I do think that starting with a BASIC (as, to be fair, I did) can bring in bad habits which it takes effort to break. Though if I were teaching people to program I would make a point of teaching them a second language as soon as possible, to emphasise that the really valuable and transferable skill is how to turn a problem into an algorithm, and the language-specific

⁹I feel the same way when I learn a new language now: I already know what a counted loop or a conditional is, you don't have to explain that, just tell me how *this* language does them and what about it is weird and

implementation detail is a *different thing*.⁹ I understand many courses do now do this.

On the other hand at school and university I've seen the desire to learn, and even the ability to enjoy whole fields (such as mathematics), beaten out of people by a system focused on tests and exams and generally *measuring performance*. Not going to argue with you there.

RYCT Clark B. Timmins: [Old Book Illustrations](https://www.oldbookillustrations.com/) (https://www.oldbookillustrations.com/) is a rich vein for me, as well as the usual (pixabay, pexels, unsplash, Wikimedia Commons).

RYCT Dylan Capel: I strongly recommend [A Collection of Unmitigated Pedantry](https://acoup.blog/) (https://acoup.blog/), Bret Devereaux' blog. He's a history professor specialising in classical Roman warfare, but he's written extensively about the Late Bronze Age Collapse and other topics (including a military analysis of *Dune*.)

RYCTM I'm not opposed to being coordinator at some point though *finding the cover art* seems intimidating. I've already modified my PDF-APA software to deal with situations encountered in the run-up to *Of Dice and Meeples* issue 1 and I expect to keep doing so.

As for magic systems, some of the secondary systems for **GURPS** (e.g. the spirit magic first seen in **GURPS Voodoo**) do a rather better job of being consistent and thematic than does the grab-bag that is the standard spell magic. (If I'd been writing the latest edition, I'd have wanted to cut magic completely from the core book, because it varies so much between worlds and having a single default magic system leads

special. Ideally *not* by telling me “well here's how we're better than that other language”, because maybe I don't speak that other language. A lot of Rust documentation is aimed at wooing people away from C, Kotlin ditto from Java.

people to think that it's the standard. Ditto psi, ditto ultra-tech. But that might not leave much beyond historical and contemporary games, which wouldn't make for a very saleable package.)

Re motivation: as I mentioned lastish with *Orient Express*, that's a separate problem, and one of the reasons I don't love dungeon games.

RYCT Patrick Zoch, I find I often want more soap opera than other players do. I want to chat with the guy who fixes our armour after it gets damaged by a monster, I want to get to know the other people who hang out in our regular pub, and so on.

Timothy Collinson: well, this discussion inspired a blog post, which was more or less as illustrated below. I have fundamentally no interest in *Traveller-D&D*: I already have a lot of *Traveller* and rules that I think work well for it, and even if running it as *D&D* would get me more players, I'm not sure I want the sort of players for whom that would have been their sticking point.

RYCTM RMCT Avran G: I think this may come into *Traveller* having a functioning society and classic *D&D* basically not (at least where the PCs are). A new magic weapon for *D&D*, you can find it in a dungeon and bash things with it. A new weapon for *Traveller*, well, there are probably law levels and things to worry about. You don't have the instant power fantasy.

(Though I am reminded of the *MegaTraveller* computer adventure I played, *The Zhodani Conspiracy* perhaps, in which if your skills were good enough you could smuggle a party's worth of FGMP-15s onto any planet. "What's that ominous humming sound from under your coat, sir?" "Oh, it's... a cyst. I'm rather embarrassed about it." "Carry on sir, have a nice day.")

Yeah, all right, in my *GURPS* fanzine *The Path of Cunning* a friend has contributed extensive material on libraries and research in that system...

The Bielanka sign is not specific to *Twilight: 2000* but just an example of a dual-script Polish sign that I found in Wikimedia Commons; the Cyrillic script is in the Lemko (Rusyn) language, which is close to Ukrainian.

RYCT Lisa Padol RHCT Paul H: one used to be able to get a set of cards with the phrase for "two beers please, my friend is paying" in a variety of languages. Also "I don't want tourist food, please show me where the locals eat".

RYCT Jim: that comes back to what I was saying about about *Traveller* not really catering to the power fantasy angle. What you start with in terms of skills is pretty much what you get.¹⁰

¹⁰Which I mind rather less if what you start with is enough to be interesting rather than Medic-1, Ship's Boat-1; I've been in long *GURPS* games with minimal experience points, but that was fine because we started off with quite complex characters.

	Rules Purist	Rules Neutral	Rules Rebel
Setting Purist	The Little Black Books are <i>Traveller</i>	Mongoose Traveller is <i>Traveller</i>	T20 is <i>Traveller</i>
Setting Neutral	MegaTraveller is <i>Traveller</i>	TNE is <i>Traveller</i>	Interstellar Wars is <i>Traveller</i>
Setting Rebel	Orbital 2100 is <i>Traveller</i>	Mongoose 2300AD is <i>Traveller</i>	Traveller: 2300 is <i>Traveller</i>

BUMBLING Through DUNGEONS

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ISSUE #10 (E&A #12)

RAE for Issue #11 but I did not succeed in getting to responses this month. Hope you enjoy the rest here!

Origins Prep

Origins Game Fair is in a few weeks as I finish up this month's E&A submission. As mentioned in various previous issues, I've been doggedly working toward Origins as a deadline for numerous design projects, and have completed pitch materials for no less than seven board game designs.

I'm running some ticketed (but free) demos of my games through ProtoCleveland, a group that has a dedicated space at the event for running demos.

Currently I also have three publisher meetings set for Origins, and various other inquiries out there that haven't been responded to. It's perhaps fewer than I hoped for, but also more than I might have gotten if the winds of fate had traveled a bit differently for me.

This is merely the beginning. The 25 or so publishers attending Origins that were reasonable targets for my outreach (many more attend, but many aren't accepting game submissions) pale in comparison to the full breadth of publishers. But conventions are a great way to make an impression, so I consider these more hopeful opportunities than many that will be email "cold calls," so to speak. Regardless, I plan on continuing my pitching efforts after Origins, and have done the research to set myself up for these efforts.

It's gratifying work, but seven games is too many to be finalizing all at once. Playtests alone push the development cycle out ridiculously when I'm rotating between so many. Lesson learned, and it won't be nearly so many in the future. I will finish 1-2 before moving on. But with these seven that are "finished" (in quotes because a few still have some A/B tests to be run to refine certain mechanics), I look forward to not having to develop them as actively and being able to pitch them in the coming months.

IgTheme: Gods, Demigods & Other Riff-Raff

I tend not to muck about with cosmic hierarchies unless my players have given me a specific hook into their characters that I can utilize in some way. If they have a demonic patron, worship a particular god or gods, well then I'll probably include them in at least cursory detail.

Ideally, this becomes a larger hook. The sorcerer with mysterious origins to her powers might be tied to a god, but she might be unaware of the specifics and has to suss out the details. Or a fey patron of a warlock has not been overt in their communications...until recently. What do they want? Why now? Answers to these questions are good plot fodder.

Neither of those is hypothetical. They're pulled from past campaigns I've run.

Also ideally, this ties into larger campaign goings-on. Gods, at least those I run, tend not to pay close attention to individual followers except when those followers are involved in larger matters that concern the god. So what is their goal within the larger scheme of the campaign? And is this at odds with other goals the party may have?

As a player, I often ignore religion, but have leaned into it on one occasion when it matched the campaign. My celestial patron, Zariel, had fallen from grace and was in league with devils. With Zariel as the campaign's ostensible villain, my character was torn between confusion (I continued to receive power from Zariel even as I used it against her forces), and a desire to turn her back toward Light.

This culminated in a rather dramatic roleplay scene and series of rolls to convince Zariel of the error of her ways. It was fun, and was a culmination of why I created the character in the first place.

In one-shots, where I do most of my non-D&D gaming, religion is hard to bring to the fore, since there's not as much time to develop it as an aspect of a character or world. Cults can - and do - still play a role at times, and this is certainly an offshoot of traditional religion. But it's

still basically never developed in much detail.

As an amusing end to this section, on one of my random encounter tables, I had an encounter with “Lonny, the Fart God” and this was rolled by one of my players, who was playing an adolescent boy, early teen or pre-teen. Of course, Lonny became his new deity of choice, and became a surprisingly recurring NPC in the campaign. As a god with little-to-no followers, Lonny wasn’t very powerful, but the player made it his job to spread the Good Word and recruit new worshippers.

Lonny will still get easter egg-style references in more recent campaigns, a tacit sign that his follower base has begun to grow to other parts of the world.

Gaming Roundup

Skullduggin’ in the Deep (5e Campaign)

The players are happily angering greater and greater forces in the city of Waterdeep. One’s feud with the dark sea goddess Umberlee came to a head when they invaded one of her temples. For a purpose other than looting, granted, but they managed to anger her nonetheless.

Most recently, they just completed a casino heist that was amusing in its juxtapositions. Or rather, it was a casino “sabotage” mission, at the behest of a rival casino. One PC spent her entire time enjoying food and drinks, going to the spa, and winning money in the casino. Their mission was handled via diplomacy and talking, with no combat.

Meanwhile, the monk ended up on a solo mission to the casino vault wherein a drider ambushed him and prompted an insane chase. He was a failed lock pick roll away from near-certain death and having to roll up a new character, but fortuitously met the lock’s DC *precisely*.

We’re 13 sessions in and the two larger arcs I have planned are about to come to the forefront, with fewer side missions unconnected from these main arcs. One involves a fey demigod whom they allowed access to this plane of existence via their shenanigans in the temple of Umberlee. The other a rogue sect of Gondians (tinkerer/mechanic religion) who have some secret plans for the city.

Board Games

Basari (1998) has been the new-to-me find of the year so far. Simultaneous action selection, but there are only three actions and only one person can take each. So when you overlap on an action, you have to barter to see who gets the action. So it becomes an exercise in trying to out-guess opponents, either to avoid overlapping or to deliberately

overlap so that you can extract some value from them in the bartering. All in no more than about 40 minutes.

Tintas (2016) is a combinatorial, perfect-information abstract that’s quite enthralled me. It has two win conditions, and a lot of the depth comes from finding ways to use one of the two win conditions as leverage over your opponent, to pressure them into actions that will help you in other ways.

Media Roundup

The American Astronaut (2001) - [available on Youtube for free](#) - is a low-budget, sci-fi, comedy, space-western...musical. The chief reason to watch it is to delight in the fact that such strange artistic works exist. I think it’s probably a little too ‘out there’ with absurdist moments for its own good, but it’s supremely memorable and a couple musical numbers are legitimately catchy.

C. Thi Nguyen’s *The Score* is a revelatory read. Nguyen is a philosopher, but one who enjoys interpreting life through the prism of games and gaming. His previous book, *Games: Agency as Art* had a strong and compelling central thesis but was a bit dry and academic. *The Score* looks at scoring systems, or rather systems of incentivization, and how they shape our minds, our lives, our institutions, and how they can be used for good but also corrupt certain practices by creating a gap between what is important and what’s being measured. It’s the easier read of the two and almost infuriating in how incisive it is in its insights, which at times brought me to (pleasant, cathartic) anger over how large that aforementioned gap is in many instances. Awareness of the gap allows you to correct for it, though, or at least control how you respond to it. So I’m thankful for having read this one.

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Mix Natter And Anti-Natter

Regardance

The third season of Foundation does focus on the Mule. It also focuses on the continued decline of the Empire. We continue to find it entertaining

I finished Children of Ruin, the second book by Tsaikovsky. It is complex but interesting. I've started Children of Time, the third book in this series and over half of the way through. So far I like the third book better than the first two.

I down loaded Cloud Atlas by David Mitchell, but only have it on my lap top. For some odd reason I could only purchase a hard copy on my iPhone.

We took in 39 Steps, a play at the local Theater in Kainaliu. It was not good. We walked out at intermission.

Northern California Minicon in June

Here is some email I received for planning purposes.

From Paul

I don't have anything on deck at the moment but I'm happy to fill a slot and run a game. My shelf always has something on it that I've been itching to

play, and I have a couple I can think of that would be fun to break out. Sounds like that might be Josh, Ben, and me if that's the case.

Here's a couple options, if any of these sound like a good time:

Slugblaster -- a game about teen skaters in a boring suburb who engage in the questionable sport/hobby/lifestyle of SLUGBLASTING: opening portals to other dimensions where they can hang out, skate, and try to go viral with videos of their coolest tricks. Of course, they also have to worry about getting home in time for dinner.

The Wildsea -- a swashbuckling adventure game about exploring a verdant post-apocalypse, riding aboard a chainsaw ship across a forest canopy ocean.

Weird fantasy with some fun mechanics and a really inventive setting, not to mention a book full of cool and colorful art.

From Joshua

I'm happy to run the Rusty Bucket! I can run any day Friday-Monday, but prefer Saturday or Friday). As usual, if anyone has any write-ups of what happened in our last (2024) adventure, please send them to me. I often have trouble remembering what happened, and having two years between adventures makes it worse! I have notes from Chris and John from 2023, but not from 2024. Thank you.

After the 2024 session I made some noises about changing rules for the Rusty Bucket, and using either Savage Worlds, Stars Without Number, or Classic Traveller. I did a little research into this, but came to the conclusion that it was not worth it. I will continue to use GURPS: Traveller rules, except for starship combat, where I will use my own, home brewed "StarTraveller" rules.

However, just recently there was a Kickstarter to create "Traveller 5e" which is Traveller using D&D 5ed (2014) rules. I will be getting a copy of these rules, but I can not imagine using them for Rusty Bucket. I still think that the work involved in converting characters (and everything else) will not be offset by the savings of using a supported rule system (i.e. something not GURPS)

Stressful but Complete

The heart valve surgery is successful. Since the my heart would pause, I had to have a pacemaker installed as follow up operation. That is also successful. Thank you to everyone who wished me luck in their zines.

Ignorable Theme

When I used to run League Cosmos science fiction games and in my two books League Cosmos and Cosmos Nirvana I include religion. There are a number of religions that derive their belief from the Face of God, or just the Face. It is the gaze into the universe on a dark night without moon(s). A common expression is *By the Face*. This was inspired by a trip to Muana Kea in 2002. It was dark and I stood looking into the sky at just under 14,000 ft elevation. There were so many stars, the light was almost blinding, I told myself. "this is the face of God."

Sum Comments

Pedro and Maira

The concept of the Arcanes, the creature that feeds on letters. Fascinating.

Mark Wilson, re top down city design. You need some kind of a map. With top down design you only need to have important places or areas predefined.// I barely made it through Lord of the Rings in 1970 when I read it. I'm definitely affiliated with Bored of the Rings fandom. Later I read the Silmarillion and don't remember a thing about it. However I love the Hobbit.

Paul Holman, Night's Hacked Agents? *snicker*

Matt Stevens, I like Chronicles of the Ancient Empire.// An important political writing that is often missed is Homage to Catalonia written by George Orwell. He fought in the Spanish Civil War. He considered himself a social democrat ("democratic socialist"). After the Soviet Union betrayed the republic, Orwell was embittered and against the Soviet Union. Then he wrote Animal Farm and 1984. He had a dog named Marx. Was it named after Karl or Groucho?// I view that there is a significant alteration of the planet economy due to Globalization. Labor value has shifted to what people view and follow on the Internet. I won't dive into AI right now, but keep in mind there's another a missing economic shift where people should be payed for 40 hours worth when they work 20 hours.// Given a few suggestions and some Stellar data I asked ChatGPT to write a science fiction short story. I thought it was better than expected but not really good. I showed it to my wife and she suggested it read like a short story written by an 11th grader.

Clark Timmins, excellent settings list. What works best usually depends on the players.

Attronarch, most of the dead in this adventure were ends :) .

Brian Rogers, I like Mother Hubbard.

Roger BW, Mummies and Nazis. A good set of archetypes. Grumman Goose, I like it.// I played MegaTraveller and Traveller: A New Era years ago, but don't recall any pluses or minuses.// An FTL requirement in my old games and current writing: zero or negative mass of the star ship.// I played Horror on the Orient Express at the last NoCal mini-con with my remaining gaming bros. I wonder if my friend David will run it again?

Myles Corcoran, petrol powered central heating? *Ouch.*// Educators not having their contracts renewed? *Another Ouch.*// Skimming is okay.// I continue to enjoy Mausritter.// Re comment to Paul Holman, grief can be overpowering. I would suggest Paul associate to some form of spirituality to guide him through the grief that he is comfortable with.

Gabriel Roark, back when I played D&D regularly, I wish I would have got my head around Arduin. The outline for Burrows and Borderlands is well organized. I always liked THACO. My favorite miscast for a magic spell was a *typo*. Examples: Raisin the Dead, FurrBall, Flies (the insect), Heel, ... // Re Faux Island. I put it on the table. The party sailed a powered boat from the area of Big Sur and used Faux Island as home base to reach several other islands to the West. All of these artifacts were part of the West Cost 2030 campaign which I wrote up for A&E years ago. The circular objects generated power from the ocean. In this campaign, dragons controlled Earth. They flew around in flying wings and would not let anyone except other dragons keep a flying machine. Obvious entities on Faux Island could be easily identified by visitors. Details of buildings could only be identified after physically examining them. This makes the GM's job easy. Obvious entities are predefined. The others you invent during the moment.// Re ice skating. I am trying to come up with an I.C.E. skating line, but I'm still working on it.

Michael Cule, are the Mother and Father actual deities in the Lunar Empire? The Sartar Kingdom?// The only *con* I attend now is in San Mateo at Mandy's and Paul's house. In general I don't travel well. It was tough enough flying and driving around Kawai. I've committed going to Maui with my wife next year. I plan to make a trip to Cameran Park to visit my bonus daughter in November. No more cons for me too.// Re no politics. I've tried to make my politics obvious from social analysis in this issue. Conservatives these days are mindless followers. When a radical student in the 1960s, is listened to Barry Goldwater or William F Buckley. I didn't agree with them, but they made me think.

ELF, An interesting collection of games. Swamptown looks particularly interesting.// Re world-building. Instead of GMing maybe you should focus on writing books.// Tsaikovsky really drilled down on octopuses in his stories. // I don't run Windows anymore. I only run Ubuntu Linux. My laptop has a dual

boot and I used to boot up Windows, but a Widows upgrade wiped out my dual boot so I took my laptop to my best computer store and they restored my dual boot. No more running Windows. I stick with MySQL. It is my impression that Access is weak to meta-structure definitions.

Dylan Capel, Re mega-dungeons. The only one I ever ran was a three dimensional dungeon made out of the *metal of the ancients*. Fly, Feather Fall and ropes are important. A character with a climb skill was required to use a rope. The walls were slick. The players nick-named it Rubicks Dungeon.

Lisa Padol, Re employment. A recommendation from someone I had previously worked with is what often worked for me when I had to switch jobs. Make sure your resume is only two pages and clear. You probably already know this, but I wanted to emphasize these concepts. The best of luck to you.// I have never played a GMless game. I would expect it would be a story telling game.// I used colors for the ocean vessel map, so if necessary, I could easily map details if necessary.// Re journaling games. Would that be where the players collectively write the story and content?// Re handwriting recognition. I've been told that doctors deliberately use bad handwriting so it is difficult to forge their signature.

Patrick Riley, Were you able to continue the paused game? Oh, I see, later the game continued.

Brian Misiaszek, Happy to hear your wheels are working again. // I continue with a detailed read of the Horrors of Mazorra and continue to enjoy it.// I have this great fear of my primary care physician retiring. She knows me over the years and is an excellent doctor.

Jim Eckman, yes, the Artemis mission is existential relief. // That is an excellent world-building list.

Heath Row, rediscovering books is a good thing.// I'm glad all your belongings arrived in Portugal.

Patrick Zoch, I like the interrogation approaches. I believe the only game where we used interrogation is COC. In that case, you really didn't want to know but you found out anyway.

Avram Grumer, interesting layout
Lessons from the world of business would definitely apply to the five years I worked for CitiCorp.

Joshua Kronengold, See my comments to Lisa on employment search.// Re PAGANS, in the real world, many Pagan archetypes made it into Christianity. The Quran mentions Maryam, the mother of Jesus 34 times. There is an

entire Surah (book) dedicated to Mary. In the Christian new testament, Mary is mentioned 19 times.// I have no opinion on a GM-less game. Since all the games I've played had a GM.// Almost all the articles on AI that I read in the journal of the IEEE are focused on security and power consumption (foot print). Also the articles in the two IEEE journals I subscribe to are loaded with acronyms. Folks don't write plain English anymore.// I used to use eLisp in Emacs to write methods. Now it's a lost gone memory.// Oh! I got it. FitM is fortune in the middle. It will be gone next week.

Vassilakos, Collinson and **Rader**, Captain Plankwell really needs a girl friend to keep him from going crazy.// Re employment. Yes I work at my business. Technically I switched jobs. But I get to do a lot of writing and play rock and roll in two bands. See <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=tikimamakau> . When I first moved to Hawai'i full time in 2013, (I worked ½ time on the Big Island from 2005 to 2013, an original telecommuter...) a recruiter asked me "What would it take to move you to Irvine California?" I was polite with my answer but what went through my mind: *An act of God.*

Jargon Zen

One day the student asked the Zen Master, "Where is the Buddha's Dharma?"

"Right in front of you."

The student replied, "You say In front of you, but I cannot see it."

"You have I, so you cannot see."

Humor

At the start of courtship the woman talks and the man listens.

At the end of courtship the man talks and the woman listens.

After courtship they both talk and the neighbors listen.

- and -

A tree is cut down and then it's cut up.

In the Hall of Stone

By Patrick Brady. London, England. May 2026.

Backstory – the strange case of thirty years later.

This is a continuation of the 'zine I wrote for Alarums and Excursions from 1988-ish? During the nineties I was a regular contributor to A+E but the early years of this century reduced and eventually ended my involvement in A+E, mainly because of work and family commitments. It is strange to think that I started this 'zine thirty years ago! I am back to 'zine writing because Jim contacted me and I realised that I no longer have to put gestetner templates in air mail envelopes to take part 😊. Where would I even get a dot matrix printer now? If the phrase “gestetner stencil” has not been in your life, consider yourself lucky! But my last 'zine was delivered in precisely that way. So, the last “In the Hall of Stone” zine (the one before this one) was made by physically posting stencils at a Royal Mail post office, having special air mail stickers plastered all over it and sending it trans-Atlantic to Lee Gold in the far off land of California. That feels very steampunk now. So here I am, accommodating those strange US paper shapes and wittering about games. Again.

Before I go on, I'd just like to say how good it is to see some familiar names here.

Lisa Padol. I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed reading your 'zine, as always.

Michael Cule. You are still my favourite Vogon! Good luck with all your endeavours.

Avram Grumer. You have a great looking 'zine, I appreciate the reading list aspect and I looked up Lerchner's paper after seeing you reference it. Thank you for that.

Brian Misiaszek. Thank you for the content and the maps. May I use your Mazorra material?

Empire of the Petal Throne. Back in the late eighties and through the nineties I was running a campaign of Empire of the Petal Throne based around the Hall of Stone clan, hence the name of my zine. I do still run EPT but I am aware that this is even less popular now than it was then. I am one of the three authors of the official 2005 ruleset published by the Guardians of Order, but it was always a minority sport. EPT has never been a popular game but I still argue that it has been very influential over its long history. So my gaming continues to be obscure. Perhaps it's a sunk cost fallacy? 😊

Urban Fantasy Games. Nowadays I run a modern urban fantasy campaign, based on the Nightwatch series of books and movies, the campaign is based in the UK (Daywatch: London). The

characters work for Special Operations 13 based in London, founded by Dr John Dee for the defence of the realm against supernatural threats and the mundane cover for Nightwatch London (if you know the books, all player characters are Dark Others). I was running that regularly as a monthly game in-person until a few years ago when family responsibilities made that impractical. My players are kind enough to wait until the stars are right and I can actually run something. So I am gently easing into running games online.



Special Security **SO13**

Hard History. I have also gotten into running historical games, by which I mean games with no fictional component. No fictional characters in particular. So you get plonked into a scenario with a pre-generated character based on a real person and see how well you do compared to the historical event. This started because I ran a game based around a World War Two bomber crew (A Canadian crew flying a Halifax on an early raid into Germany) encountering a flying saucer and what followed. It was a good game and the players enjoyed it. But then I reflected that I would have been happy to

run that game without the science fiction element. Since I am a huge SF fan, for me to think about removing the science fiction part of a game was a major insight. I still run SF and F games, but the art of making a pure historical game has been a thing for me. Inevitably, several of these games are set in WW2, so in one you were the crew of a Long Range Desert Group gun truck in Libya going against the Afrika Korps etc. I also ran the defence of Rorke's Drift as a roleplaying game. Some of these work out as they did historically, some diverge significantly.

Game mechanics. I'm old school enough that writing the rules of the game is a given. Back when I started in this hobby in the UK it was hard to get games and so modifying rules was normalised. During the eighties I was around Games Workshop and White Dwarf, and at one point four of the players in my campaign were or had been the editor of White Dwarf, so talking about game mechanics and then just writing some was normalised. So, none of my current stuff is based on commercially available rulesets. I gently transitioned out of dice dependency at the end of the last century and seldom use them in my games now. I realise a whole bunch of cool design has and is happening, but writing my games is part of my hobby. I am indeed so old school that I am actually indie but never One True Way. I'm glad we are diverse and I respect all the interesting things that people are making and doing. That creativity is what makes this hobby sing. In short I have remained active in the hobby since this zine was last published in Alarums and Excursions.

Ignorable Theme : On gods...

My angle on this is that I am reading and listening to audio versions of the complete works of Aristotle. It's interesting for all sorts of reasons including being an on the ground view of Gods from someone who as in Greece when it had more than a few gods in regular worship. As a side-note, this is interesting in the current context of AI because I did a check on how AI would explain the views of Aristotle on religion. What I got back is impressively wrong. By which I mean, they actively try to retrofit Aristotle into being a monotheist (a kind of proto-Christian) which he was not and which shows how subtly culturally biased these AI summaries can be. If I hadn't been reading the original texts I would probably have believed the summary. So although the AI wants me to think that the Unmoved Mover is a monotheistic god, actually Aristotle was more talking about the concept of causality itself (which he saw as somewhat different from a divine being). On that basis I suggest that in a discussion of gods that the LLM has more in common with conceptions of the devil, it can give you everything but it is a skilled deceiver! 😊

So, if you actually read Aristotle, he thinks that most of the stories about the gods are just fiction. That was a brave statement back in 340 BC and frankly, still is. That does not mean that Aristotle did not believe in the divine, he certainly did. However, he viewed the gods as being separate from the moral and ethical systems that should govern human behaviour. What Aristotle definitely does believe in is physics. He viewed the Gods as clearly separate and as important to the functioning of society. Where he sees the Gods as important is not as superheroes but as social cohesion. For Aristotle managing your relationships with various gods isn't an abstract. They need to be accounted for, literally budgeted for. He is clear in his work on politics that a properly constituted state needs to consider its budget allocation to the worship of the gods. It's a set of facilities, like drainage or wall maintenance. Failing to do so is about as smart as not maintaining the drains. They are fundamentally important to the organisation of a state because coherence of belief is important as social solidarity. If they didn't exist, we'd have to invent them... That's from 343 BC. Admittedly, from a very smart guy in 343 BC.

That's it for me. Glad to see you all here.

Twisting the Rope #12

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Don't Try to Wake Me in the Morning

Tired and busy, the start of May finds me worn out, with too many administrative tasks and not enough vim to tackle them. I predict a short zine from me this month. I also managed to tear half the nail on my right ring finger off while trying to prise open a Dell aluminium body laptop, which is making typing slower and a bit painful. Oh well. On a brighter note, the goslings, ducklings and cootlings have hatched at the nearby park and pond. The flourish of plants and new baby birds makes me love this time of year.

Rowan has finished his third year (of four) of his fine arts degree and doesn't know what to do with all the free time, nor with the luxury of choosing what books he wants to read instead of course work.

Olivia has finished her work placement in the public library in Douglas, Cork, and is less delighted to return to the normal 5-day week with the training course she's attending. She did enjoy a day's barista

training this week, despite finding coffee nauseating as a drink.

Mutterings

The regular weekly board games sessions continue at work on Friday lunchtimes, but the exam season and the end of term has impacted the workplace role-playing sessions, as coordinating longer group sessions becomes more difficult outside the normal term time of the university. I have managed to schedule another *Mausritter* game for May, but I think the *Vaesen* game is on hold at least until mid-June.

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.

The mice left Shattered Oak in a reflective mood and continued their mission to the home of the mouse-wizard, Magnolia. The sun was just past its zenith when the

solitary tree grew visible in the distance. The distinctive bird cage residence hung from a stout branch, but no other sign of the inhabitant was visible.

As the mice drew closer they realised that the cage glowed from some light source within, and it was absolutely crammed full of twigs, feathers, dried flowers and grasses, as well as scraps of human-made cloth and shiny geegaws. From their closer vantage the mice saw another mouse, with foxy-red fur and clad in green and red fabric, was seated under the cage playing a melancholy tune on his mouse-violin.

The sound of the strings faded and the Oak Home mice applauded, startling the stranger, who blushed a deeper red under his russet fur. Introductions followed and the violinist gave his name as Bayleaf, a travelling musician and herbalist.

“I have travelled to consult with the great wizard, Magnolia,” he declared, his voice louder as if trying to draw their attention. “They reside in the curious home above, and have been a gracious host. I have been well fed during my wait, though I am yet to meet the wizard in person.” His voice betrayed a petulant tone with this last statement. “Enough of me,” he finished. “Tell me about yourselves!”

The mice proceeded to recount tales of Boulder-Face, the talking rock, the human in the shape of a frog, and how they overcame Baron Oswald of the Dead Ratz.

As Gwen mentioned Whitethorn Ash, the faerie she encountered in the woods near the sleeping birch, a noise sounded from the cage above, as a round door, fashioned from the crown cap of a human beer bottle, popped open and a rope ladder unrolled to drop to the grass below. The wizard Magnolia emerged and descended the ladder with more grace than one would expect from a mouse on a rope ladder.

“You there,” they gestured at Gwen, “tell me more of this Whitethorn Ash.” They sniffed

the air, “and I’ll have some of that beer you’re transporting on your wagon while you’re about it.”

Bayleaf was speechless at the appearance of the wizard, and hung on their every word. The wizard did not appear to note the look of longing on Bayleaf’s face.

In the conversation that followed, the Oak Home mice informed Magnolia about Winter Ash and goings-on at the Temple of the Moon and of their more recent exploits that left them with a curious and troublesome ring. A ring with a worrying hold on their friend Odette’s attention.

Odette piped up, “Not worrying, it’s merely a valuable ring that I feel warrants deeper investigation.”

Magnolia agreed to examine the ring, over Odette’s protests, and identified it as something of Human make, definitely magical but beyond their power to cancel or unmake. Their advice was “that which is made by Man must be unmade by Man.”

During the examination, Ambrose took Bayleaf aside to offer him some advice. “It’s clear that you have feelings for Magnolia, why don’t you tell them how you feel?”

Bayleaf admitted his interest but “how could a mouse like me ever prove interesting to a great mouse like Magnolia?”

Ambrose came up with a plan. A little electricity might grant Bayleaf a change of heart, or courage to talk to the wizard. “Is electricity like magic?” asked the hesitant musician. “Oh yes!” replied Ambrose, “It’s like magic but better.” He then poked Bayleaf with the exposed terminals of his portable battery. A loud zap and smell of burnt fur accompanied Bayleaf’s startled cry.

Magnolia’s attention was finally on the hapless travelling mouse, and they instructed the other mice to carry Bayleaf up the ladder into Magnolia’s home. Somewhat

dazed, Bayleaf was nonetheless delighted with the invitation.

Soon after all the mice were snugly installed in a chamber in the cage, surrounded by bric-a-brac, and squished together in the limited space, while trying to give Bayleaf room as he continued to spark. Magnolia served tea and talked to Gwen, who asked about the magic tablet of invisibility she retrieved from the Temple of the Moon. Magnolia carefully described the process of recharging spent spells inscribed on tablets before asking the group for a favour in return.

“I desire a particular berry from the thicket to the south-west. I warn you that it is poisonous, but I will provide stout gloves and a leather sack for the gathering of the fruit.” Gwen agrees, indebted to the wizard for their explanation of the magical tablet. The other mice nod and accept the request.

“We’re going on a berry hunt!”

Kriegsmesser – Landau Before the War

Continuing the write-up of the campaign of *Kriegsmesser* set in the German city of Landau in the summer of 1617 shortly before the outbreak of the Thirty Years War. The characters were:

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

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

Alfonzo Meemo, pragmatic graverobber (Marie)
Lazaro Alamano, carriage driver and would-be duelist (Pete)

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

Session 15 (2023-02-16)

As you may recall, the (semi-) valiant crew from Landau attended the Hiller’s ball, infiltrated as staff and entertainers, while the young Isabella

Nachtman attended under the watchful eye of Franzis.

We rejoin the festivities as Udo and Jaroslav attend to the mysterious Serafina, the woman in black they confronted, while she and they both snuck about the upper floors of the Hiller house.

Udo and Jaroslav tie up the unconscious woman and relieve her of 4 daggers and a black silk mask.

Udo checks the hall and finds the guards still milling about, so they send Lazaro back into the other room via the balcony before Jaroslav calls the guards’ attention. The two men, Thomas and Bravold, are surprised to find a woman tied to a chair, but realise when Jaroslav shows them the jewels that they have stumbled on a robbery and not some spicy upper class pastime.

The guards escort Serafina away, locking the doors along the corridor as they do so. Udo worries that Lazaro is now locked in the third storey room. The guards usher Udo and Jaroslav out of the building before locking Serafina Rumbold in the wine cellar.

Outside, Alfonzo hears the crowd gathering for a fondue and follows the stream of people towards the ornamental pond where many trestles stand around a huge cauldron of melted cheese. Wine flows and people are given brass forks to spear the bread.

Udo goes around the house to first call and sings up at the window of the room he believes Lazaro to be locked in. Some drunks join in and Udo’s carols are quickly replaced with more bawdy songs. It takes Udo a few moments to realise that Lazaro is one of his impromptu choir. The carriage driver has taken brandy to ease his sore head.

In the fondue queue, Alfonzo spots a man wearing Lazaro’s coachman’s coat. It is the mysterious assailant from the third floor. Alfonzo pokes him with his toasting fork and starts a scene. Unfortunately for him, the guards take the other man’s side, being

richer and better dressed, and drag Alfonzo out of the queue. Fortunately, the gravedigger gives them the slip and hides his face with a stolen mask. He then encounters Udo and Lazaro as the drunken choir winds down. He returns the coat he retrieved from the mystery man.

The fondue queue fragments into a chaotic scene with pushing and shoving, so Franzis quickly steers Isabella and Maria away from the brawling back to the house. In the press of people someone tries to steal Isabella's necklace only to receive a sharp rap on the knuckles from the pommel of Franzis's sword. Once the ladies are safely back at the relative calm of the house, Franzis stalks back towards the crowd to hunt for a man with bruised knuckles.

By the pond two people have already been accused, sentenced and chucked in the water for perceived trespasses.

In the cellars of the house, Jaroslav follows the guards as they lock Serafina away. He waits until one guard leaves and the other nods off before he approaches the woman and addresses her through the locked cellar door. He introduces himself as Jaroslav Furtwängler, and she replies she is Madam Nobody. After brief banter she offers to aid Lazaro against Balthazar Rumbold, who turns out to be her brother. Jaroslav hesitates, wondering if he owes Lazaro any such aid, and the lady snubs him before looking about the cellars for a means of escape.

Udo, worried about Lazaro mixing brandy and a concussion, suggests they return to the coach to get bandages and treat Lazaro's abused head. As they approach the line of coaches, Udo spies a figure moving between the carriages and the stables. Alfonzo approaches, cosh and toasting fork at the ready, and is rewarded with the whistle of a thrown knife that passes his ear too close for comfort.

Lazaro runs to the coach and fumbles out a pistol from the lockbox under the driver's

seat. Udo fades into the background as the figure is briefly lit by moonlight. It is Urzula, the Dutch assassin.

Alfonzo dashes to the coach and clambers inside as Lazaro stands up, silhouetted against the moon and fires his pistol straight through the floor of the coach. Alfonzo hops out of the coach and pulls the pistol away from the drunken Lazaro to hide it while muttering furious oaths.

The guards come running and Udo calls on his silver tongue and best saintly manner to mollify them and send them away. The three by the coach head into the stable where Udo attends to the dazed Lazaro by the light of a brazier.

Session 16 (2023-03-02)

Jaroslav, in the cellar, lifts the keys from the sleeping guard and unlocks the cellar door to free Serafina. Together they quietly slip past the slumbering guard and up the stairs to rejoin the party. Serafina excuses herself for a moment and returns in a new ball gown and mask, likely liberated from an unfortunate lady guest. They head to the fondue tables to look for Lazaro.

As Jaroslav and Serafina reach the fondue they realise they are too late and most of the cheese and bread has long since been consumed or used in makeshift warfare. As they console themselves with a glass of wine, a courier thunders up the gravel drive towards the house, clearly in a steaming hurry.

Jaroslav excuses himself and slips closer to overhear the courier deliver a warning to Laurene Hiller, the host and owner of the Hiller estate. "A frenzied mob approaches, good lady. Religious fanatics whipped up by some doom-saying preacher, they plan to lay waste to all the works of Man and bring about the end times."

Franzis stalks past, hot on the trail of the would-be necklace thief. Jaroslav passes on the information about the approaching mob,

and Franzis redoubles his efforts, scanning each party goer for bruised knuckles. The man is soon found and Franzis takes him into custody, tying him up and delivering him to the house staff before collecting the ladies, Isabella and Maria, to return home. The rumour of impending religious zealots roaming the country-side makes a night-time coach trip seem less dangerous. He joins Jaroslav and Serafina and they all head to the coach house and stables to look for Lazaro. Jaroslav pointedly ignores Franzis's comments about his new 'date.'

At the stables the smell of smoke fills the air. Urzula has fired the straw and set the stables ablaze! Lazaro sees the flames and sobers in an instant before gathering the horses and leading them, whinnying in terror, from the fire out into the cold night air. Udo and Jaroslav organise a bucket chain but the fire grows faster than they can contain it, and in minutes the whole stable is a roaring furnace.

Smoke-stained and bone-tired, the group decide to leave the Hiller estate at first light. They stand shifts guarding the coach and the ladies, warmed by the fire until the sun lifts its pale face above the hills. Lazaro places Serafina and Udo in the coach with the ladies, and Franzis up front with a loaded pistol ready. Alfonzo and Jaroslav climb into the postilion seats and they set off for Landau.

Lazaro skillfully avoids the craters and potholes of the road to make good time back to the city. They pull up outside a hostelry and break their fasts before the coachman takes the ladies onward to the estate of Piet Nachtmann, Isabella's uncle and ward.

Serafina waits for Lazaro's return for she has a plan she wishes to discuss with the wily coachman.

Session 17 (2023-03-09)

Franzis and Larazo return Isabella Nachtmann and her companion, Maria, to her uncle's estate in the early morning. Once

the women are safely inside, the soldier and the coachman break their fast with the cook, who grudgingly gives them some food while warning them to keep their feet off the table. Franzis warns the cook of the religious mob approaching from the west. The woman is suspicious but takes the warning, passing on word to the other estate staff.

In Landau, the others pay a visit to Captain Sforbeck to discharge their civic duty and warn the authorities of the roving mob. Udo takes his leave and similarly warns the librarian at the university, whose collection of rare books would be an incalculable loss if the mob were to torch the library. The librarian charges Udo with a mission to retrieve some missing books from Stephen Bestwilling, a scholar living near Hammelbass and whose house is unfortunately in the path of the oncoming zealots.

Their duties discharged, the group repair to a tavern to await the return of Franzis and Lazaro. Once the coach pulls up at the tavern, Serafina Rumbold takes Lazaro aside to describe her plan to humiliate her brother, Balthazar. With clever costuming thanks to a seamstress Serafina knows and some judiciously placed rumours, Lazaro will appear to come into wealth and lure Balthazar to attempt to waylay him on the roads as his alter-ego the Crimson Mask, highwayman of some repute. Balthazar will not be prepared for the tables to turn, and Lazaro will rob him of his fine horse, his fine sword and any sense of self-worth.

The group then walk to Hammelbass with Udo, as he goes to look in on Simple Simon and Mother Sarah on his errand to Bestwilling for the librarian. They are greeted with pandemonium, as flooding of the graveyard has brought bodies to the surface around the church and the village folk fear the apocalypse is coming.

Udo calms the gathered villagers before going in search of Father Gross, whom he finds in bed, suffering from a severe fever.

The priest is very ill and Udo's news of the approaching mob only makes matters worse. The priest charges Udo with the town's spiritual protection while he is a-bed.

Outside in the graveyard, Jaroslav and Alfonzo examine the damage done by the flooding. Alfonzo notices fresh scrape marks on the perimeter wall, as though left by a cart or stretcher pushed over the wall. Jaroslav confirms the uprooted bodies are uniformly of advanced age but then spies freshly turned earth and an empty grave-plot. Talking to the groundskeeper, Alfonzo determines the empty grave to be that of the Baukunth family, and a prodigal son, Morten, was buried there only a week past, dying shortly upon returning to Hammelhass after a long time away.

Comments on E&A #11

Luke Broderick (cover): Another cracking cover. Well done.

Roger BW: I enjoyed skimming the first issue of *Of Dice and Meeples*. I must find time to give it a proper read.

Re AI swallowing up SSD/RAM chips: Agreed. If I understand Ed Zitron's ongoing reporting¹ of the AI bubble it's definitely fake money, circular debt passing and cancerous 'financial' growth over any actual material value being created. The rest of humanity will just have to bear the brunt of the losses when the crash comes.

RYCT me re Free League dice pool games like *Alien* and *Vaesen*: I haven't played *Blades in the Dark* but I understand that the dice pool mechanic in *Kriegsmesser* was substantially similar, and allowed for that PbtA style success at a cost middle ground. The Free League house system does without that, and like you said that leads to PCs who crumble under pressure, and quite a lot of missed rolls.

Re Greg Stafford's arithmetic: It's not an uncommon problem with game designers who find a mechanic they like but don't

really understand the likelihoods of various outcomes. IIRC the fumble chance in *World of Darkness*² d10 dice pools increased with the size of the pool, making experts screw up spectacularly more often than neophytes.

RYCT Lisa Padol about *The Book of the Estate*: That seems unfortunately common from Chaosium. I get the feeling that Greg and later authors often put in rules they would never use at their own tables. So many games would be slim volumes instead of chunk hardbacks if game designers left out everything they thought should be included just from a sense of completeness.

Dylan Capel: Re *Salute 2026: Miniatures* wargames don't appeal to me greatly, but *Sniper Priests* is a cracking name for a product.

Re *Roll for Shoes*: The core concept chimes with my preferred 'develop-in-play' approach, but I know some people for whom the fuzziness would be anathema.

Timothy Collinson: I'm very much a theatre of the mind GM, though I do sketch maps for the players as the situation demands. At least one of my players seems to have a hard time visualising spatial relations from a description, so the impromptu maps help.

Re your daughter's prop diary for "Into the Unknown." That's an amazing handout to create. Kudos to you and your daughter for making it real.

Michael Cule: Re *The Mother* "does not store deep wisdom, at least that humans can access" will get you dirty looks round many gaming tables. I remember Sam having a dig at Greg Stafford when he attended Gaelcon in Dublin about his Sartarite triple goddess ideas and the treatment of women characters in *Pendragon* and his surprise to realise that he'd never really thought about these things from other than his own perspective.

I'm sorry to hear your con-going days are ending. I was hoping to bump into you at the

¹ <https://www.wheresyoured.at/>

² At least in the versions I am familiar with from the 90's.

Dublin 2029 Worldcon (assuming its bid succeeds). I sympathise with the aches and pains. I attended an all-standing Stereolab concert in Cork a few months back and realised that I have to pay hard for several hours on my feet.

Re Starmer in your comment to Matt Stevens: I know it's viewing things from across the Irish Sea, but Labour as a whole, and Starmer in particular as a human rights barrister, have run over so many rights to protest, assemble and free speech in the defense of Israel, while simultaneously making the lives of the disabled and transfolk worse, means I cannot abide the man.

Erica Frank (Elf): Congratulations on getting back on the GM's saddle with *Brindlewood Bay*.

Thanks for the review of the "TTRPGS for Trans Rights in Idaho" bundle from itch.io. I missed it unfortunately but completely agree with you that the itch.io bundles are worth throwing money at if only for the weird and wonderful smorgasbord of ideas that go into them. The only hitch is that often games are repeated between bundles, which reduces the grab-bag entertainment from a new bundle somewhat. Well, that and the common complaint about organising your purchases in a semi-sensible fashion.

Avram Grumer: Re Braunstein bears vs. Braunstain bears: Ouch. I love it.

Re your *Love & Rockets* t-shirt: I still have an old and well-loved L&R t-shirt with the phrase "We want the world and we want it bald!" emblazoned on it. A quick search online suggests an as-new condition replacement would be over €100, so I'll stick with the old shirt and turn it into a cushion cover eventually.

Re the dilemma of buy-in with develop-in-play vs develop-at-start split: I'm

strongly a develop-in-play player, but also an almost "always GM", so I tend to develop a PC in ways to lean into the setting and/or plot the GM is chucking at the players. For me you are right to suggest buy-in comes from a juicy setting or campaign premise.

RYCT Matt Stevens re balconies on the colossi in *Shadow of the Colossus*: Clearly so the residents can have barbecues without having to descend hundreds of steps.

Joshua Kronengold: It's good to hear that your health is back to normal. Long may it remain so.

I clocked your zine at over 17,000 words. I don't know how you find the time or the energy!

Brian Misiaszek: Re your assistant leaving to provide childcare: We have a very competent member of IT Services who has been out on leave after her maternity leave was used up, solely because she's unable to get childcare for her kid. It's infuriating.

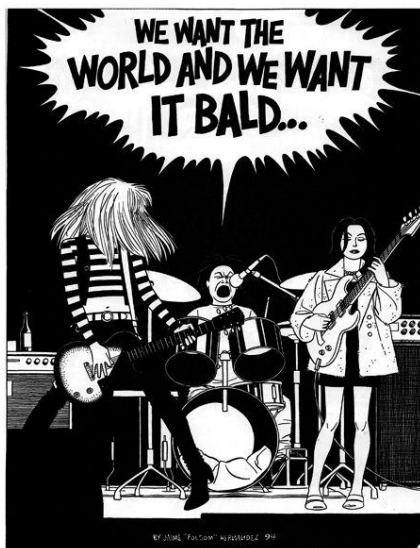
Lisa Padol: Re resumes: What I've read about automated AI and keyword screening in the job hunting scene makes me extremely grateful I've got a permanent post in a unionised civil service job. Good luck.

RYCT Brian Rogers re a principal of a school of orphans: That's a story hook if ever there was!

I'll definitely put anything more I come up with for the Invisibles Tarot into the APA.

John Redden: I hope you are well recovered from the heart surgery and it all went smoothly.

Re AI bubble or not: I'd be happy to believe that IEEE articles were correct and that the AI hyperscalers were moving towards environmental responsibility, but I'm not holding my breath. The economic system rewards growth, and I honestly don't see the actual market for AI to be anything



like profitable enough to warrant the enormous sums of money and resources that have been poured into the sector. Coupled with the ouroboros of financing and purchasing compute resources between the invested parties, the whole business looks massively overleveraged to me. Of course, Keynes's remark holds: "Markets can remain irrational longer than you can remain solvent."

Gabriel Roark: I think you are the first to spot the rubric of song lyrics in my opening headers. I'm glad the reference encouraged you to return to your Cure collection, something I always find rewarding.

Congratulations on your 28th wedding anniversary. Sam and I celebrate the same 28 years in September. Thank you for your hard-won advice on grieving. I appreciate it.

Brian Rogers: Loved the "Potion of Spines" dialogue.

Mother Hubbard's sorcery sounds like Silver Age Magneto's command of Magnetism, able to do whatever the plot demands, only in the style of 40's comics, she does it all in the space of 18 pages. Writers back then had no truck with 'decompressed' storytelling. Her silver buckle shoes jutting out of the frames are amazing.

Nice work on the UtGS Cleric class. I particularly liked the acts of faith rules as distinct from the scholarly magic, and the faith dice pool mechanic that went with it.

Heath Row: I liked your Chyldehome map. Hand-drawn maps have great charm and the creation and curation of the *Mausritter* map in my game has been rewarding.

Re Contaco and Comic Con Portugal: I hope you get to many more conventions in Portugal. Discovering the local gaming scene can be a challenge but it's worthwhile.

Re *Tinny Dungeons*: It took a visit to rpggeek.com to verify I wasn't losing my mind. Both *Tinny Dungeons* and *Tiny Dungeons* are published games.

Clark Timmins: RYCT me on magic items in an actually magical world: Agree. Enchanters

would have steady work making commonplace items and material stronger and more durable, at least until the Economics mages discover planned obsolescence. In the *World of the Five Gods* books by Lois McMaster Bujold, I appreciate that the entropic magic of embodied demons is not just for derring-do but the implications for engraving printers' plates and fighting tumours are just as important in the stories.

Jim Vassilakos: Re teaching of programming in universities: Sadly I recognise too many of your experiences that mirror my own, both as student and later as staff. It seems to me that a lot of what goes on in teaching at all levels is done simply because that's how it's always been done, without digging into the 'why' is it done.

RYCT Erica Frank (Elf) re the Head of Vecna: One of the things that amazes me about the tale is that the PCs all manage to act in character as pre-Moderns and act as though the brain (to be removed and replaced with the head) is simply there to cool the blood, or some similar other old-fashioned idea³.

Patrick Zoch: Re interrogations and "I would like to play a tune for the prisoner": I immediately thought of Cacophonix from the Asterix comics. His singing and lute playing would loosen the tightest of lips, if only so the prisoner could escape the awful din.

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³ ObPol reference - I cannot resist the comparison with RFK Jr. and his reported support of the long-rejected miasma theory of disease.

DENIZENS OF THE LIBRARY #11

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

All About Me

This continue strange around here, still too complicated to get into. My boss change at work was made easier by having a member of our team promoted into the top spot; since this is someone I've been working with for a decade and who I had really hoped would be tapped for this the whole situation was much easier to handle. My wife is in her work season right now, happily busy with her school groups at the nature center, and the elder kiddo is now in northern New England looking for pre-contact cultural remains. NO HARM CAN COME FROM THAT. She did learn something I knew from my own distant past, which was "there are no weekends in archaeology", but she's having a lot of fun.

As you'll see this issue the Star Wars one shot did turn into something that will hopefully happen quarterly. My ideal here I think is the sense of one "movie" worth of content over 3-4 sessions, and then maybe play some other RPG the next year? The new GM among the player has said she's willing to help so it might turn into alternating? Or me run 3 and she runs 1? In any case it would be a chance to play face to face, which I'd love, even if she's likely to run it in D&D 5E.

Circumstances have allowed us to see several shows, so if these come around you: the book for *Chess* 3.0 remains a hot mess but the music & dance are great; & *Juliet* is a fun distraction but so very, very 21st century; the adaptation of Apple TV's *Shmigadoon* is a love letter to old Broadway that I recommend...even if it is just a recapitulation of the show it is done with such energy; finally, given the technical requirements I don't know that *Stranger Things: The First Shadow* will ever go on tour but the staging is a technical marvel for all that the story is a little disjointed.

One last note: we finally got to do a proper dinner party, where the guests ended up being a bunch of my college friends and their spouses. Courses were a roasted tomato basal bisque, then a cheese assortment alongside patatas bravas and asparagus mimosa, then homemade dinner rolls, leek tart, sauteed duck breast and duck confit, followed by a light salad (provided by the one guest who insists she has to bring something), then wild berry pie and home-made vanilla ice cream, and as last mixed nuts because if I was doing this I'd be damned if it wouldn't be soup to nuts. This was all with paired hard ciders compliments of another guest. Lovely evening!

Comments on E&A 10 and 11

Matt Stevens (10): Love the deep cut on Big Ben vs. Miracleman. LOL. Her dig site is indigenous ice age. She'll be up there when you're reading this! REYCT Lisa: you *think* Comliness has been dropped for good but you have no idea what 8th edition will look like. I always did love the logic in the JB007 Appearance rules. REYCT ELF 1 word RPGs: supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!

Myles Corcoran (10): re *Vaesen's* dice mechanic: I was flaggerbastard when the recent Play to Find Out season did *Ghostbusters* and everyone felt the maths of the WEG d6 system were too complex. Some of these same people had played and enjoyed *Vaesen*, so the issue was just adding the dice rather than declaring all dice that came up X+ being a success. The idea of spot adding 5d6 being too complex remains baffling to me; my *Star Wars* players right now don't seem to have an issue. re *Mausritter*: LOL at the crow exchange. Yes, absolutely bring the magic ring to the most powerful wizard in the area! Brilliant! Re alternate *Everway* deck: The friend from whom I borrowed *Invisibles* divested herself of her comics so I can't reread them; I was just in Newbury Comics and picked up an Authority digest sized compilation and figured I'd ask if there was a similar one for *Invisibles*. "Did you mean 'Invincible'?" "No, it's a 1990's comic." "Oh, we don't carry anything that old." and then I blew away to dust.

John Redden (10): *Spamalot*. Re AI: the line is "AI should do my dishes while I create art, not try to create art while I have to do the dishes."

Clark B Timmins (10): I continue to enjoy your detailed Elaria notes that are campaign archaeology.

ELF (10): Re *Brindlewood Bay*: It's always fascinating to read other people's realities on RPGs (Patrick Riley and Joshua Krnogold can back up this history); I am wondering what brought you to "RPGs starting with adventure-conquest" when most everything I read about the early days/experienced in my youth was the preeminence of exploration and problem solving, with super-hero games (chock full of soap opera elements) being seamlessly integrated into my early play and reading tons of survival/horror narratives. Mechanics for mysteries and romance are harder because those are genres where the idea of a satisfying narrative conclusion is baked in in ways that it isn't for the others; mechanically driving the players towards a narrative

conclusion is hard. (similarly, your experiences on OSR and open ended skills vs. my experiences) None of this is me saying you're wrong in your assessments: pre-internet gaming was a Darwinian archipelago with each table evolving in different ways with just the *HMS Beagle* LGS *Alarums & Excursions* exploring between them. It's just they are so very different from my own. It's making me interrogate how much of my stance comes from growing up in play as a socially adept cis-het-white-guy i.e. doing this on easy mode. re *V&V*: yes, you roll up powers as an inspiration point and then define the abilities from there; For some reason the rules for "you can modify these powers however you wish" got lost on a lot of players, in part because they were so freeform and trust based as opposed to the much more structured *Champions*. For both games initiative, the basic ideas of spotlight time weren't well explored, and these are the first steps past side-based initiative. It remains a thorny issue, especially in genres where single skilled combatants are supposed to be able to defeat small mobs. You can see more in thisish's *Regrettables*. re YCT. re YCT Avram Grumer on consistent game terminology: put a line of my agreement exclamation points here.

Attronarch (10): Bob has the worst damn luck. Also: Mayonnaise?! "Some mysteries can never be solved" is one of the things I love about OSR play: reminders that the world isn't there for the PCs, it's just there.

Micheal Cule (10): re Reading the will: I acknowledge now that this is a horrible cliché but I remember it being used on me at a CoC con game in the early 80's and I felt it was perfect. Some things just work.

Dylan Capel (10): re trade good currency: I need to do more with that. It really lends verisimilitude. re *Tower Dungeon* and royal blood: Yawn indeed. re City Building: Yes, this is exactly how I build cities, though I do enjoy *Shmigadoon's* origin myth: "My great grandfather saw this valley and declared 'no one will ever find us here!'"

Roger BW (10): I also enjoyed the concept for that *Traveller* adventure. Re Kor is the god of Roads and the Elderly, whose symbol is the Sun. Nothing in that speaks to arachnid mounts so we may be witnessing the addition of the *Book of Arachnids* to the holy text. re YCT Patrick Riley on your father's sword: the idea of weapons growing in power as they tie to your legend goes back to at least *Earthdawn*, where items are adventure seeds as you need to learn its history to activate more powers.

Lisa Padol (10): that looks like a nicely busy medical drama free con. I did chuckle at the *JB007* naming convention. re the kiddo's dig: I will ask her if it's the Mi-Go or Ithaqua tracks. re Henschpider: in my experience here all the kids put a lot of effort into protecting their

henchmen. re "Why Do They Even Have That Lever?!": Since *Knave* doesn't have spell levels just a few spells per caster per day. I want every casting to radically recast any problems they have, with more power = more risk. Also, I like the idea of battlefield spells, where fireball and lightning bolt as writ were too dangerous to cast in the dungeon, not that people wouldn't do that anyway. RE no story: yes, the idea of weaving things back in makes sense. re *Unisystem*: I ended up cutting down all the numbers and removing the dozens of maneuver options that modified the base attacks, then applied Feng Shui principles to the attack descriptions. It all became much less granular and more playable. Re YCT Myles on *Unknown Armies*: I got the 2E book having only played it with Bob Dushay & Eugene Reynolds and was surprised by how Millennial-Focused the setting was: it was essentially a time capsule. Also, how much of 2E was metaplot advancement, the threat of setting it so tightly in the real world. re "Dungeon tradition makes every fight a fight to the death" just floors me, having run *B/X* or *Knave* (and as a kid played in *B/X*) games where everyone runs away A LOT, or tries to turn fights into a negotiation. What tradition?! Re YCT Josh on character vs player social skills: this argument NEVER goes away.

Avram Grumer (10): the only place I use dice-first-then-roleplay-after is Con rolls in *WEG Star Wars*. Everything else, even in that game, is narrate-then-roll-for-outcome, but I find knowing if your Con will fail madly gives space for "We're fine, we're all fine here... how are you?" responses that players would never open with. I find players enjoy the chance to utterly, publicly fail in the *Star Wars* idiom.

Patrick Zoch (10): it was jarringly meta to see the paladin refer to spell slots in his narration, but it does raise the *Earthdawn* or *Order of the Stick* question of how much the world's residents know the mechanics. re slaughtering the last hobgoblin: Gyaaaah! It is freaking weird how 5E players approach this as opposed to the *Knave* kids who are all about talking around most fights and recruiting defeated foes. re GM notes: consider it Epimethemian insight! Prometheus' brother might have been laughed at, but there are a lot of things we only learn by looking back. As for the players acting more like tourists than adventurers, I'm of two minds - some of the best RP sessions I've ever had in D&D were pcs just wandering the town, but at the same time you don't want to veer to cozy fantasy where they take their reward and set up a coffee shop and bardic stage. I'm enjoying your comments on Saltmarsh politics, and like the complexity of the setting. I've never done a lot with *Greyhawk*, but I know the Scarlet Brotherhood from the *Gord* novels and general osmosis. It feels like you're handling the long-distance-subtle-manipulation-big-plan group well. RE

Easy Company: the DC war books were always better, and much longer lasting, than the Marvel ones. I like Fury as 1960's James Bond super spy (Steranko's work on this was top notch) but yeah give me *Sgt. Rock* or *Unknown Soldier* any day for the wartime stuff.

Brian Misiaszek (10): I'm so sorry to hear about Zoe's passing. That sucks; you're having a hard year. Re Habana: I love the area-specific note of "men fall like sacks of raw sugar". congrats to Lauren on the school!

Joshua Kronengold (10): re inflammatory polyp: Damn Mi-Go! re Henchmen: your idea of Charisma creating NPC ally slots is how *Knave* works; Charisma is both the "how good a cleric you are/how many blessed objects you can carry" stat as well as the "how many henchman" can you have. I'm not sure if those are supposed to be one pool or two, but I treat it as two. All but one PC in the group with a Charisma stat has maxed out their henchmen – Remus' unusual situation keeps him from looking at henchmen so far. The party's 6 PCs + 4 henchmen hasn't been hard to manage yet. As for what my *B/X Under the Giant's Shadow* hack is doing, I just want henchmen to be part of play as *B/X* Charisma was clearly the "henchmen control + avoid fights" stat. *B/X* Mid- and high-level fighters REQUIRE henchmen, troops, and intelligent swords to reach full potential; having the social power and action flexibility of scores of troops is what balances high level fighters with wizards. Your *AD&D* analysis is correct for ally power levels; take a look at the *Draw Steel* Summoner for an build to impressive necromancer (and therefore other summoners) from the jump. *Under the Giant's Shadow*, Wizards can skip the recruiting process to summon monsters that, if they are more powerful, always have a chance of breaking free and attacking. It's a gamble. (Familiars are a different kettle of fur, and as you saw are much more versatile and powerful.) It's my fantasy world so it doesn't allow for animal/undead armies. A suitably charismatic PC could have 6-8 of them...but high level fighters get 20-80. RE *Feng Shui*: starting at 17 Martial Arts is broken; like many perpetual experience point systems playing too long will break if you don't spread the points out. I've already told the players in the Star Wars game that getting past 6d in any skill is diminishing returns. Everyone seems to get that. As you've seen, Eldon lost the Celestial Marble Servant spellbook and admitted this was probably a good thing. As for $V \leftrightarrow V$ strength, I had a longer discussion here but cut it for being too fiddly. I have the line because it makes sense to me, and I am likely the only $V \leftrightarrow V$ GM in the world who bothered to draw it at all. Re Special Attacks yes, they are how you model ongoing effects, as they take much longer to recover from. Re Agility, as you saw with Diskette, I had it tuned by that point that her

high Agility gave her real advantages, but not game breaking ones. My extensive use of movement rate rules made it look like Miss Anima was just as 'fast' with her Speed Bonus as she kept getting narration rights for how she defended herself, but Diskette got to go first and have more actions on average. If that Legion ever had a "my power is Heightened Agility" character things might have gotten sticky. re games about space travel having people dump everything into piloting: in my *Star Wars* game there's expected space travel and no one started with extra points in Piloting. It's just not that important to anyone even though you don't see Star Wars without space travel. re Moves as Clarity vs. Messiness: I guess I fall on the messier side. Lisa's comments this issue about leading players and why two characters always attacked everyone else because of the leading question comes to mind here - the clearer the character sheet is on "this is what you can do" the invisible barriers of "and anything not on here is what you can't do"; the rules don't have to state that for people to think it. Whereas a game that DOESN'T put the attack rules on the character sheet leads to a lot more 'can I try this?' which leads to confusion, but also broadens options considerably. I see this all the time in the difference between *Knave* and *13th Age* and for a time *Draw Steel*. LOL at your comment to Attonarch about the adventurers not getting tired of the *Tower that Just Kills You*. re YCT Myles on *UA3*: Oh ick does that seem overcomplicated compared to 2E. re YCT Patrick Riley on 8 page non-comments + unlimited comments: as a counter argument, and I don't want you to take this the wrong way, I'll be reading along and hit your zine of 12 pages of 8 point type blown out of the margins of purely comments and it's like running into a goddamn wall. It's just too many sub conversations that require rolling back to lastish to track, and while it's worth the effort most times because you're an erudite poster, if everyone did this I would never, ever be able to get through an issue and would quickly give up.

Jim Vassiliakos (10): Thanks for the kind words on the *Knave* campaign report. Yeah, teenagers. re *Traveller* not having XP being a drag on popularity: I think you're likely correct. We love our Skinner Boxes.

Luke Broderick (11): that is a great cover; thanks!

Pedro Panhoca da Silva & Maria Zucolotto (11): I am very much looking forward to this new series.

Mark A Wilson (11): re Rangers, I've always felt they have a strong hook as hunter/civilization defender, but the classes' powers drifted quite a bit over time. *Edwin Drood* was insanely fun to watch, but so much work for learning the alternate endings. RE Nefarious Gondians? Say it's not so! The church of Gond has always been a patron or 'good guys' in the games I've played in.

Paul Holman (11): Paul, I am so very, very, sorry.

Matt Stevens (11): re Piloting: regardless of when my pilot fumbled, we always crashed near the adventure site. re Joker eating China: I got a book called the [Marvel's Greatest Comics: 100 Comics that Built a Universe](#); towards the end of it there was BS about Nick Fury being elevated to becoming the new Watcher and it was the exact same "what sort of horsecrap is this?".

Clark Timmins (11): far from inchoate, this was a helpful breakdown. The more I run across *Greyhawk* materials the more I see it does have great foundational bits, but as I kid I never saw them to use them.

John Redden (11): I do love me some *Forbidden Planet*; still haven't shown it to the kiddo. Must rectify. You are going out of heart surgery as I write this; fingers crossed!

Attonarch (11): they made it out of the death tower! It's amazing how often OSR well-meaning preparations are unnecessary, but you do them anyway because sometimes they aren't. re Hagar: the advantage of already owing someone a favor means that if they leave you dead, they get nothing! Also save or die effects are harsh!

Roger Bell-West (11): wait, seriously, you got contacted by an NPC's real world nephew?! RE returning the looted statues: all 5 are reunited, but they did so just outside the tomb, and now in the capital city. What use they may have remains unknown.

Myles Corcoran (11): re *Mausritter*: that was a lovely little vignette. re YCT Me on *Tropic Thunder*: I've not watched the commentary track, but that does follow. I hope my PBEM got at least some X-Men telanovela batshit weirdness.... RE YCT Joshua on *UA3E*'s pairing of Dodge & Fitness: I'm guessing Fitness is your ability to soak damage, so it's a trade-off of avoiding or soaking.

Michael Cule (11): I am sorry to hear that time and age have caught up with you. Time for more local gaming! re the kids with their neologisms: I fight back with the library kids by hitting them with references they have no chance to get. It balances out, six/seven style.


ELF (11): LOL at the "we have magic swords" explanation for the flying city in *Thirsty Sword Lesbians*. Thanks for the breakdown of interesting things in the Idaho bundle, and I am enjoying the ongoing time loop.

Lisa Padol (11): re the kids setting complaints off through the parents being possible; I've met the people involved and it's really not. re the statues of Tiamat, oh it's a metaplot alright, leading them into the *Red Hand of Doom*, with its Tiamat worshiper Big Bad; I'm replacing him with the escaped, wingless, ancient green dragon the

PCs freed from the Forbidden City (that replaced the Pan Lung in *Dwellers of the Forbidden City*, and the one where a PC no longer with the party has the key to free her egg from a Mordenkeian's Chest). IMHO V&V shouldn't get 'flashbacks' unless it's part of a power; it *could*, but the designers are anti-Story Game mechanics, *and* I also know that when a grafted a metacurrency into *V&V* the players kept forgetting it was there. V&V's style just isn't built around that sort of thing. RE game lengths: yes there's a proliferation of short, small press stuff, but just looking at the new *Space 1889* you gave me vs the original, there are +50 pages in the new edition (200 to 250) and the Mars supplement is 230 pages as opposed to *Conklin's Atlas of Worlds* which was Mars, Venus, and the Moon at 80 pages. When *HERO 5E* came out 20+ years ago there were jokes about it being 2rPD armor and now it's not meaningfully bigger than the *Swords of the Serpentine* rules. Art and font and layout take up so much more space (see also my comments to Josh on his zine design), RE YCT Dylan Capel: I don't write essays; you tolerate my blather. RE *Monsterhearts* SF Hack where you r ghost PC died in cryofreeze: I went down a mental rabbit hole of why the medlab's systems wouldn't have alerted someone on this and ended up at Syzygy Darklock from *Dreadstar*, the wizard who was actually an animated dead who'd worked elaborate ways into not admitting it to himself; when one of the other characters started to figure it out Syzygy warned them to stop talking about it: "belief is fragile; a word can kill it." re YCT Josh on Beth's *Feng Shui* PC: oh the overpowered came through loud and clear. RAE Lady Susan, PI.

Partrick Riley (11): Not gonna lie I LOL'd at the footnote on the players forgetting their hooks. So Anan was killed, and the revived by a ring of spell storing stored cleric spell? Why did Anan insist on the death? reYCT me on over fiddly design: but when I know it by heart, it's playing the violin, not fiddling! re gunpowder yes, but do you have the metallurgy? OF COURSE I DO! I'm a likely white male college engineering student in the 70's and ipso-facto know everything! re *V&V* having facing: the movement rates & ranges all measured in inches, the list of required equipment includes a ruler for measuring the distances between the combatants in inches, and there are explicit rules for facing and cost for changing facing during the round, the modules come with 1" by 1" cardboard cut outs for the combatants & maps of combat areas overlaid with grids for clarity, but you're arguing that it wasn't built as a gridded game? OK then, lets agree to disagree. RE YCT Patrick Zoch on a player at in a super-school game complaining about student endangerment: cue "Charles Xavier is a War Criminal for using child soldier" meme for there being teenage super heroes in a book about teenage super heroes aimed at teenagers. RE player designed skills: do

you remember the structure I discussed for my *Unisystem/Buffy* hack for *Girl Genius*? *Unisystem* has a list of 20-odd skills for each implementation, and Qualities that were bundles of stats and skill bonuses tailored around the implementation's themes (so Slayer, or Athlete, or Nerd). I ended up having players define two 'careers' that broadly explained their character, and pick 6 skills that applied to that career (with a synergy bonus if it applied to both of the careers). It gave me both the broad theme careers that I like while giving very clear skill usages; see below.¹

Nadia Swan		Game Mechanics	
		Type: Ally	Life Levels 12
Level: Experienced		XP 1	
Sex: Female		Drama Pts	
Age: 35		Spytech Uses	
Attributes			
Strength	3	use for power, large movements	
Dexterity	5	use for precision, grace, aim	
Constitution	3	use for physical resistance, endurance	
Intelligence	4	use for debating, inventing, learning	
Perception	3	use for persuading, searching, instinct	
Willpower	3	use for commanding, resisting	
tests are 1d10 + 1 of the above + relevant qualities bonus			
Initiative	13	combat counts down from high #	
Qualities			
Spy Bonus 5		Nadia Swan's Story	
Use with all Guns, Influence, Notice, Society, Stealth/Crime, Travel tests.		Nadia's life is 12 years of practical finishing school, 2 years a soldier and 15 years as a field agent. There's little by way of espionage that she doesn't excel at, but she's an expert at slight of hand and sudden attacks.	
Synergy Notice, Stealth/Crime tests are at 7			
Specialization Brawling with Spytech uses this bonus			
Soldier Bonus 4		Two years of active officer training followed by 15 years as a revolutionary makes her physically capable, experienced in war, versed in close combat and very skilled at scaring the troops into action.	
Use with Athletics, Brawling, Drive, Notice, Profession, Stealth/Crime tests.			
Specialization Pickpocketing at 6			
Beautiful Extra Bonus 4		Nadia is strikingly beautiful in face and form, but also in carriage and glances - her finishing school knew that a true lady needed not just God's blessings but years of training to attract and hold the eye in any circumstance.	
Add bonus to any social roll with humans			
Bonus is increased to 6 when sex appeal is involved.			
Information and Supply Network Extra Bonus 4		Nadia has a broad circle of former lovers whom she can call on for aid, plus TRA agents (outside Trillinec) and TU agents (inside Trillinec) she can tap for information. She has resupply caches of resources across Europe.	
Add bonus to gather information or any info rolls after touching base with contacts in area.			
Recruit a contact to do legwork/combat for you at -2			
Gain Resources 3 when cache accessed			
Secrets and Lies Penalty 3		Nadia has the secrets of her background, plus that she is working for both the TRA and TU even with those groups are enemies with each other.	
Has powerful background secrets hidden from her allies			
These would lead to her exile from the groups if not her death at their hands if revealed			
Active Agent Penalty 4		Nadia's actions breed obligations and enemies. She is hunted by the Turducken Junta and the Tsar's foreign agents. She has obligations to both the TRA and TU.	
Hunted by powerful adversaries			
Obligated to assist her employers and their field agents			

Brian Misiaszek (11): RE YCT me: burn it down!
BURN IT ALL DOWN!

Heath Row (11): Agree re ephemera's importance. re using $V \leftrightarrow V$ for superhero solo play, don't do 1.0; it is a deeply flawed system. 2.0 is much better, and has a random plot generator.

Patrick Riley (11): thank you for the explanatory list of interrogation techniques. I'm doing something similar in *Star Wars* where there isn't Intimidate - not something

the movie heroes did - but explaining how to approach it with Con, Command, and Bargain.

Avram Grumer (11): My daughter the *Les Miserables* fan gave your random RPG idea a hearty "YES!" followed "Napoleon III was so stupid!" Had to read the Charlie Brown balloon anecdote to the family as well.

Joshua Kronengold (11): re Quint Taking the crown - only good thingsssssss ... yesssssss..... I mean it's not like they are heading into battle with the army of the Yuan-Ti's god's bride. re *Everway* PC creation: I had COMPLETELY forgotten that! re V&V Superboy in the Legion of Superheroes: my rules game had power scales where low and medium power characters were 2 and high power like Superboy (along with Supergirl, Ultra boy, Star Boy, etc) were 3s and the exponent for carrying capacity was higher for power 3; with his Ht. Strength B Superboy had a 1/10th his STR to the 5th power, and could lift 16 kilotons. RE YCT Matt: the NY area GMs are "Chums in the Water"! RAE YCT Roger BW on visualizing the world, game systems, and *FATE*. Nothing to add but it was thought provoking. RE YCT Lisa on KT's roll, you're forgetting something: KT *made* the repair roll, the ship was fixed; she failed the Starship Piloting roll, which was happening RIGHT NOW. RE complicated page max formula: NEW RULE: every submission has its margins & font changed to be 16 pages. Does this mean Pedro has 2-3 sentences per page at 28 point type? SO BE IT!

Jim Vassilakos (11): re YCT to Roger BW on cost benefit of dungeoncrawling and discussions: I can say from experience that once any group of players did that once for one campaign, the juice was out of that lemon and they never bothered with it again. As for my current dungeon crawlers in *Knave*, a couple of times they have entered a dungeon, gone through a couple rooms, and left, moving on to something else because I made it clear the world is huge and I can always pull more Dungeon Adventures locations out of my stack. Thanks for the explanation on the cover art, and for the phenomenal work you have done in curating it.

Timothy Collinson (11): congrats on the *Traveller* accolades! re YCT Jim on *Traveller* XP: I see what you're saying, and you're not right, but there are a lot more players who want the feel of advancement than those who don't miss it (or prefer it not being there), which likely did limit *Traveller's* reach. It was rowing against the current, even if it successfully got somewhere else.

¹ Character portrait is of Angelina Jolie in Sky Captain, taken from the promotional materials.

Inside the Library:

The Knaves of Ridgefield

We last left the Knaves on a cliffhanger: the 9 crew (6 PCs and 3 henchmen) had nearly all escaped from the fire newt forces, but the PCs doubled back to give their dakon (intelligent gorilla) allies time to get free. Now the 6 PCs are in there, facing an equal number of fire newts. Hearing a barked command from the newt leader Eldon orders shields up. The coordinated flame breath burns Chandler and Eldon, burning the strap holding Eldon's spellbook of *Landu's Celestial Marble Servant*. The crew pushes forward with Randal delivering a brutal two-handed slash to kill one newt, and then a second. Eldon coordinates their attacks to push the dead back to the entrance, while Remus (in wolf form) protects those ascending. The shield wall shrank with each escape. Eldon bore several wounds when he left, having lost the spellbook, his hammer and a bag of gold.

Eldon's Player: likely best that I lost that spellbook.

Remus Player: You think!?

The others were likewise wounded as they escaped, but all lost things of sentimental value rather than the sweet, sweet gold. When only Chandler, Randal, and Remus remained the wisdom of Eldon's earlier actions were made clear: there was but one fire newt left in the room, but another 8 were forced to waste time clearing the doorway of corpses to get in. During that moment Chandler and Randal made it out via the ladder and Conrad's rope, with Eldon yanking Chandler up and out with speed. Remus' lupine form and terracotta body gave sufficient protection to escape with a wild upward leap having absorbed only a few more cracks in his form. Conrad slammed the secret door closed before any newts could follow. The crew breathed a sigh of relief at their improbable survival, but Blanche lamented losing both her magic weapons².

As the company regrouped for the days long trek back to the *Princess Andromeda*, the persistent steam from the Blistering Bay cleared, a rainbow appearing over the group. A blessing in the eyes of all Kor worshippers³. They took it as a sign and started immediately for the coast. They managed a full watch, from late day sun to crepuscular light to full dark before fatigue made them stop. Negotiations secured the dakon's keeping watch over the camp till mid-morn, promising that Remus would use his crystal ball to locate their lost gems.

² She was never able to pick them back up this session...

³ Actually a Travel Shift from the random travel die...

A good thing too, as a giant constrictor snake tried to slip into the camp to swallow someone two hours later. With the dakon raising the alarm the crew of the *Princess Andromeda* rose and dispatched the serpent, Chandler repeatedly jabbing its face and mouth with a campfire brand while the others slashed with steel. Their night's rest ruined, many stayed up to dress the snake, securing its fangs, eyes, skin, and chunks of meat for alchemy and ships stores. These were laid on Click-Clack, Randal's giant spider, for transport. They didn't know that another constrictor approached overhead during this butchery and thought better of attacking so puissant a party.

Me: The snake looks down at you slaughtering his brother-in-law and decides to become a vegan.

Remus Player: I applaud that snake's life choices

Conrad's Player: snake: "I never liked Bob anyway."

Restorative sleep lost⁴, the group packed at dawn while Remus used the crystal ball. Scrying showed a group of bandits traveling downhill, the jungle thicker on their left, the sunrise to right. A moment's figuring told our heroes these thieves headed north down Mt Koralgesh as our heroes went south. They posited that the dakon should be ferried by the *Princess Andromeda* around the island to take the thieves at their ship. The dakon were... dubious, when there was a rustling: *SOMETHING NEARED!* Everyone made weapons ready before three more dakon emerged from the jungle. The crew lowered their weapons and watched their friends explain events to the newcomers via grunts and signs. The newcomers' opinion of the plan was made clear with an admonishing slap to the ally's head. While rubbing his head, their ally explained that the consensus was to head north.

The crew limped through the jungle, stopping every few hours. Finally, the ocean came into view but between them and the *Princess Andromeda's* rowboat were nearly a score of virulently colored giant frogs. Discussion about waiting it out or fighting, but Eldon finally threw up his hands and told everyone to sheath weapons and walk calmly through the mob. This is successful, albeit stressful. 36 frog eyes swivel to the crew as they traverse, and on more than one occasion someone needs to reach out and steady another lest they jostle a temperamental amphibian. Only Remus comes close enough to attract attention, and the creature rubs up against him... fortunately the temple guardian's terra cotta skin absorbs the poison harmlessly. (Wait, I mean since he is a PERFECTLY NORMAL HUMAN who does things like EAT AND BREATHE AND GET POISONED so he must have just been lucky.)

⁴ Knave requires 2 consecutive watches of rest, which the encounter spoiled; there were 3 encounters in a row over 12 hours, two with the d% same roll!

Anyway, it takes several trips in the rowboat to get all the crew and their treasure aboard the *Princess Andromeda*, where they promptly collapse, leaving their last as yet unnamed human crew member and Kalembak the shifty, spindly, bullied fire newt they rescued from the Keep to keep watch while everyone slept for 8 hours. During that time many of the company (all but Randalf, Jasper, or Drogo, not citizens of Cabra) share a comforting dream about the wedding of Haermond III, the Count's heir. Eldon & Blanche befriended the heir during the Ord Insurgency⁵. The crew woke joyful, mirrored in the sky by the bright pink of a flamingo migration.

Chandler got to work, assessing stores, replacing spoiled rations with snake meat, and getting the sails up: they intended to assist the dakon, out of friendship and to capture the thieves' ship⁶. The rest of them count and store the treasures of Koralgesh⁷. Rounding Blistering Bay but delayed by poor winds, they encountered more crabmen who recognized the crew. A friendly discussion nearly became violent as Kalembak the fire newt came on deck: the crabmen's animosity to fire newts flared! Eldon, thinking quickly, used another of Landeau's spellbooks to cast *Banishing Clay*⁸, creating a lump of earth to slap on the newt, returning it to its home plane in a flare of smoke. The crabmen swim off satisfied by the fire newt's 'killing'. The sun was setting as they cleared the point to see the thieves' ship at anchor.

Eldon decides to not wait, and the group approached the thieves' ship, *Gales Teeth*⁹, as the vast tract of ruined city where the thieves were docked at embrowned itself moment by moment. There was activity – something to do with sailors on the forecastle – and Chandler brought the *Princess Andromeda* quite close before the *Gale's Teeth's* captain turned to find the caravel right behind them! With a yell the PCs save Randalf leapt to across the gap to the poop deck, leaving henchmen to man the ship.

The battle with the captain and two sailors on the poop is one sided but not quick, with the *Gales Teeth* crew repeatedly falling back to the quarter deck and then the deck, while the crew of the *Andromeda* tried to intimidate rather than kill. Captain Leono of the *Gales Teeth* never recovered from the first rush, ending up in the sea when Eldon pitched him overboard. During the fight some men tried to untie the ship's boat, resting inverted on the deck. The tenor changed when Marcus, the first officer, started negotiating for their lives as Shankill merchants.

Conrad: Wait, you're merchants?

Marcus: Well, technically we're graverobbers. Captain Leono found this lost city, and we've been clearing out the trade goods and selling them in Shankill.

Blanch: So, you're not bandits or pirates?

Marcus: No! aren't you pirates?

Remus: <Facepalm>

Eldon: So where are the Dakon's gems?!

<Everyone turns to look at the forecastle, where the sailors recovering from jungle fever lie moaning>

Marcus: Youuuu idiots!

Eldon: <leaning over side to Captain Leono> Sorry!

After Leono is back on board, he hands his sword to Marcus and Eldon passes the *Sword Argent* across the gap to Finn so the two captains can come to terms in the Captain's cabin. Just before they enter the dakon emerge screaming from the jungle in the full dark; only their friendship with *Andromeda's* crew prevents a slaughter: Eldon promises the return of their gems, no harm, no foul; the dakon want their gems back **and** to tear the sickened thieves' limb from limb. Capton Leono refuses; the dakon request tearing just one thief apart.

Remus: That does seem fair....

Eventually they settle on one of the thieves, Rikard by name, being presented to the gorillas as he returned their chest in a fever-stricken stagger. The lead dakon slapped Rikard upside the head, knocking him into the coal-black sea. He was fished out, stunned, while the dakon stalked back through the ruined city. All agreed this was just.

Eldon and Leono enter the captain's chambers, with the captain knocking a cabin door as he passes. Emerging is a scarlet tressed, well-armed woman named Francis, ostensibly the ship's new mage. She exited to the desk with orders to have the crew get the ritual started and prepare to leave. In his cabin Leono re-explained his situation and Eldon started negotiating a protection deal where the *Princess Andromeda* would give the *Gale's Teeth* marine support for a cut of the cash¹⁰. Leono is cagey, digging into the group's origins and ties to the church of Kor & the city of Cabra. Eventually he agrees to have them return to Shankill with him as a for 10% of the proceeds in their hold. They exit out to the rear balcony, but before they take the trap door into the hold Leono notices that the chest that should hold crossbows on the balcony to repel boarders is missing.

⁵ The travel shift die came up 'wedding', and I liked how this idea made the world feel like it keeps moving without the PCs there. There was then a free shift, followed by "bird migration" on the travel shift die.

⁶ planned to rechristen it *Princess Andromeda's Second Cousin Once Removed*.

⁷ they need 2000 CN for the new PCs to level up. Yet another reason to take on the bandits ere tackling Sangkon Bhet, a City of Rust in the Lost Lands

⁸ This enchants some normal earth into a lump of moldable earth that will repel or dispel extradimensional entities.

⁹ The ships name and several plot points lifted from Thomas M Kane's adventure *The Old Sea Dog* from **Dungeons #23**

¹⁰ Wait, aren't they supposed to explore the lost city of Sangkon Bhet for Remus' goddess? Or raid the shipwrecks in the blistering bay? Yes, but...

While this is happening, Chandler, the most seaworthy of the *Andromedins*, notes that the *Gale's Teeth* feels wrong, and realizes the anchor is already raised. Remus, the thief-taker, keeps seeing glances between Frances and the sick crewman in the forecandle. Conrad and Conrad help Warren, the second officer, untie the ship's boat, revealing a huge mastiff under there, apparently the ship's dog, Sirius, whom Warren tosses a juicy bone. Marcus leads much of the rest of the crew down the gangplank for a torchlight ritual; Warren explains that the city is haunted, and their ship would be infested with wraiths on departure if they didn't use this warding ritual from Nohrah, the goddess of travelers, which they had purchased from one of her hidden temples in Shankill.

With the captains below deck, the bulk of the *Gale's Teeth* crew off the ship, and the *Andromeda* crew distracted, Frances kicks the gangplank off, two of the 'sick' sailors raise sails, the remainder reveal stolen crossbows on the forecandle! The battle for the *Gale's Teeth* has begun! Frances casts *Guards and Wards*, putting the defenders into chaos with webs and fogs and ghostly shrieks, followed by *Gust of Wind* to send the *Gales Teeth* flying away from the Andromeda.

Or it would have if Chandler hadn't already lowered the anchor. There is too much chaos to list, with Eldon casting *Avenging Finger*¹¹, to drive the stern into the water and sending everything flying before escaping the hold and climbing around the outside of the ship to garotte Francis, Randal and Click-Clack leaping through the fog beheading mutineers, the bewebbed Leono ordering Sirius to kill, saving Blanche's life as she was losing her duel with a mutineer, Conrad & Chandler rescuing Sirius as the rocking threw the dog overboard, Remus using his bear trap to staple Frances had to her backpack of spell books... the second Frances took to the skies with her fly spell... with Eldon clutching her backpack! Eldon cut the strap free, falling into the turbulent sea with Frances' spellbooks and her mangled left hand¹²....

Once everyone takes stock, they collect sufficient reward from the captain (and the pearls and coins in Frances' backpack) for the new crew to hit level 2. The group is torn between taking this opportunity with Captain Leono and supplying in the Shankill Isle's titular city for the trek to Sangkon Bhet, or parting ways with the Gales Teeth and heading directly towards the City of Rust (a local term for abandoned cities since *Glabicki* is the god of Rust (the end of crafts, the decay of civilization)).

¹¹ He keeps rotating through Landeau's spellbooks!

¹² *Guards & Wards*, *Gust of Wind*, and *Fly* are right out of AD&D; Eldon had encountered *G&W* before raiding the wizards academy in Cabra and coveted it. I gave him the choice of killing Frances but losing the spellbooks or keeping

An Age of Reckoning

Act 1

Abbreviated Mid-Movie Crawl

Senator Seris Valorum recently assumed the cover identity of **Amyr Pyr**, on paper an agent of recently captured remnant **ISB Chief Myn Fells**, infiltrating the base of **Admiral Iaxic Grenau**. Grenau had carved out a place for Imperial-aligned wealthy to outlast the New Republic on **Yaterro**, funded by using Flakax slave labor to mine Doonite, sold to parts unknown.

With her success on the Yaterro mission, she won an alliance with the Mon Calamari delegation and gained intel on Grenau's operation. While she, **R3-KT** and **Rooka Patzi** negotiate for more Republic backing, **Roist'r Vaazinj** and **IG-N80-S** have ideas on how to track the smuggled Doonite back to the pirates who raided Gren's supply lines....

The Script

Roist'r Vaazinj <pocketing small knickknack>:
Wow, the Chandrilan Senate Offices are fancy!

IGN8ius: An organic clients' environment is usually a good metric for our offer rate, Roist'r.

Rooka Patzi <entering room>: [inarticulate Abyssin language sounds]¹³

Senator Valorum: I'm sure Iggy knows they are on long term retainer, Rooka. I have just a few minutes before the Mon Cal delegation arrives, so here's the bad news: Intelligence officer Ixa Tul told me the data crystal was corrupted, possibly from mishandling.

Roist'r Vaazinj: That's Bantha Poodoo! I kept that crystal real safe when I stole it!

Senator Valorum: I know. Which means someone didn't want us to get the full story from it, either an Imperial mole or corrupt official who could be implicated Admiral Grenau's Doonium mining scheme. <looks back over shoulder> Once such corrupt official is a deciding vote back in this counsel.

Rooka Patzi: [inquisitive inarticulate Abyssin sounds,]

Senator Valorum: No, I don't want you to rip Senator Vaallus' arm off. But tempting. We need uncorrupted files from Mon Kraytos, since Grenau isn't talking.

IGN8ius: Anticipating a bounty on Rear Admiral Deng, Grenau's second in command, I arranged monitoring on

the spells but Frances escaping and larceny won out. Returning Villain! She was even a Molyneaux worshipper, the adversary in the Ordite Revolution.

¹³ Unfortunately, Rooka's player came down sick at the last minute, so I was providing the inarticulate Abyssin.

Yaterro. Deng has engaged in significant military build-up. Acquisition without military support will fail.

Roist'r Vaazinj: Pirates!

Senator Valorum: Yes, plus the pirates. Vaallus will use Remnant conflicts as a reason to block military support.

Roist'r Vaazinj: No, we use the Pirates! Offer them the ore as plunder if they help take Mon Kraytos!

<Pause>

Rooka Patzi: [Abyssin language sounds that clearly imply he thinks this is a good idea]

Senator Valorum: Do you have a way to contact them?

IGN8ius: They must have offloaded spoils from prior raids, which means they have a fence. The appropriate colloquium is "I know a guy." More specifically, a Hutt.

Rooka Patzi: [Abyssin language sounds that clearly imply he thinks this is a bad idea]

Senator Valorum: We can't offer them the ore; that will belong to the Flakax. But I can offer something better.

Roist'r Vaazinj: Credits!

Senator Valorum: Legitimacy. Tell them... tell them we can get them Letters of Marque if they assist.

R3-KT: Wirrrrrr Bleep peep! Ping!

Senator Valorum: The Mon Calamari are here. I have to go sell this to them, Vaallus, and the others. You find the pirates and tell them the offer.

IGN8ius: And if you can't sell it? We end up offering something we can't provide?

Senator Valorum: I'll sell it. <her party leaves>

Roist'r Vaazinj: Maybe the big guy's right... maybe this isn't such a great idea. On the other hand, Pirates!

Act 2

Cut to Senator, Rookah, and KT in the Subcommittee for War Crimes, where Seris deals with the following:

- **Rom Vaallus**, Senator of Endad in the Colonies¹⁴, He was a Navy Captain, then Regional Governor over Endad and 7 other systems. He switched to the New Republic before the end, claiming he protected his charges from the Empire's horrors. He sold this lie well enough to get elected on Endad, his home-world. He joined the War Crimes subcommittee to make sure it didn't target people like him.

- **Anutsash, Brusit & Vule:** Senators from Mon Calamari delegations, they wanted Grenau targeted.
- **Crarin Poshun:** Senator from Ysallo Delegation, she's also on the Navy Finance subcommittee. Seris knows Crarin is ideologically on board as long as it doesn't cost much...
- **Bysip Aagret:** the final member of the committee, a member of the [Sullistan](#) delegation. A non-voting member unless tie-breaking is required. No one has ever heard them speak in session.

Seris responds to questions on her mission report. The Mon Cal delegation are quite happy with the results and had a list of war criminals they wanted to target next; Poshum was happy due to the high ROI; Vaallus never liked Grenau anyway. Seris' attempts to redirect that enthusiasm to a Privateer fleet was not an easy sell.

Seris quickly get Poshun on board as Letters of Marque are essentially free, but Vaallus pulled her back with the danger of a reputational hit if the pirates ran amok, or cost if they hit Republic assets. Seris shifted to the Mon Cal, who were swayed by Deng's culpability and absence on the list being an oversight. Vaallus didn't object, but stressed the privateers, if we went that way, were uncontrolled. The former Imperial steered conversation to Brusit recommending that a privateer fleet, if created, be overseen by someone with military experience.

Seris swore under her breath but kept a calm façade. The compromise position for the Letters of Marque was that *after* she put her name on the line for this first mission control would shift to Vaallus, the only subcommittee member with a military background. She really, truly didn't want to give this weasel his own small navy, but this was now a 'tomorrow problem' as she had promised IGN8ius that this would happen. Vaallus, with a show of reluctance¹⁵, agreed to the Mon Cal suggestion. Seris would swear she saw him smirk¹⁶. She instead acquiesces with an additional push for at least some New Republic naval support in this initial venture, as a show of force. The group agrees, and Vaallus, having gotten what he wanted, takes the lead requisitioning a ship. Seris knows Vaallus now wants this; she trusts she'll get something.

Wipe transition to IGN8ius and Roist'r on board the *Doom Saloon*, their Seinar Ship Scout B, who are en route to Tatooine¹⁷. IGN8ius had previously done work for Arurc the Hutt, the bloody-handed inheritor of Jabba's smuggling and, er, repurposing organization after the latter's death at the hands of Senator Organa.

¹⁴ The Colonies are a subsection of the Star Wars galaxy. [This will help](#).

¹⁵ He turned down the laurel three times!

¹⁶ "Maybe I should have let Rooka rip his arm off."

¹⁷ I quizzed the players on movie elements they to include; Tatooine won.

Some creative manifests accounting they are now a free trader looking to take on medical equipment for Outer Rim worlds. This gives a plausible excuse as they aren't on a job. Their codes are accepted with the full diligence of the Tatooine Port Authority – letting the Hutts know what is going in and out of Mos Eisley¹⁸ - by Colsta Gresbot, with his [AJ^6 cyborg construct](#). This all works per IGn8ius rough plan to contact Arurc for 'work'.

In Mos Eisley they approach the infamous Cantina, to have IGn8ius turned away due to their 'no droids' policy. Ordering Roist'r to not make any rash decisions, he lets his ward try to gather information solo. Roist'r threads through the crowd, orders a blue milk, and makes an appropriate bribe to the bartender for information on pirates moving doonium. When pressed he says he's the son of Cloizen Vaazinj; the bartender, Prweek Happogg, shares that he once flew with Roist'r father¹⁹. The young Xexto is almost in tears at this information (and also that Prweek didn't accept the bribe, sliding it back). The word is that Captain Irtaar of the *Blackfish* is due back through in the next couple days, but that Roist'r might want to make contact quickly when Irtarr arrives....

Iggy, exiled from the Cantina, heads to the gambling establishment of Osim, which also acts as a bounty hunter clearing house for Mos Eisley. Approaching as if he were looking for work to get the lay of the land. That lay is impending violence as a new fence, Gul Vis, is trying to set up shop in the shadow of Arcuc the Hutt. Vis is apparently paying out a higher percentage than the Hutts do, and Arurc is strangely not responding with a price war to lure product through his door, but with impending violence. "Lots of good opportunities for a sentient of your caliber..." Osim intimates.

Act 3:

Days have passed for the Senator & Rooka. In that time, she's been given use of a [Nubulon Class C Frigate](#), the *NRS Remarkable*, slated for decommissioning. Yes, it's on a half crew (10 officers, 100 crew), but all well-seasoned and capable²⁰. Mon Calimari Captain Wewbi is under Seris command for the duration of the mission.

The senator learns this in her suite via a KT projected hologram from Captain Wewbi. Distracted while going over notes on her datapad, Seris isn't paying too much attention to the door chime, or Intelligence Officer

Ovadjaz's request to make a report to the Senator. She waves for KT to open the door, and then the camera goes crazy. We have a split-second shot of the figure in the doorway pulling out a blaster before Seris flies across the room, overturning her couch as Rooka body checks her out of the way, taking the first blaster shot. She's dazed, listening to screaming blaster fire, a bolt struck the lights which start flickering, and she hears Rooka bellowing in Abyssan for her to run.

Hating the thought of leaving him, knowing this is his job, she drags herself up a wall and from her salon to her chambers, which has a second exit. Gaining confidence, picking up speed down the corridor, and hearing KT beeping as she follows, Seris acknowledges that this is at proof that someone corrupted the data crystal. There is a hideous sound of ripping flesh behind her. Seeing another security guard approaching, she starts to slow when he too draws a gun²¹! Diving forward she slides between the assassin's legs, rolling to her back, pulling her hold-out blaster, but has it kicked away²². He takes a second to aim and Seris anticipates the blaster flash, only to hear the loud electronic crackle of KT using the taser Seris had installed²³. The would-be assassin collapses on top of her, and things go black.

Cut to IGn8ius finding his blue-milk-mustached ward at the *Doom Saloon*. They exchange notes; it appears the *Blackfish* took Gul Vis' higher pay last time they moved the doonium, and the Hutts need to make an example. Additional information is gathering as the *Doom Salooners* reconfirm that their goal is recruiting the *Blackfish* to for a raid to learn where the *normal* shipments were going to, not tracking where the *stolen* doonium went²⁴. Eventually the pair confirm that yes, the *Blackfish* had dealt with Gil Vis last time, and yes, the Hutts planned to make an example of them, so yes, they should try to meet the *Blackfish* in orbit before any attack can take place to make their pitch. Hearing from Happogg that it was expected today²⁵, Roist'r takes them into orbit. The transmit a message to the *Blackfish* and wait; once they get a call back of "who are you, how did you get this frequency" they close in, starting their pitch.

Unfortunately, as get to sensor range, they see a B-Wing, weapons hot, rising-up from Tatooine, transmitting to the Blackfish: "Arurc the Hutt sends his regards...."

¹⁸ This predates both *the Mandalorian* and *Book of Boba Fett*.

¹⁹ This was a botch on a Streetwise roll that separated the two PCs, followed by Roist'r blowing the doors off the next roll.

²⁰ Alas for each and every one of them this is their last tour, and they all have photos of the significant other waiting for them back home. There are some edits here on the ship type, name of the captain, etc. as I was extemporizing.

²¹ He was created as a wild die complication on her escape roll.

²² Yet another wild die complication. The dice do not want the senator to be a direct combatant. This is why she has a bodyguard.

²³ I did say 'direct' combatant; her Preparedness skill is top notch!

²⁴ Seriously, there was a lot of back and forth around remembering the plan when the opportunity to try to *Red Harvest* Mos Eisley came up. Their time spent did confirm it wasn't plot relevant.

²⁵ and getting their transponder ID from that same insane Streetwise roll

Act 4:

As the B-Wing shoots we screen wipe to the medical bay of the *NRS Remarkable*, where Senator Valorum returns to consciousness. We see janky, flashy memories of being scooped up by Rooka, who literally had a hole blasted through him, seeing the assassin who tried to kill her bursting into violent blue-white flame that resisted KT's extinguishers. Then blackness. Then awake again as she falls, Rooka collapsing in her personal Elin System Ketch 4 shuttle, seeing that he had grown an arm... no wait, that was some-one else's arm. Blackness again, with the sound of KT's beeping and the ships engines.

Back to the present, where Captain Wewbe awaits her return to consciousness. He clarifies how Rooka got to her shuttle and KT got them to the *Remarkable*. Rooka is in the bacta tank, hole through his chest closing thanks to his Abyssin nature. Reassured that he will be fine, she directs the *Remarkable* to Dantoine, her arranged meeting point with the *Doom Saloon*, and turns her attention to her assassins. Alas, the main bodies were unidentifiable due to some cellular ignition, but... the assassin's arm was severed before the ignition and it intact²⁶! "Good job, Rooka!" she mutters as she sets to work²⁷.

Several days later her data pad is full of new connections: the shooter was an Eowlyn, a human-adjacent Colony world whose people took to the Imperium like ducks to water, especially in the ISB. Myn Fells' assassination cadre in the ISB were heavily Eowlyn, and many vanished after the war. "OK, this is probably on me..." she admits, for using Myn's agency as cover earlier. But is this an independent hit or part of a larger web?

Cut to Tatooine orbit, where a furious space battle starts with the *Doom Saloon* and *Blackfish* on one side and the Hutt's B-Wing on the other. While Roist'r is an energetic youth and a capable pilot, he's not in a starfighter yet; the only thing that saves him is that the B-Wing doesn't consider him a threat. To be fair Roist'r was little more than an irritant as the B-Wing's pilot took down the *Blackfish*'s shields and then crippled her lateral thrusters. The *Doom Saloon* gets a cryptic message of 'roll with it' along the tight channel just before the tramp light freighter suffers a hull breach, venting air and detritus.

Roist'r clears his mind, trusts the Force, and fires, aiming at the B-Wings engines to cripple it²⁸. The B-Wing's pilot radioed back "Ok, that was a hell of a shot, kid, but my

job here is done," as he turned to fall back into atmo and land with his thrusters. Once the B-Wing was out of range the *Blackfish*, who faked their decompression by explosively venting a cargo hold of medical supplies²⁹, radioed the *Doom Saloon*. The offer of letters of marque in exchange for a raid on Yaterro is tentatively accepted, and after some crude repairs they leave for Dantoine.

Act 5:

Establishing shot of *Blackfish* and *Doom Saloon* docking with the *Remarkable*, the Ruxos Irtarr and his crew being ushered into a conference room with Senator Valorum, IGn8ius and Roist'r, where the negotiation begin in earnest. Captain Irtarr's (who by the laws of space opera is roguishly handsome even if his crew are less so³⁰) has the primary concern that he and his men aren't going to be used as cannon fodder on the Yatterra raid, with none of them left to enjoy this new status. Clearly, he's not an idiot. He also wants some official communication lines to someone on the Senate subcommittee, which played into Vaallus' hands.

These negotiations took place across several venues in the ship, from the initial conference room to a formal meal in the banquet mess to a small meeting in the captain's ready room, Seris is pulling out all the power signals of the New Republics comparative position to the guy whose ship they are currently repairing as a courtesy... and to strengthen her connection to Ruxos so that she keeps an informal communication line even when he officially starts reporting to Vaallus. A deal is struck, the location of their secret base is revealed, and the *Remarkable* plots a course back to the Yaterro system, and Elescund, An utterly isolated hunk of rock, likely a rogue planet, captured by the gravity of the Yaterro star. This space, so near their primary target is the home of the *Associate Shoals*, the Blackfish's fleet.

(While this is going on IGn8ius and Roist'r are advising, forming connections with the Blackfish' crew, and commandeering repair bay hours for the *Doom Saloon*.³¹). To their surprise the pirate base is on an abandoned city of unknown origin (though Seris' suspects it is from the Deep Core). The Senator and the Pirate Captain make some rousing speeches, and they figure they'll lose about 20% of the company who don't want the government connections, but maybe gain 30% more given time. Everyone starts to prep for the battle of Yaterro....

²⁶ I'm trying to give Rooka's actions as much weight as we can even if the player wasn't there.... Always rip the arms off is the lesson here.

²⁷ Rewarding the players boosting *Alien Races*, I love how she's enjoying being the brains of the outfit, as these are skills I've never had a player boost before.

²⁸ Roist'r's player was VERY CLEAR that this was using the force for a non-lethal shot... he's played PCs on the road to the Dark Side before, and Roist'r

ain't one of them. Also, IGn8ius player did comment later that he was as useful as tits on a bull during this, which is a fair cop; he didn't get a lot of action this session I promised him ample carnage next session.

²⁹ What a coincidence!

³⁰ Seris' Player: I keep finding reasons to glance at him. **SHE GETS IT!**

³¹ Since Roist'r's player keeps spending XP to improve the ship

Stating up Regrets 11: The Puppeteer

There has been some discussion about random power generation around this series, so this month's entry from Jon Morris' *League of Regrettable Superheroes*³² highlights a hero who is a prime example of this gone wrong. With actual regret I present to you, the Puppeteer.³³



Ok, it's time for a little game: take a look at the image above, do you have a hard time connecting that flag-bedecked costume to the name "Puppeteer"? Perhaps his powers have a puppet theme? Well, no: transform to his heroic form with flight and super-strength, pretty basic stuff. Transform you said? Is this transformation puppet derived? No, it's triggered by a magic musical instrument. Well, surely his partner in heroism will have a puppet theme? Well, no. It's a talking bald eagle.



Wait, he mentions puppets with sending sets? Yes, because Alan Hale, Puppeteer's secret ID, is a puppet maker. Despite being patriotism bedecked, Alan took his heroic ID from his day job. Take moment to sit with that. Apparently, the only tie between his name and his heroics is the wireless

sets he builds into puppets to innocuously place on people/at places so he can overhear their goings on.

Okay, but the rest of his idiom is patriotic, right? Like, the transformation trigger is playing the Star-Spangled Banner on a bugle? Well, no. It's playing the opening to Beethoven's Fifth on a pipe organ in his puppet shop. Because all puppet shops have pipe organs. Another V,

you ask? So the bald eagle's name is... Victory? Again, no, it is 'Raven'; everyone calls it a raven despite it clearly being a bald eagle

Despite none of this making a lick of sense, let's build it in $V \& V$. Now, we could do his unusual access to Powers as a *Special Requirement* (can only use powers when his organ is played³⁴) on his *Heightened Strength B +19* (for a 30 total, for the strength of 5 (V)



men) and *Flight* (which clocks in at a little under 400 mph). But instead, I want to give him *Transformation A: Power Activation*³⁵, a subset of the 'change yourself into other things' power that lets you pull a Shazam and transform into a super-powered version of yourself, but as an item, his pipe organ. Power Activation means you don't normally have your powers, but when you transform you get them, plus two extra powers and one extra weakness, which you can avoid by dropping another power. This gives him his *Flight* and *Ht. Strength*, with the *Special Requirement* as a weakness.

Why do it this way? My gut says that this feels cleaner, but also it opens the idea that Alan Hale was willing to be a super hero, found the magic pipe organ, and *really* wants to lean into Puppetry Powers, but the powers and the costume materializing with them is a super-patriot cacophony: this isn't his choice. It also opens the idea that anyone³⁶ playing the opening bars of Ludwig Von's opus on that hidden pipe organ would get powers. He's otherwise normal, with Performing Arts (Puppetry) and Manufacturing (Electronics) as Area of Knowledge.

But how do you play it?

I'm doing this as a worked example of the GM asserting control or nerfing a character. It's so very easy for me to see this as a PC based on a player facing GM Dickery. As a UConn grad, a school with one of the best puppetry majors in the world, I have several puppeteer friends.

³² My original plan thisish was *The Ghost Patrol*, a trio of lovable undead scamps, but it turns out they are still under copyright. Drat! Worth a Google!

³³ Created by Alec Hope, the Puppeteer is in the public domain. All images from <https://pdsh.fandom.com/wiki/Puppeteer> and <http://www.internationalhero.co.uk/p/puppeteer.htm>

³⁴ Not like that. These are aimed at children. Stop that.

³⁵ Going back over my notes I find I accidentally refereed to all of Doctor Hormone's *Transmutation* powers in DotL 6 as *Transformation* powers, as if we were playing goddamn *Champions*. *Denizens* regrets the error.

³⁶ Or I suppose anyone whose pet played it....

Knowing *V&V* lets them play themselves, the player is eager to be The Puppeteer, perhaps with mind control, or object animation, or an animated puppet servant... but is told they MUST roll the dice and the GM gets to interpret the results and drop a power. So poor Alan is left with this slop. Sure, you're the Puppeteer, but you get your patriotic themed generic powers from a pipe organ! And you rolled a pet? I know you wanted a raven, but those aren't combat worth enough, have an eagle!

If you think this is an exaggeration, one of the times I rolled up a 1.0 character I rolled Special Weapon,

Special Weapon

The character chooses which of the two possible types he wishes to have.

A: A normal looking weapon which shoots or does strange things. There is a 60% chance that it will only do one strange or special thing. Otherwise the weapon will have two to eight special things. These functions are chosen by the player with the Gamemaster's approval. New functions can be added to the Special Weapon in the same fashion as with Gimmicks.

B: An abnormal appearing object with one to four special abilities. I could be a box, a shield, or even a piece of string. The player decides what it looks like and the Gamemaster determines its abilities or special powers.

and chose type A. My GM declared that since type B let *me* decide what it looks like, that meant for type A *he* got to pick, and my special weapon was... *cowboy boots*. (Now I could design a cowboy-themed hero literally having to literally fill his grandfather's shoes. Then I named the PC Western Wonder, and his boots let him fly, which the GM insisted was with little Namor wings, but now he would be Colt, since the Colt factory in Hartford ties the western theme to my Connecticut home, and they would let me materialize a ghost horse and spectral six guns) Anyway, it's all too easy for me to see poor Alan Hale coming to the game with a heroic name and a dream and having the Puppeteer be a joke where few parts fit together, and those that do aren't Alan's visions.

The regrettable world.

If the Puppeteer exists in the regrettable world, he was a short-lived hero in the wartime era who disappeared. The appearance of his magical pipe organ by someone could be a plot seed, or he could come out of retirement after having given up the hero work for a mismatch between his instincts and the organ's transformative idiom. I Kinda like the idea of his daughter being the new "Lady V" in the 1970's, not having her father's obsession with puppetry. Maybe he's her radio-contact advisor/researcher, code named "Puppeteer"?

My Challenge to You!

Tell me what abilities you would give a hero named the Puppeteer! What would their costume look like? Their idiom be? No need to do it in *V&V* unless you want to, and to be honest, stats aren't necessary, but if you get something really evocative I'll write it up as the grandkid of the original Puppeteer who developed an entirely new set of abilities to honor their grandfather's heroic acts in the wild new era of the Regrettable 1970's.

Hit me with your best shot!

Regretting what I said to you...

I am a trifle flaggerbastard that people didn't take my footnote on *V&V 1E's* character creation at face value: yes, the 1E rules have you roll a d10 for origin type, but if it is your first PC – the one based on you – rolls of 9 and 10, nonpowered adventurer and extraterrestrial, are rerolled on a d8. Yes, that's really the rule. No, I don't know why. I can hazard a guess that origins are things that happened recently so that all of your life up to the last, say, 3 months played out writ so spending a lifetime of training or being an alien contradicted that. Yes, that's a silly idea, and easily circumvented. Fortunately, it, GM interference of PC creation, and the defense table, are consigned to the Flumph House of Historical Dustbins.

We've had a couple of comments on doing Regrettables in *Champions*, with Roger BW's specific comment about The Face, so here is how I build the Face's powers in Hero, using my usual 100 points of powers guideline. (Since these are only powers, assume he has some Martial Arts skills further boosting that HTH damage)

Powers (100)		BASE	AP	Real
Element Control	Fright Mask: Everything in this is IIF (-1/4), and any attack powers are resisted by	10	10	8
	Mental Defense rather than Flash or Power Defense as they are fear effects (-0)			0
* Drain - frozen in terror	4d6 Drain vs. DEX and SPD simultaneously (+1/2), Area Effect - Cone (+1)	40	100	36
	2 Recoverable charges (-1), only vs. human foes that can see his face (-1/4)			0
	(this has a 90% chance for -1 SPD, and a 5% chance of -2 SPD)			0
* Flash - blind fear	4d6 Flash vs Sight, Area Effect - Cone (+1), No Range (-1/2), Linked to Drain (-1/2)	20	50	11
	2 Recoverable charges (-1), only vs. human foes that can see his face (-1/4)			0
	While the targets can still 'see', they cant process/clearly remember anything.			0
* Aid - taking advantage	4d6 Aid to SPD, 2 recoverable charges (-1), Linked to Drain (-1/2)	40	40	11
* Characteristics - Presence	PRE +22, reduces 5 per minute from first seeing The Face that day (-1)	22	22	5
* Characteristics - Dexterity	DEX +7, only to act first in a phase (-1), only to make Drain attack (-1)	21	21	3
* Characteristics - Speed	SPD is +2; only during first turn of fight, first action must be Drain (-1)	20	20	5
* Damage Reduction	50% Resistant Reduction, only while attacker suffering from Drain (-1 1/4)	30	30	8
* HTH Att - Forgot to duck	4d6 HTH attack (-1/2), only while defender suffering from Drain (-1 1/4)	20	20	3
* Suppress - too scared to run	4d6 vs Running, 2 continuing charges of 1 turn (-1)	20	20	4
* Suppress - forgot your gun!	4d6 vs RKA, 2 continuing charges of 1 turn (-1)	20	20	4
				0
Running	1" increase in run speed	2	2	2

At the fight's start he's operating with a 5 Speed, and an effective Dex of 21 for initiative – faster than any normal opponent – but his first attack must be his linked Drain, /Flash/Aid. This capture that 'before the fight starts he messes with initiative' aspect of his Emotion Control. After that attack goes off everyone in a cone in front of him loses a 1 SPD and 4-5 DEX (so a likely 2 point loss of CV), which won't fully come back for a couple of turns. They also are functionally blinded for 4 segments (so at 1/2 the reduced CV), and the Face gets another point of SPD. He acts on segment 3, then gets to 6 SPD, acts again on segment 4 & 6, and can clobber some foes who are blinded with fear through segment 7. At the end of the first round, the Face's PD drops back down to 4 (3 + the 1 point from Aid), but all his foes have their speed throttled back by 1 as well.

Goodnight, Speed Centaur, wherever you are.

BUGBEARS & BALLYHOO #50

May 18, 2026, for Ever & Anon #12

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

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

In this Issue

Happy May & June! We have had another madcap month at Mojo Dojo Casa House of Roark. Celeste & I started new skate classes on May 2; I am in the Gamma-Delta class now, learning how to perform three turns (a one-footed turn that makes a 3-shaped path on the ice), forward lunges, & a few other fun things. The Emperor's Choice Games & Miniatures Company reached out in May to discuss a collaboration on an Arduin project, which I have started. We also squeezed in some AD&D and Star Wars 2nd edition roleplaying. What did all of this leave time for me to write about? This:

- Still Yet Another Look at Arduin's Portal to Adventure
- Comments on E&A #11

STILL YET ANOTHER LOOK AT ARDUIN'S PORTAL TO ADVENTURE

In Bugbears & Ballyhoo #47 (E&A #9), I embarked on a serial review of Arduin's Portal to Adventure, by Emperors Choice Games (Empcho). Issues 47 & 48 provided high-level overviews of this deluxe RPG box set, orienting the reader to the contents & their physical qualities. Many readers of E&A have at least a passing familiarity with David Hargrave's *The Arduin Grimoire*, so I decided to continue the series by looking at a component of the Portal that does not seem to have previously surfaced in E&A: Matthew Tapp's *Barrows & Borderlands Box Set, Limited Edition*. The last two issues of B&B surveyed the box set, described the physical characteristics of the first volume of Barrows & Borderlands (*Men & Mutants*), & got into the gaming content of Men & Magic. Issue 49 covered the following sections of M&M:

- **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

leaving us to examine:

- Radiation Resist,
- **Equipment**
- **Combat**
- Death & Healing, Critical Hits
- Poison
- Grappling
- **Beyond 10th Level**
- Dueling
- OGL

Bold-text contents in the dot lists above indicate common or similar subdivisions in Original Dungeons & Dragons, Book I: Men & Magic.

Rules for gameplay occupy pages 40–59. Continuing with **Radiation Resist (RR)**, the tl;dr with this section is that radiation is a fact of life on Firnum. RR represents one's resistance to radiation damage & mutation. Upon exposure to radiation, the referee compares the character's RR to Intensity on the Radiation Intensity Level Chart. The number at the intersection of these two scores indicated the number of D6s of radiation damage inflicted upon the character. A zero means no damage, naturally, but each round spent exposed to radiation reduces RR by 1, so it'll get you eventually. The chart also has instant death results. Referees might permit a Radiation Death Save to take only ½ damage. Upon receipt of a fatal dose of radiation, there is a 20 percent change of mutation instead of death. In this circumstance, each point of radiation damage adds 1 percent to the chance of mutation, which manifests within a few weeks.

Equipment. B&B uses a silver-based economy for most goods & services. On Firnum, 100 copper pieces (cp) = 1 silver piece (sp) = 1/50 gold piece (gp). The six-page equipment list is divided into categories: melee weapons, armor, missiles, ammunition (called "Miscellaneous Firearms & Missile Weapons"), Firearms, Misc. Equipment, Food & Drink, Vehicles, Animals, Tack & Harness, Services, & Lodging.

All weapons & armor are priced in sp. Melee weapons range 5–50 sp. The list provides ranges for throwable weapons with maximum ranges running 20–80 feet & damage between 2 hp & 2d6. Many of the weapons have neat, simple modifications like, “ignores shield armor class (AC).”

Armor is also priced in sp, from 5 to 400. Types encompass the usual medieval-to-early Modern spectrum of protective gear. Each piece or suit of armor listed B&B uses descending AC, starting at AC 9 for an unarmored git of unremarkable Dexterity to AC 1 for full harness. Each armor type has an assigned movement rate, weight rating (light, medium, heavy), and a damage reduction score from 0 to 2.

The Missile category is a medieval affair. Costs run from free (a rock) to 100 sp. All missiles are statted for rate of fire, ranges (maximum of 240 feet, which seems way too short), & damage (0 for a net, 1d6+2 for heavy crossbow).

Firearms comprise wheellock & flintlock pistols; matchlock, flintlock, & wheellock muskets; & long-barrel variations of the muskets. Costs are 30–130 sp. Rates of fire are provided, as are ranges (up to 720 feet), & a maximum damage of 1d8+2. Firearms ignore five points of armor (presumably AC) at short range & provoke morale checks after firing but can misfire.

Miscellaneous Equipment. This is standard adventuring gear, costing from 1 cp to 100 sp for an hourglass. **Food & Drink** covers meals, drinks, & rations to the tune of 5 cp up to 9 sp. **Vehicles** consist of medieval and early Modern types, running from 5 sp to 3600 gp for a frigate. I appreciate that the lodging section gives an average price for a rented apartment & services do likewise for mail, coach, & ship passage.

MORTAL COMBAT! B&B provides 11 pages of combat rules. Despite this relatively high page count, I find this section of the rules to be quite tidy. Time is measured like in many editions of D&D and its derivatives: 1 round is 10 seconds & 1 turn is 10 minutes. A high-level overview of combat in this game is as follows.

1. Determine surprise
2. Declare actions
3. Roll initiative
4. Resolve actions
5. Check morale for NPCs/monsters, if appropriate

As a mechanic, surprise is a simplified D&D construct: roll 1d6 per side, 1 or 2 = surprise & grants the unsurprised side one free round of actions. Matthew Tapp encourages players to keep their declaration of actions short & to use a caller for the party. The default initiative mechanic is rolling side initiative on 1d6, highest score goes first. Actions may be held if declared at the beginning of the round.

Movement speed is based on armor (Equipment section) & encumbrance (*Men & Mutants* does not seem to provide encumbrance rules or values; must be in a subsequent book). The game accommodates normal moves, double moves (with AC penalty), half moves with actions, & charges.

Combat actions are classed according to three types: melee, missile, & magic. Only fighting men can move and fire missiles in the same round. Magic includes spells, devices, turn undead, & similar.

The order of combat is based on the default side initiative. The winner goes through the entire sequence below, followed by the loser.

- Melee (no move)
- Missiles (no move)
- Magic & Abilities (no move)
- Move & Hybrid Actions
 - Move only (normal or double)
 - Move & melee (1/2 move & attack or charge)
 - Move & missile (1/2 move & fire)
 - Move & magic (1/2 move & cast or use ability)
- Other actions

Tapp suggests three alternative initiative orders: side plus seating order, Dexterity order, & weapon priority. Only the last is not self-explanatory, so a few words about weapon priority is in order. In this initiative style, all rounds are simultaneous; no initiative is rolled. Resolution of actions is determined by weapon or action type, armor, Dexterity score, & movement rate (for monsters). Each category is assigned a number. When all factors are totaled for the participants, the highest score acts first & resolution proceeds in descending order. This is how I like to run initiative order in all my games.

The combat options in B&B are an effective compilation of conceits from published RPGs & OSR blog posts. They include subtle changes to old standbys, such as the spear charge getting double damage on a natural 19–20. Shield techniques comprise shield walls, bashes, binding, & covering an ally. The game has fighting stances, which offer tradeoffs in attack & defense, something that I first saw in *Lamentations of the Flame Princess*. Simple rules are provided for indirect fire with archery, arrow-setting to increase one's rate of fire, & double-arrow shots. Techniques more suited to mass combat also make appearance, such as pike squares (hedgehogs) and caracoles.

Injury & death resemble the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons approach, with unconsciousness at 0 hp & death at –10 hp. Like The Arduin Grimoire, critical hits can occur with spells as well as martial combat. The effect of a critical hit is rolled on a chart & has variable effect by class & roll of 1d6.

My impression of the material contained in *Men & Mutants* is positive. For an adventure RPG, it displays imagination in setting & construction of the rules on a familiar early-edition D&D chassis. The rules are simple & promote flexibility. It reminds me of a modernized Arduin Grimoire, albeit better organized. We shall see whether I feel so sanguine about Barrows & Borderlands when we peek at Book 2, Psychics & Sorcerers...next time!

COMMENTS ON E&A #11

- Reddened Stars No. 10 (John Redden)
- Denizens of the Library #10 (Brian Rogers)
- Firedrake's Hoard No. 9 (Roger BW)
- Shiny Math Rocks #7 (Elf)

Reddened Stars No. 10 (John Redden): Tune in for the results of your surgery, sir! Fine Easter joke 😊.

Denizens of the Library #10 (Brian Rogers): Landeau the traitor wizard? Reference!

Nice adoption of Irish for your place names.

Concerning your clerics, your take makes them flavorful indeed. I like that clerics are specifically concerned with the advancement of their religion & perhaps also personal devotion to a deity or pantheon. Clever rationalization of clerics being forbidden the use of swords. Nice work all around.

Firedrake's Hoard No. 9 (Roger BW): RYCTM about the respective page counts of OD&D and B&B, this might provide more insight into where the extra pages come into B&B. For that matter, lastish might have done so as well.

Shiny Math Rocks #7 (Elf): It is great to hear that you are running games again. RIP, Lou Zocchi.

This space reserved for Taylor Swift



Issue 249

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Age of Menace

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From Our Last Episode

I was in Montreal for the 2026 *Canadian Geriatric Society's* annual scientific meeting which ran just after the last E&A deadline. It was great to meet up with friends old and new, many who I had supervised during their training or they had supervised me.

I managed to slip away to visit *Le Valet d'Coeur*, one of the oldest game stores in Canada. It's been in the same location in Montreal since 1981. I drop in each time I visit, this being November 2024. They still have a decent selection of RPGs, including those translated into French, but not like the hey-day of the 1990s when they had all three sides of the entire back alcove and not just the back wall.



I found & purchased a copy of "Campfire Tales: Scouts Against Cthulhu" (*Chaosium 2026*) for CoC 7e, along with a few other items. They also had quite a selection of French translations of standard Chaosium 7e Call of Cthulhu (*L'Appel de Cthulhu*) books on their shelves (see image above).

Without much hope, I looked for some of the older French language editions of *Call of Cthulhu* which were published by

Éditions Sans-Détour (ESD), who went out of business ~2018 when they lost the license I regret back in the day not purchasing any of ESD French only editions other than a single book, *Le Manuel de l'Équipement* (2014). This is a kind of interwar catalogue (1920 to 1930) of stuff Investigators could purchase, ranging from medications (and the years they are first available, to weapons to vehicles. Prices for other ESD works sell online for extraordinary high prices, if they can be found at all.



Pulp Cthulhu:

Expanded Pulp Talents

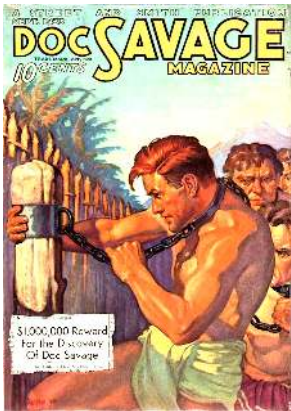
Pulp Cthulhu (2016), for *Call of Cthulhu 7e* is not simply a variant CoC updated for 1930s play with more hit points & larger weapons. Its aim is was model the protagonists of the hero pulps of the same era: competent, decisive, and narratively resilient figures of action who while they remain vulnerable to the Mythos, are still willing to stand and fight. Think more of two-fisted Robert E. Howard's attitudes of action, not H. P. Lovecraft levels.

Although *Pulp Cthulhu* includes many Pulp Talents, several feel mechanically fiddly and do not fully capture what makes pulp heroes distinctive. *Doc Savage, the Shadow, the Spider, the Avenger, G-8, Secret Agent X, Operator #5, Tarzan, and Conan* do not prevail because they deal more damage or absorb more punishment. They win because

they think faster, improvise under pressure, escape deathtraps through ingenuity, act decisively in crisis, and weaponize fear and reputation before the first blow is struck. These are narrative competencies rather than numerical ones, and the existing Pulp Talents only partially reflect them.

These homebrew *Pulp Talents* for are intended as *genre upgrades* rather than power boosts, reinforcing the logic and expectations of pulp fiction instead of simply increasing mechanical potency.

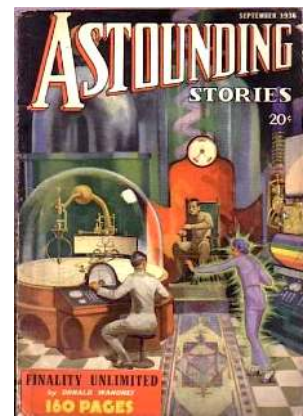
ABILITY SCORE BASED PULP TALENTS



- **Muscles of Bronze** – TWO Bonus dice for STR tests; at *Keeper's* discretion may automatically succeed in emulating a strength feat as performed by *Doc Savage, Tarzan, or Conan* (player must show their homework)
- **Pulp Athletics** - Bonus die to *Climb, Jump, & Swim* rolls; once per session at *Keeper's* discretion may automatically successfully emulate an athletic feat as performed in the pages of *Doc Savage, The Shadow, The Spider, Secret Agent X*, or any other hero in a 1930s-1940s era pulp magazine set on Earth; may use once per session or once per chase (player must show their homework)

SCIENCE BASED PULP TALENTS

- **Polymathic Scientific Genius** - Gain a bonus die to all *Science* related rolls; once per session ask one question about a scientific phenomenon being observed and the *Keeper* must provide an authentic/honest (in game) explanation.
- **Weird/Alien Science Intuition** - Gain a bonus die to identify, sabotage, or safely use another's *Weird/Alien Science* devices. Cannot use to repair or invent new ones, use the official *Weird Science* Pulp Talent instead.



SOCIAL / PRESENCE PULP TALENTS

- **Commanding Presence** - Gain a bonus die to *Persuade* or *Intimidate* rolls when issuing clear orders in a crisis. Once per scene, when allies are panicked, confused, or hesitating, make a *Persuade, Intimidate, or POW* roll. On success, one ally may immediately ignore one penalty die caused by fear, stress, or confusion. On a *Hard* success, two allies may do so. On an *Extreme* success, ALL nearby allies who can hear the Hero may do so until the end of the round.

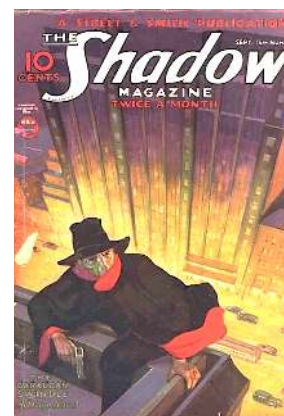


- **Terror Incarnate** – During a sudden, dramatic entrance wearing your signature appearance, all *human* opponents who can see or hear you must immediately make a *POW* roll.
 - A success means 1 penalty die on all actions until the end of the next round.
 - *Failure*: the above AND lose 1 SAN.
 - *Fumble*: TWO penalty and loss of 1 SAN, & targets hesitate, drops an item, misfires, or momentarily withdraws.

This Talent may be used once per scene. No effect on *Mythos*/other entities immune to fear.

MEDICAL / SUPPORT PULP TALENTS

- **Battlefield Medic** - May attempt *First Aid* in combat without provoking attacks of opportunity; once per session automatically stabilize a dying PC or NPC you can reach (n.b. cannot apply to self).
- **Oslerian¹ Doctor** - Gain bonus die to *Medicine*; add +1 HP to all successful healing.
- **Scion of Freud:** - Gain bonus die to *Psychoanalysis* and add +1d6 SAN to all successful mental healing.
- **Florence Nightingale** - Bonus die to *First Aid* + *Psychology*; repeat *First Aid* on the same patient once; reduce **SAN** loss from injury/shock by 1.



- **Animalistic Senses**- Bonus die to *Listen* + *Spot Hidden* rolls; negate one penalty dice for unfavourable condition on these rolls (e.g. dim light, invisible beings, background noise).
- **Actor of A Thousand Faces** - Gain a bonus die to *Disguise* + *Acting* rolls; once per session, declare a prepared false identity, hideout, or cover story.
- **Sleuth-Hound** - Gain a bonus die to *Tracking*, *Navigate*, or *Spot Hidden* rolls when actively pursuing a specific target; once per chase, reroll a failed CON or DEX roll.
- **Cliffhanger Escape** - Once per session, avoid death, capture, or helplessness; instead suffer a separation and a later complication when reunited (*Keeper discretion for this event, or even if to permit use of this Pulp Talent at all*).
- **Deathtrap Savant** - Gain a bonus die to *Locksmith*, *Mech/Electro Repair* to escape restraints, disable traps, or improvise solutions under time pressure; once per session, ask one clarifying question about a deathtrap's construction.
- **I'm Not Dead Yet!** - Once per session, delay death or collapse on yourself long enough for rescue; survival carries narrative cost (i.e. permanent serious injury, prolonged amnesia, etc., at *Keeper's* discretion).
- **Globetrotter** - Gain a bonus die to *Navigate*, *Anthropology*, *Language*, and *Credit Rating* rolls made abroad; never suffer more than one penalty die due to unfamiliar culture.
- **Master of Illusion** - Gain a bonus die to *Sleight of Hand*, *Disguise*, *Art/Craft (Acting)*, & *Locksmith* when using stage magic, escapology, planted props, or

COMBAT-ADJACENT PULP TALENTS

- **Bulletproof Momentum** - Once per session, when wounded/injured may delay the effects of that injury for one full round. During that round, ignore all penalties, restrictions, or effects caused by the injury. At the end of the round, all delayed effects apply immediately. *Keeper* may impose an additional consequence reflecting shock/blood loss/delayed pain. This Does not prevent damage, death, or SAN loss.
- **Measured Violence** - When using a normally lethal weapon against a human target, you may declare your intent to incapacitate rather than kill (e.g. bullet creases the skull to cause loss of consciousness). Damage is rolled normally; if the target is reduced to **0 HP**, they are unconscious but alive & not dying. Reduce SAN loss from violence by **1** when this Talent is used. Cannot be used in chaotic firefights or suppressive fire.

NON-COMBAT / GENERAL PULP TALENTS

¹ *Sir William Osler a Canadian*, is acknowledged as the Father of Internal Medicine. Plus I live in the same town he grew up in.

theatrical deception. Once per session, declare a small object is concealed, switched, palmed, or apparently produced, provided the Hero had a plausible opportunity. Cannot bypass an impossible restraint, or overrule a failed escape from a true deathtrap.

- **Reputation/Notoriety** - Bonus die to *Intimidate* or *Persuade* rolls when your reputation would plausibly apply; once per session *Keeper* may introduce complications from this reputation (e.g. vengeful nemesis).
- **Who Do You Think You Are, Barney Oldfield?²** - Gain bonus die to any *Drive*, *Pilot* & *Repair* rolls to your vehicle.
- **Wild Man/Woman** - Gain bonus die to *Navigate*, *Tracking*, *Stealth*, *Survival*, & *Natural World*, & *Fighting* (Brawl) hand to hand vs Wild animals familiar to the Hero. Counts as TWO Talent slots, & need to have suitable background to possess.



But the shootout is not fixed. It is the default outcome if the Investigators are absent, delayed, passive, or committed elsewhere. It is one clock reaching zero without interference.

That distinction matters. A living scenario needs events that continue when the players look away. But those events must remain reachable, alterable, survivable, or re-constructable. If not, a vivid crisis becomes only a cutscene. The Director's Manse crisis should therefore be read not as what happens but as *what happens if no one interferes*.

Before the likely gunfight, Investigators may notice the unusual return of part of the Presidential Escort, the arrival of an armoured limousine, increased switchboard traffic, Esperanza leaving a telephone off the hook, or Srta. Varona climbing the trellis to the second-floor balcony. They may enter the Manse while seeking help for the threatened children, arrive just before shots are fired, or discover the piled money and the supposed President Machado on the floor.

Even if they miss the fight, they do not miss its consequences. Eye-witness survivors (including Esperanza), stretcher movements, ambulance logs, fingerprints, spent cartridges, tainted American currency, and *Baron Kriminal's* signature odour all allow the scene to be reconstructed and to learn the weird metamorphosis and disintegration of one of the dead Mazorra guards.

In Pulp RPGs like *Pulp Cthulhu*, Pulp Investigators are not passive antiquarians waiting for doom. They are competent, intrusive, and disruptive. A *Doc Savage*-style group imposes order through science, speed, and restraint from killing. A Shadow-style Investigator turns fear back upon the Porra, turning the episode into a haunted crime scene. A Spider-style Investigator may prevent one atrocity by unleashing an even greater and far bloodier one. While each approach is completely different they all have one thing in common; their proactive intervention changes the default outcome.

Mazorra Designer Notes:
Pulp Player Agency vs Default Clocks

Lisa Padol's question to my lastish in her comments about whether the *Porra vs. Porra* gunfight in the Director's Manse is "a done deal" is a good one. Jim Vassilakos' concern that the Investigators might become "at best ineffectual, secondhand spectators" is fair too, especially regarding the *Porra* gunfight in the Director's Manse.

² Legendary US automobile racer whose name became synonymous with speed in the early 20th century.

The same principle applies across Mazorra. The scenario provides clocks, factions, NPCs, maps, clues, motives, and consequences. The Keeper receives a plausible course of events. The players bring disruption, courage, curiosity, and bad or hasty judgment since the ongoing pressure gives them little time for careful reflection.

Some countdown clocks are historical and fixed, such as Machado's resignation and flight. Others are fictional or situational: *Baron Kriminal's* reprisals, the Twsha outbreak, Vives' abduction plans, Gandia's escape attempt, *El Rey's* seizure of *La Oficina*, and the approaching airport mob. These clocks continue whether or not the Investigators engage with them. The Director's Manse shootout is therefore not a mandatory set-piece. It is one possible crisis point where several pressures converge.

That is the intended model for Mazorra as a whole: structured pressure, not predestination. The world moves. The Investigators decide where to intervene, what to sacrifice, and what version of the disaster survives the night.

Horrors of the Mazorra:

A 1930s Pulp Cthulhu scenario (cont.)

Due to issue length constraints, I'll bump what I had written to *Age of Menace* issue #250.

Appendix A: Secrets of the Twsha

Notes on apparent outbreaks, investigative discovery, & forced dormancy.

Part I: What Are They Are Seeing?

Just an Ordinary Zombie Outbreak?

Superficially, exposure to the *Twsha Elixir* produces changes that somewhat resembles a Hollywood³ or pulp fiction⁴ zombie outbreak. The affected with their exposed flesh will look like the walking dead. Their lurching blind movements and movement towards others making moaning sounds looks like a trad zombie. If killed, or given time, victims collapse & then undergo a hideous dissolving transformation.

³ *White Zombie* (1932) was the first.



Supernatural Misinterpretation

This is not death followed by reanimation due to Haitian Voudan sorcery. It is biological replacement.

Twsha exposure produces structural alteration, not decay. Human tissues are progressively replaced by translucent alien cellular material. Skin first becomes optically transparent revealing muscle, vessels, and deeper structures beneath an invisibly intact skin surface. Later, deeper tissues appear to vanish as normal organs are exchanged for nearly invisible equivalents. The body seems to hollow out, blur, and melt, but it is not rotting. It is being replaced.

The victim's ocular involvement causes progressive blindness. Subjects extend their hands to navigate by touch. Peripheral sensation fades so they will move on despite significant painful injuries that would disable almost anyone. Gait becomes unstable and ataxic, and facial coordination and speech deteriorate into breathy fragments or moans. Horribly, consciousness, memory, and identity may remain intact through much of this early phase.

Behavioural Misinterpretation

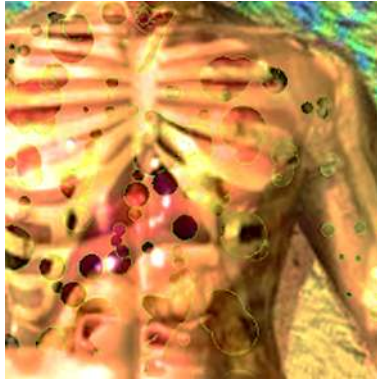
Twsha-afflicted victims do not seek others because they are predatory and hungry. They seek the company of others because they are frightened, disoriented, and seek comfort by human closeness. The uninfected recoil from their awful appearance, worsening the victim's distress & provoking repeated attempts at contact. This behaviour mimics contagious aggression, but the intent is not hostile. However, danger remains since contact with bodily fluids, open lesions, or broken skin may spread viable Twsha material to infect others accidentally.

Terminal Phase

Eventually the victim loses postural control and collapses into a heaving coma-like state. Thereafter the replaced tissues lose coherence. The body collapses into a viscous

⁴ *Zombies from the Pulp!* (2014) collected by Jeffrey Shanks is a nice collection of such 1930s fiction

protoplasmic mass, with the brain being the final structures that changes. From this transformation a dense, pulsing Twsha nodule forms: a compact biological control organ embedded in translucent tissue.



Keeper's Note: Twsha Environmental Preferences:
Twsha-affected hosts favour dark, warm, humid

environments: hydrotherapy wards, damp tunnels, & working laundry pavilions. Intense vibration, electro-mechanical noise, dryness, & bright polarized light disrupt Twsha signalling. These factors do not cure established infection, but they may slow, confuse, or suppress it. Simulated moonlight (which is polarized) slows activity; bright polarized light combined with dryness and vibration suppresses it more strongly.

Twsha Human Transformation Progression (Table A1)

Physical progression follows time since exposure; mental collapse follows SAN/POW erosion. Witness SAN is usually once per stage or major new reveal. High-dose exposure, heat/humidity, active signalling, or deliberate provocation may advance post-Stage 2 victims 1D6 hrs early. **Dormancy attempts** (see Table A6) delays: *Success* by d6 hrs, *Hard* 24 hrs, and *Extreme* indefinitely while conditions are maintained.

A1: Twsha Human Transformation Progression

Stage / Time	Body	Mind / Behaviour	Victim SAN / POW	Witness SAN	Contagion / Notes
1. Early Invasion 0 to 6 hrs	Subtle translucent patches. Low grade fever. No motor deficit.	Intact, frightened, and likely denying implications. May use cosmetics, bandages, heavy clothing to conceal. Mirror avoidance is common.	Uneasy suspicion SAN 0/1. First unmistakable lesion on self SAN 1/1D4.	Early patches SAN 0/1D3.	No routine contagion. Dormancy easiest. Exposure history or lab records matter most here.
2. Corporeal Usurpation 6 to 36 hrs	Increasing translucence. Vision dims; glare hurts. Lurching gait. Speech possible.	Aware and frightened. Proximity-seeking others, and isolation distress. Drawn to warmth, humidity, rose-floral odours, slow percussion. Repelled by harsh odours, discordant rhythm, industrial noise, bright light.	Self-recognition q8h while aware: 1D3/1D6.	Coherent but visibly altered victim: 1/1D6.	Contagious through bodily fluids, open lesions, mucous membranes, or broken skin. Dormancy still possible.
3. Growing Alien Dominance 36 to 60 hrs	Functional blindness. Replacement is systemic; visible tissues look optically wrong.	Human awareness persists. If not resisting, host seeks dark, warm, humid, mineral-rich places; may press against walls, floors, or pipes as if listening.	Blindness: 1/1D6, plus q8h roll. Seeing own anatomy: 1D4/1D8.	Blind, visibly inhuman victim: 1D3/1D8.	Contagious. Dormancy possible but harder. Useful stage for research, restraint, and moral pressure.
3.5. Hemispheric Usurpation 60 to 72 hrs 60 to 66 if high-dose exposure	Most soft tissues transparent. Bones and nervous tissue visible. Speech failing. Severe ataxia.	One hemisphere effectively colonized. Comprehension may persist in the intact hemisphere. Long stillness, then sudden movement away from discordant noise and toward soothing vibration/music or moist darkness.	Control Conflict: POW roll. Success suppresses impulse 1D6 rounds. Failure gives Twsha control 1D6 rounds and costs 1/1D6 SAN. Spend 1 POW for one automatic success; each forced round costs 1 POW. At POW 0, Stage 4.	Bones/nerves visible, speech failing: 1D4/2D8. Prior witnesses: 1/1D8 if newly worsened.	Still contagious. Dormancy possible but unlikely without strong signal control and restraint.
4. Full Transformation 72 to 78 hrs	Human tissue fully replaced. Entity blind but navigates tactile, and vibrational cues. Mostly immobile during reorganization.	Human identity extinguished if SAN/POW are 0. If any remains, identity flickers for 1D6 hrs but cannot regain control except under extreme disruption.	Lose remaining SAN/POW over 1D6 hrs. No normal recovery.	Newly witnessing full transformation: 1D4/2D8. Subsonic signalling within 3 m: 0/1D4.	Contagious. Vibrational signalling begins. Research window is brief and dangerous.
5. Hyper-metamorphosis 78 to 90 hrs	Host collapses into unstable protoplasm. A viable Twsha node forms within the mass.	Immobile but active. Node seeks stabilization, connection, command, or dominance over compatible Twsha material.	No remaining human SAN or POW.	Collapse into node-forming mass: 1/1D8, or 1D4/1D10 if personal connection.	Node survives up to 12 hrs without stabilization, nutrient substrate, or compatible protoplasm.
6. Node Collapse 90+ hrs or reserves exhausted	Node breaks down into pale gelatinous residue, then dries into white powder proteinaceous dust.	No human mind remains. Residual signalling may briefly persist as twitching, tapping, or delayed contractions.	None.	Residue alone 0/1D4. If observer knows who it was, use 1/1D6.	Residue contagious for 1D12 hrs, then inert powder unless rewetted and exposed to active Twsha signal.

Keeper short version: Victims suffer harsher total SAN loss by repetition & self-recognition. Witnesses roll only once per stage, unless a clearly worse reveal occurs.

Post-Mortem Acceleration: If a Twsha-affected human dies or is killed before transformation is complete, cellular usurpation occurs ~7-15 times faster. What physical changes that would have taken several days may occur in minutes to hours.

A victim killed at early stage 2 will have external changes to their remains appear as stage 4 within 30 minutes, and will start 'melting' into protoplasm to form a viable node within two hours.

Part II: What the Keeper Knows

Original Purpose of the Twsha

Mateo Derosier misunderstood the contents of his stolen vial. He believed it to be a toxic 'zombie' transformative agent, a substance that "eats what you are" and leaves the victim in a state resembling living death. That false interpretation shaped his use of it. He did not understand that he had stolen something more specialized and more dangerous.



In Mythos terms, the Twsha was developed as a biological control organ: a living regulator designed to impose constraint, coordination, & command on unstable Shoggoth-derived protoplasm. A Twsha is not a monster, parasite, or contagion in the ordinary sense. It is a control instrument. The elixir contains trace Shoggoth-derived material that can, under suitable conditions, grow into a Twsha node. A Twsha without a Shoggoth is an orphaned control system. It searches for compatible unstable matter to regulate. Infected humans are not intended targets. They are *accidents*.



Accidental Human Hosts: Parabolic Phase

In humans exposed to the Twsha Elixir, development enters a prolonged parabolic phase. Host physiology is reshaped to support Twsha maturation, but the living body also resists that process and shapes the Twsha.

Twsha-replaced human tissue appears adapted for function within depigmented, amorphous masses. In

humans this produces partial translucence and visible internal structure. This is not deliberate camouflage. It is structural incompatibility made visible.

Replacement, Not Transformation

Absent intervention, Twsha development ends in complete biological replacement. The human body is not enhanced or corrupted. It is rendered obsolete. Identity does not fragment. It is erased.

Twsha-affected individuals do not seek to infect others. Their need to connect is translated through the human host as loneliness, fear, disorientation, and relief at contact. Secondary exposure is usually accidental. Behaviour becomes erratic because human sensory and regulatory systems fail, not because the subject becomes hungry, evil, or undead. Behaviour is most erratic by stage 3.5 when Twsha signalling fights to overtake human control, but becomes more predictable when total control occurs by stage 4.

Twsha Control and Regulation

Twsha do not transmit thoughts or commands. They regulate compatible protoplasm by vibration. Apparent remote control is shared material resonance, not telepathy.

Low infrasonic pulses travel far but carry little detail. Higher-frequency tremors carry finer regulatory information but fade quickly. Distance depends on medium: direct contact or a shared table, bed, jar, pipe, water bath, or body allows full effect; the same room allows reliable response; the same building or tunnel branch allows crude coordination; wet drains, sewer trunks, or saturated masonry may carry alarm-like pulses 60–300 m. Beyond that, Twsha may sense major disturbances but cannot meaningfully direct hosts.

Mature Twsha tissue can stabilize or arrest weaker Twsha tissue by imposing a coherent dormancy rhythm. This is hierarchical, not exponential. Proliferation is less like plague spread than rival control systems trying to impose order.

Dormancy halts progression but does not reverse prior change. Dormant subjects retain visible anomalies, remain biologically compromised, and preserve identity, memory, and consciousness. Dormancy is not a cure. It is a stay of execution.

Twsha Anomalies

These anomalies are not random oddities. Each proves a different Twsha principle.

1. **The metacarpal specimen** proves Twsha can grow outside a complete human host.
2. **Barrera's corpse** proves death removes living restraint.

3. **Zorrilla’s abdominal mass** proves dormant compatible tissue can be recruited, signalled, & synchronized.

1. The Metacarpal Specimen.



After 02:00 Aug. 12, the discarded metacarpal that once held the Twsha vial activates in the humid Lunar Vivarium.

At first glance it is only a finger bone among the soil trays. Close inspection reveals translucent filaments protruding from the marrow cavity and hairline cracks. They flex and retract like insect legs. If watched, the bone shifts a few millimetres across damp soil or glass.

Dolores García, hiding nearby, may scream about a *ciempiés blanco* (“white centipede”). Investigators may instead notice thin drag marks, condensation streaks, or faint tapping among the plant trays.

Keeper’s Note: SAN Loss 0/1 the first time the bone moves.

The specimen moves slowly and can be captured with forceps, a jar, or an inverted glass. Once confined, it twitches in warmth and humidity, retracts when disturbed, and may tap against glass.

It provides a contained Twsha model. Broth, blood, or nutrient solution causes visible growth: filaments thicken from a central gelatinous mass and gradually bury the bone in translucent tissue. Overfeeding may crack the container.

Keeper’s Note: SAN Loss 0/1 the first time the specimen visibly grows after feeding. If the container breaks, all within 3 yards must avoid contact with sprayed material or risk exposure.

2. J. Barrera’s Post-MD Twsha Acceleration

Assuming he dies in the *Porra vs Porra* fight, this Mazorra guard’s corpse reveals the second major anomaly: Twsha progresses faster after death. While alive, the host’s nervous system, circulation,

metabolism, immune signalling, & tissue integrity restrain replacement. Death removes that restraint. Once cardiac and central nervous function cease, the remaining human body no longer regulates the process. Twsha’s own hyper-metamorphosis accelerates.



Observation suggests:

Clue	Implication
• No putrefaction	• The body is reorganizing, not decaying.
• Changes follow a sequence	• The process can be timed and photographed.
• Acceleration begins after death	• Living physiology restrains Twsha growth.
• Final nodule forms predictably	• Twsha replacement has a terminal structure.

Keeper’s Note: A successful *INT, Medicine, Biology, Pharmacy*, or relevant *Science* roll suggests the essential implication: the Twsha does not merely survive inside living hosts. The living body restrains it. If Investigators isolate the body and observe or photograph it at intervals, they may document widening translucency, progressive softening, inward fluid migration, increasing tissue cohesion, and eventual nodule formation over the next few hours.

3. Zorrilla’s Abdominal Mass

By early evening Aug. 12 1933, Zorrilla looks exhausted, pale, and poorly regulated: vivid dreams, headaches, palpitations, temperature swings, and translucent mottling spreading from temples and wrists across his abdomen. He now reports focused left-sided abdominal cramps.

He has long carried a congenital abdominal mass, diagnosed in adolescence as a benign, quiescent *fetus-in-fetu*. For over forty years it caused no concern. Now it aches with intermittent pulsatile throbs and small internal spasms, as if something inside is flexing.



Privately, Zorrilla admits he can now see through his own flesh, that something inside him moves and hurts, and that intense willpower can briefly suppress it.

Keeper's Note: Zorrilla's Abdominal Suppression: Medicine detects a smooth, firm left lower-quadrant mass, ~10 × 12 cm. Bright transillumination through increasingly transparent flesh reveals blurred bowel, vessels, and a small fibrous mass beside a cartilaginous axial column. When it twitches, Zorrilla winces sharply. Witnesses roll SAN 0/1, or 0/1D3 if it answers the metacarpal specimen.

While awake and lucid, Zorrilla may spend 1 MP and roll POW to suppress an attack. Success stills the mass briefly. Failure incapacitates him for 1D6 minutes; the first failed suppression per 6-hour block costs 1 HP. A fumble costs 1D3 HP, causes collapse or near-collapse, and prevents further suppression for 1 hour. At 0 MP, attacks are unopposed; every second unopposed attack worsens visible Twsha progression or advances the outbreak clock.

Morphine suppresses pain, not Twsha activity. Sedation prevents POW use, resonance testing, and reliable symptom reports. Sleep restores 1 MP/hour, but sleeping attacks are unopposed unless external measures are in place.

SIDE-BAR: Radiographic Horror Earlier X-rays showed Zorrilla's fetus-in-fetu as acardiac and anencephalic. Fluoroscopy now reveals a new knot of rudimentary neural tissue. During pain attacks, the mass visibly twitches. If a nearby Twsha specimen is tapped, warmed, exposed to light, or disturbed, the abdominal mass may answer with delayed contractions. Careful observation suggests resonance, not independent life. The mass is not awakening. It is being recruited as compatible dormant neural tissue. Tests with tapping, vibration, bright light, the metacarpal specimen, Tambor's rhythms, or Zorrilla's suppression attempts may show Twsha activity can be provoked, suppressed, and partly synchronized, but never safely controlled.



Part III: Unlocking the Twsha's Secrets

Investigators are not discovering a cure or how to kill the Twsha. They learn via research how to make it stop *maturing*. Treat research as a multi-lane investigation feeding a 6-stage *Revelation Clock* [see Table A2, & full A6 chart at end].

Table A2: Twsha Research Revelation Clock

1. Not a Zombie Outbreak
2. Tissue Replacement, Not Putrefaction
3. Living Hosts Restrain Twsha
4. Growth & Suppression Discoveries
5. Twsha Tissues Signal to Each Other
6. Twsha Dormancy Requires Signal Control

The research phase works best if every Investigator has something useful to contribute. Their task is to first collect sufficient information and only then to assemble these into a testable hypothesis.

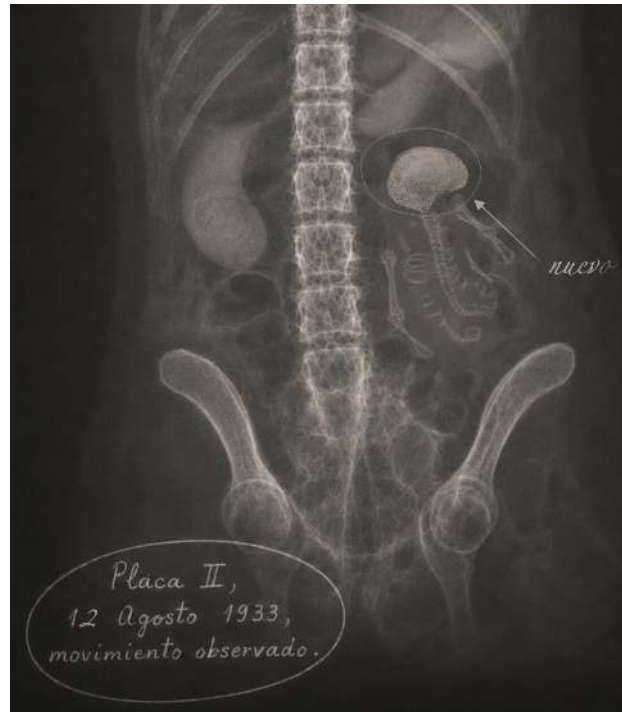
Keeper's Note: *Players* Roll secretly when failure would produce a plausible false interpretation. Procedural rolls, such as gaining access, setting quarantine, repairing equipment, or locating records, may be rolled openly. Failed research should not simply mean “nothing learned”; it may create a wrong but testable conclusion.

Research Time: Each workstream attempt costs 1 hour. A rushed attempt takes 30 minutes with one Penalty Die. A failed or false lead costs +1 hour, triggers a setback, or advances a Mazorra clock, Keeper's choice.

Each completed Research Revelation advances the clock by 1 step. A *Hard* or *Extreme* success, a clever cross-comparison, or two linked lanes may advance it by 2 steps. A false lead costs time, resources, or safety.

Table A3: Parallel Research Workstreams

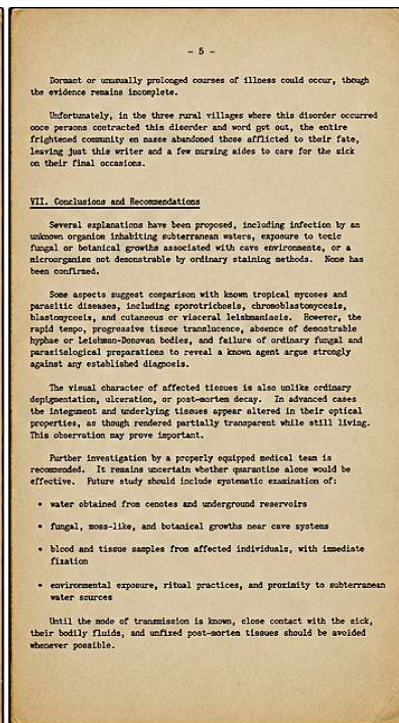
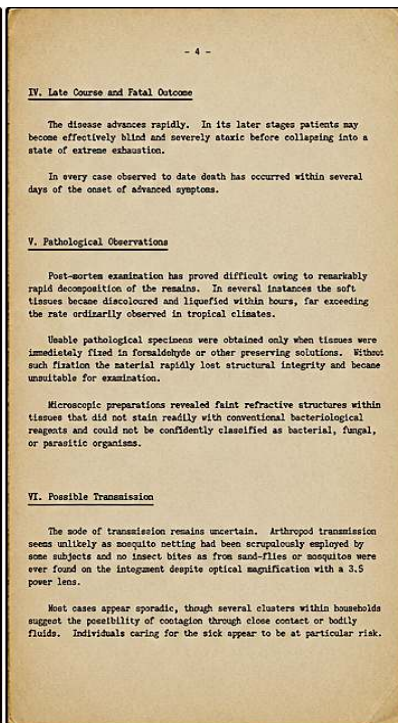
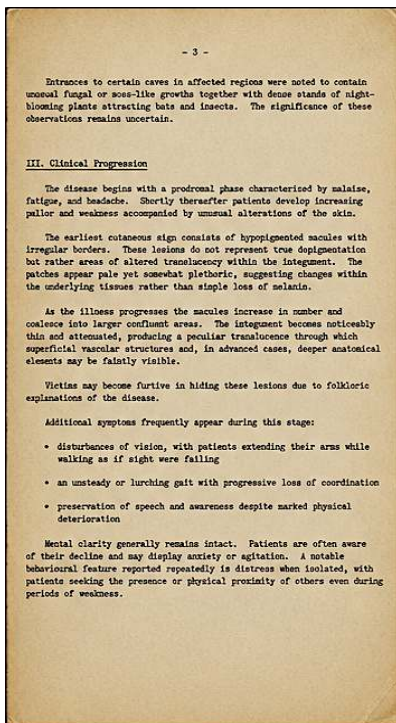
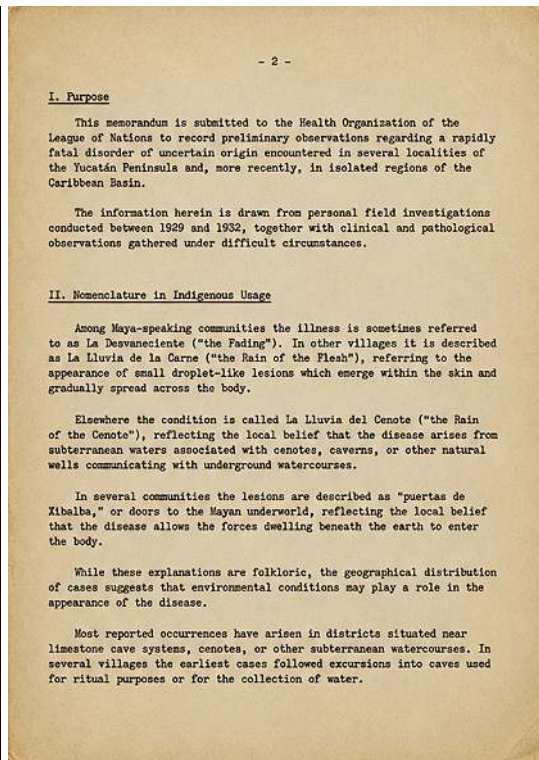
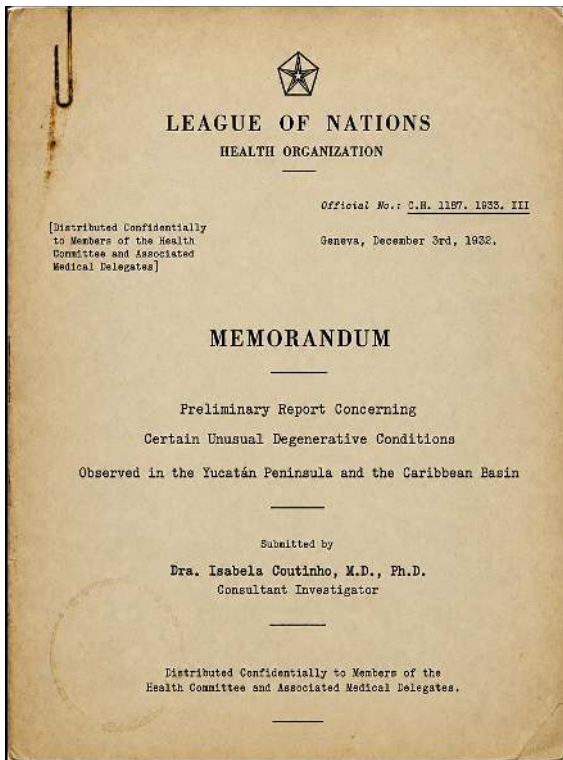
Workstream	Who Can Lead or help	What They Do	Payoff / Clue	False Trail, Dead end, or Risk
Quarantine	Medical PCs; RN Beatriz Montalvo, & Yolanda Herres. Mons. Aurelio can help (<i>past experience in leprosarium nearby</i>)	Create safe & proper contact isolation: gloves, masks, outside ventilation, bleach, limited touch, waste discipline, and nursing charts. No die roll needed	Prevents research from worsening spread. Not doing this risks Investigators becoming contaminated & afflicted by Twsha. Establishes that containment reduces new exposure but does not cure established cases.	Believing quarantine containment is itself treatment. Not doing this risks exposure
Clinical Exam/charting	Any medical NPC or PC; charting by NPCs RNs,	Examine Gil, Zorrilla, Dolores, & any new cases. <i>Medicine</i> skill check for exam. Chart vitals, extent and speed of skin, vision, gait, speech, pain, mood, & other changes on flow sheets hourly. Someone (PC/or NPC) to do <i>Spot Hidden/Listen</i> every hour to chart.	Shows staged progression & preserved identity. Gil + Zorrilla were exposed together, yet Gil progresses faster. Dolores progress faster than Gil despite later exposure. Charting reveals metacarpal entity activity coincides with Zorrilla's abdominal pain flares.	Failure to monitor every hour for those more prone to elopement (Zorrilla or Garcia) increases this risk, as does Failure/Fumble.
Obtain Old Medical Records	Any PC Investigator; NPCs can help: Castellanos, Marina Suárez, Esperanza	Retrieve or copy records for Gil, García, & Zorrilla. García's + Gil's files are in <i>La Oficina</i> records, now controlled by El Rey's courtiers; <i>Persuade, Fast Talk, Charm</i> , or a royal "petition" to gain entry; <i>Library Use</i> locates the files once inside. Zorrilla's personal file & prior films are locked in his M1 office, now inside <i>El General's</i> zone; entry requires <i>Fast Talk, Disguise, & Stealth; Locksmith</i> re desk access.	Establishes baseline health, and Zorrilla's <i>fetus-in-fetu</i> anomaly. Prior films show it was smaller, & was anencephalic (no brain). Garcia's old notes reveal very cheerful & agreeable, her "tell" just before she will become fully manic & try to escape.	Unable to get past <i>El Rey's</i> minions who will bar entry. Assuming missing files mean no useful information exists. Ignoring Garcia's manic prodrome misses opportunity to prevent violent escape attempt.



Player Handout: Dr. Zorrilla's prior, & new radiograph (nuevo=new)

Zorrilla Abdominal Mass pain/Imaging	Medical NPCs/PCs Radiology or lab staff	Need access to X-ray, fluoroscope in M1 →needs El General's or one of his Marshall's permissions (<i>Persuade, Charm</i>) or to repair & connect the old one located in the dangerous sub-basement of old M1 (<i>Electrical Repair</i>). Transilluminating the increasingly transparent Zorrilla after abdominal pain and twitching. (<i>Roll SAN 0/1 to look inside grisly interior</i>) Compare to prior films locked in his M1 office.	The <i>fetus in fetu</i> has changed, has a soft tissue (neural) mass present in LLQ & is no longer fully anencephalic. The fetal inclusion reacts to other Twsha activity & vice versa. This also suggests dormant compatible tissue is being recruited through Twsha's influence & and offers a way to communicate and control.	Treating the abdominal mass as ordinary tumour, or obstruction, and overtreating with morphine. Zorrilla, frightened, may attempt drastic future measures if anyone loses SAN examining him, ranging from escape attempt or even convincing someone to do surgery ASAP no matter the risk.
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Dra. Coutinho's Paper Chase	Any but Coutinho (who is busy); NPCs Castellanos,	Recover Coutinho's LON-HC memo in La Oficina's Library (see handout) → reference inside needed to jog her memory (a specific French journal) cannot quite remember. <i>Library Use.</i>	Saves hours; reference needed (not shown) gives her the tissue conversion analogy; tissue is not being digested or putrefying. It is being metamorphosized/replaced.	Fail/Fumble on <i>Library Use</i> and the Investigators recover the wrong French scientific article costs 1D3 hours to realize error and find the correct one.
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Player Handout: : Dra. Coutinho's Dec. 1932 League of Nations Health Committee (LON-HC) Memorandum

New Case Mapping	Any	Plot cases by ward, staff routes, tunnels, guards' & RN barracks, and cross-cover nursing traffic. <i>INT, Navigate, Accounting</i>	Spread follows contact and institutional movement, not miasma, sewer lines, or random curse.	False trail Over-investigating drains, sewer gas, or Voudon explanations.
Twsha victim Interviews	Any	Gently ask affected patients about sight, touch, loneliness, fear; effects of smell, music, light, warmth, and relief near others. <i>Charm, Psychology, Persuade.</i>	Shows proximity-seeking is distress behaviour, not hunger, but still spreads contamination.	Coercive questioning provokes panic, contagion contact, or future escape attempt. Failure or Fumble induces same reaction Assuming emotional distress is mere hysteria.
Laboratory Animal Study Work	Coutinho, Zorrilla if lucid, Gil if able, scientific PCs	Study test lab animal specimens, and those affected in Aux Lab Test against light/dark, light polarization, radiation, dryness, humidity, vibration, electricity, nutrients, psychiatric meds.	Growth accelerates somewhat with nutrients, moisture, warmth. Dryness, bright polarized light, vibration, sound patterns/interference suppress activity.	Cutting lesions means spreading contagious & viable Twsha material.
Twsha Anomaly Studies	Coutinho, Zorrilla if lucid, Gil if able, scientific PCs	Studying / charting changes of the metacarpal entity, Barrera's metamorphosing remains, & changes to Zorrilla & his abdominal mass,	Post-mortem restraint failure suggests living hosts are unintentional substrates; life forms that have complex nervous systems slow growth, lack of sanity or madness accelerates	Human euthanasia of those affected the only course. Overfeeding the metacarpal until it bursts its container.
Twsha Signal Study	Tambor, Zorrilla, musically or mechanically skilled PCs	Observe for abdominal pain & metacarpal 'tapping' synchrony, specimen pulses, wax cylinder recording responses, and effects of percussion or industrial machinery.	Reveals Twsha tissues signal through vibration primarily, but effects amplified under polarized light. Opens the idea of permanent latent dormancy solution.	Mistaking syncopated rhythms for purely occult musical tradition. Falsely believing can learn Twsha language

Researching Potential Suppressive Signals

- **Zorrilla as Living Regulator:** If conscious Zorrilla's altered physiology may help self-impose suppression through force of will on the growing abdominal neural mass. Each attempt causes severe pain, however, & pushing too hard risks unconsciousness & accelerating his own progression.



- **Tambor as Interpreter:** Tambor can detect & reproduce rhythmic patterns in tapping, drumming, and specimen movement. He does not understand the Twsha scientifically, but he hears what physicians miss & reacts intuitively to it.
- **Metacarpal Specimen as Reference:** The contained specimen may reveal the active unheard rhythm or phase pattern. Bringing it too close, however, risks amplifying the wrong signal to unwittingly impose dominance over the wrong Twsha tissue.
- **Machinery as Blunt Interference:** [Steam laundry machinery](#), [diesel generators start up sounds](#), [boiler room sounds](#), [water pumps](#), [construction sounds](#), [high voltage electrical discharges](#), and can disrupt Twsha signalling through vibration, electrical noise, & random mechanical resonance. This is crude, hazardous, and hard to control, but useful when there is no time for delicacy.
- **Structured/Layered Acoustic Suppression:** [Afro-Cuban syncopated percussion](#), [Santeria bata drumming rhythms,\(version 2\)](#) [atrial fibrillation](#) heartbeat sound amplified, or [ritual Orisha cadences](#) may impose temporary entrainment. Recorded and broadcast over the PA, a dormancy signal could reach multiple wards if Twsha afflicted can 'hear', but distortion, feedback squeal, or the wrong rhythm may worsen agitation or even accelerate growth.

Table A4 Research Setbacks (Keeper's Choice to complicate & redirect Research, not halt progress).

Research Setback	Immediate Effect	Longer-Term Consequence
Infrastructure Failure	Power fluctuation, failed refrigeration, lighting loss, contaminated water, or ventilation disruption interrupts research and containment.	Specimens degrade, dormancy periods shorten, and outbreak progression accelerates.
Researcher Destabilization	A compromised Investigator-researcher conceals symptoms, alters notes, & attempts unsafe cut-corner procedures.	Investigators receive mixed truths, false conclusions, or dangerous recommendations.

Subject Escape / Exposure	An infected patient, or animal escapes, wanders, hides, or seeks emotional contact.	New infection clusters emerge and rumours spread through the Mazorra.
Biological Escalation	Twsha tissues abruptly change behaviour, growth rate, signalling, or transmissibility.	Existing protocols become unreliable; visible manifestations increase.
Information Corruption	Notes vanish, charts contradict one another, specimens are mislabeled, or witnesses disagree.	Investigators lose confidence in timelines and may pursue incorrect theories.
External Interference	Porra, cultists, frightened staff, desperate lovers, political actors, or <i>Baron Kriminal</i> interrupt, sabotage, steal, or suppress research.	Research priorities shift from understanding to survival & escape.
Institutional Breakdown	Invasion, panic/riots, or conflicting orders disrupt coordinated response.	Isolation wards fail, vulnerable patients disappear, and even delusional patient command authority fragments.
Minor Procedural Failures	Delayed charting, fatigue-clumsy broken glassware, drifting temperatures, exhausted staff, misplaced files, waste time and focus.	Research slows incrementally while unnoticed errors compound into larger failures.

Table A5: Requirements for a Dormancy Attempt

Requirement	Method	Risk
Suppressive Environment	Subject is in an area relatively quiet dry area with bright polarized light, minimal humidity, and minimal exposure to blood or nutrient fluids.	Proximity to darkness, warmth, moisture, or blood/nutrient exposure restarts growth.
Signal Disruption	Introduce acoustic-mechanical interference: machinery, engine vibration, discordant percussion, & PA feed-back.	Too little disruption does nothing. Uncontrolled disruption simply agitates nearby Twsha tissue.
Signal Override	Impose a coherent stabilizing pattern: Afro-Cuban music, syncopated drumming,	Incorrect signalling may actually accelerate Twsha maturation to the detriment of any afflicted.

Forcing Twsha Dormancy

Once the *Twsha Revelation Clock* reaches Step 6, the Investigators may attempt forced *dormancy*. This is not a cure and cannot restore replaced tissue which now indelibly taints those affected. However they can preserve life & identity by halting further Twsha maturation.



The Investigators are not learning communication with Twsha from their Research, and there is no musical password or language to be deciphered. They are stumbling toward temporary suppression of Twsha maturation through combinations of rhythm, vibration, sound, signal interference, environmental stressors that appear to disrupt Twsha coordination & maturation. The

effect is partial, inconsistent, and dangerous to reproduce under field conditions, but in a lab setting they just may be able to achieve permanency

A Twsha dormancy attempt requires three coordinated domains:

1. *Medicine* or *Biology* to identify viable subjects, monitor deterioration, & any harmful responses.
2. *Mechanical* or *Electrical Repair* to shape vibration, power, lighting, machinery, or containment conditions on hosts that can detect effects.
3. *Listen, POW, Art/Craft: Percussion*, or *Tambor's tapping Pulp Talant* to detect, match, oppose, or impose an overriding suppressive rhythm.

Each domain requires one lead roll. Other Investigators may assist, contain, restrain, observe, manage equipment, calm witnesses, block interference, or prevent contamination. A successful assist grants one *Bonus Die*, cancels one *Penalty Die*, or prevents one related complication. No lead roll may receive more than two Bonus Dice. Extra successful assistance reduces risk rather than improving the roll further.

The Keeper then uses Table A5 to determine results. Twsha Dormant subjects retain visible Twsha alterations, but are not infectious while dormancy holds.

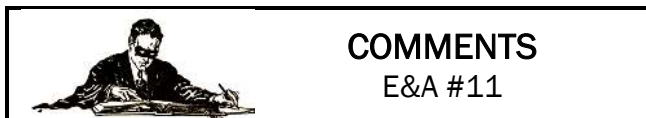
Dormancy is not cure or immunity. It is *imposed* latency akin to flicking a biological switch: the Twsha remains suppressed in altered tissues indefinitely, but may reactivate months, years, or even decades later under a strong overriding Twsha signal.

Table A6: Dormancy Resolution Table

Result	Outcome
3 domain successes	Dormancy induced. Progression halts for 1D6 hours. Continued protocol extends dormancy.
3 successes, with at least 1 Hard success	Sustained dormancy for 24 hours, provided suppressive conditions are maintained.
3 successes, with at least 1 Extreme success and no failures	Deep dormancy holds indefinitely unless conflicting /overriding Twsha signals resume.
2 domain successes	Partial dormancy. Progression slows for 1D6 hours, but symptoms resume unless the protocol is repeated or stabilized.
1 domain success	Brief suppression only. Subject calms or clears mentally for 1D10 minutes, long enough for a clue, message, or final instruction.
0 successes	Dormancy fails. Progression resumes immediately or accelerates at the Keeper's discretion.
Lead fumble	Twsha signaling actually strengthens. Nearby affected subjects advance one stage, the subject suffers Twsha-directed behaviour, and a participating Investigator risks exposure. May try again in 1d6 hours.
Assist Fumble	Creates a local complication unless another assist cancels it.

Table A7: Summary Twsha Revelation Clock

Step	Revelation	Practical Consequence
1. Not Zombie Undead	The afflicted are alive, conscious, frightened, and not predatory.	Gentle handling improves safety. Do not treat them as monsters.
2. Replacement, Not Rot	No ordinary putrefaction explains the optical changes. Tissue is being replaced by translucent Twsha analogues.	Quarantine/containment alone is inadequate.
3. Living Hosts Restrain It	Living physiology slows the process. Death accelerates it. Mazorra Guard Barrera proves this at human scale.	Avoid killing affected hosts unless there is no other option. Death & unleashed growth worsens contamination risk.
4. Growth & Repression Discoveries	The metacarpal proves Twsha can grow outside a living human host if given moisture, substrate, and nutrients.	Nutrient exposure must be controlled. Suppression techniques include vibration, acoustics, bright (polarized) light
5. Twsha Tissues Signal Each Other	Metacarpal entity's tapping, and Zorrilla's abdominal spasms in synch with Metacarpal entity show coordination through vibration	Signalling vulnerability which can be disrupted & exploited
6. Suppression & Dormancy Requires Signal Control	Biological change is irreversible; there is no cure. However, Twsha may be suppressed into a permanent dormancy pattern.	May proceed to attempts to force-signal dormancy [see Table A6]; <i>Success</i> = d6 hrs, <i>Hard</i> =24 hrs, <i>Extreme</i> = indefinitely



COMMENTS

E&A #11

JOHN REDDEN: I am glad to learn that things went well with your cardiac procedure earlier in May, & huzzah to your new cybernetic implant! ● That was a horrible pun you included as 'Easter Humor' BTW!

PEDRO PANHOCA DA SILVA & CAMILA LOURENÇO PANHOCA:: *Re IF books having 'reading maps'*; I think a flowchart showing all possible paths would be extremely

helpful to ensure all paths are followed, but be placed upside down at the very end.

LISA PADOL: Thanks for your web-link for *Stephanie St. Clair*, the Queen of Harlem's underworld; I had never heard of her before. *RY Mazorra CTM*: I incorporated my reply to one of your questions in the designer notes section of this. I had also extensively revised my initial Investigators Research Tree into the Appendix A *Secrets of the Twsha* I included this. ● Your other helpful editorial comments I sent to you as a direct email message!

BRIAN ROGERS: I really enjoyed reading your detailed coverage of *Mother Hubbard* and how you kitted her out using the V&V rule system. Snickered at the 'potion of spines' reaction everyone

had. ● I was sorry to hear about your motherboard crash cascading down to cause the loss of all your written comments. And I hope all of Zach's special needs have resolved for the better.

ROGER BW: All the very best for the launch of your new board-gaming APA "Of Dice and Meeples"

MATT 'Capt. Baloney Face' STEVENS: *RYCT Roger BW:* "...one of my concerns is that 'we don't talk about politics' can very easily become 'we don't question the status quo.'"; Huzzah! I agree completely.



RYCT Lisa Padol & the theme of authenticity in the vintage pulps. This also resonated with me. The better pulp writers did not treat "authentic detail" as decoration. They used to oil the narrative machinery to convey the story and the action briskly along in a fashion entirely believable to the reader because of the accuracy of its detail.

Lester Dent, who wrote most of the *Doc Savage* novels as Kenneth Robeson, is a useful example of someone who used and shared details of his own knowledge and experiences to craft his stories. Dent had an inventor's temperament and a magpie appetite for grabbing and hoarding practical knowledge for his stories, and just like how Doc personified the official Boy Scout motto 'Be Prepared', Dent himself *was* a Scoutmaster. He also held pilot, radio-operator licenses, telegraph, electrician, and plumbing credentials, sailed with his wife Norma Dent aboard their schooner *Albatross*, was for a spell a member of the *Explorer's Club* from his travels and drew on those experiences for fiction that felt modern, technical, & cutting edge for its day.

ATTRONARCH: *Hagar the Hewer* was pretty brave to go exploring that tight space despite Tiberius being lost for reasons unclear to all. It was later heartbreaking to see he succumb to that undead female vampire-faced horror whose snake like body was made up of the bodies of dead women.

MYLES CORCORAN: RAE this write-up for *Mausritter*, especially the eerie encounter of the slumber enchanted mice near the Ghost Beech, compounded with Gwen meeting with the Elf *Whitethorn Ash* in the Winter Wood.

Re Irish fuel protests: I suspect this is only the beginning. Energy shocks now ripple globally almost immediately, and ordinary people end up paying for geopolitical brinkmanship they had no role in creating. I do not think the present crisis can simply be blamed on Iran alone. The

broader confrontation around the Gulf, threats to shipping through Hormuz, sanctions, and retaliatory measures have all helped drive fuel prices sharply upward. What particularly angers me is how another island nation, Cuba, is being treated at the same time. The tightening US pressure campaign on Cuba, combined with earlier actions against Venezuela and threats directed at other countries supplying fuel to the island, has worsened an already severe humanitarian situation. Even Mexico appears to have stepped back from fuel shipments under US pressure. The result is not abstract politics but daily civilian suffering. Fuel shortages in Cuba are now affecting electricity generation, hospital backup systems, transportation, food distribution, and even basic sanitation and garbage removal. Whatever one thinks of the Cuban government, deliberately intensifying conditions that primarily harm ordinary civilians strikes me as both needlessly cruel and strategically shortsighted.

GABRIEL ROARK: Thanks for your highly detailed survey through *Barrows & Borderlands*, (subtitled *A Weird Science Fantasy Old-School Style Role Playing Game set in a Dark Radioactive Wasteland of Magic, Black-powder, and Dragons!*). *I'll be waiting on the second part nextish.* ● Happy belated 28th wedding anniversary and enthusiastic skating progress!

ELF: Your *Brindlewood Bay* game sounded fascinating but the solution of the player-detectives framing persons seems terribly wrong to me on so many levels. The game specifically references TV and vintage detectives for their moves, and few of these would go along with this ploy. Your added comment that the scenario write-ups seem so 'sparse' struck a chord with me because it highlights the real tension at the heart of adventure design. Too little detail and the GM is forced to improvise on the fly connective tissue, motivations, logistics, and background under pressure while already juggling pacing, rules, and players. Too much detail, however, risks overwhelming the reader or creating the impression that the scenario must be followed as a fixed script.

I increasingly suspect there is no universal "correct" density. Different GMs want different things. Some prefer a skeletal framework they can freely adapt, while others want a richly documented environment they can confidently inhabit without inventing half the setting themselves, and any attempt to satisfy both preferences is folly.

RARE your many thumbnail reviews of interesting items included in the *Trans Rights Idaho Bundle*. ● I was sad to learn from your last zine that dice legend & d100 inventor Lou Zocchi had died.

DYLAN CAPEL: RAE your *Megadungeon* essay & your attendance at *Salute 2026*. Your mentioning of *Necropolis28* stimulated me to look up this *Narrative Diorama Skirmish Game*.

PATRICK RILEY: *RYCT Lisa Padol* where you wrote "I asked the player to run the dinos and the player had the dinos run away." This is hilarious and for all the wrong reasons.

AVRAM GRUMER: I saw what you did there with conflating the *Berenstain Bears*, often cited as an example of the Mandela

effect, and Braunstein. © Interesting introduction to the MASHED RPG written by Mark Plemmons set at the fictional 8099. The punning inclusion of the ability *Pierce*, which somewhat detracts from the very interesting historical setting.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: I'm sorry to learn the job hunt is so prolonged, & your interview didn't go well. Was it in person or via Zoom or similar. Did you ask for or get honest feedback why you weren't considered for the position?

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: *Re BackerKit for Traveller 5E* (based on D&D 5e); the lowest tier for entry is \$100!

JIM VASSILAKOS: *RYCTM re image consistency:* Thanks very much. I'm glad the images are coming across as consistent, because the actual process was less elegant than the result suggests. Most of it was trial and error, with a fair amount of brute effort.

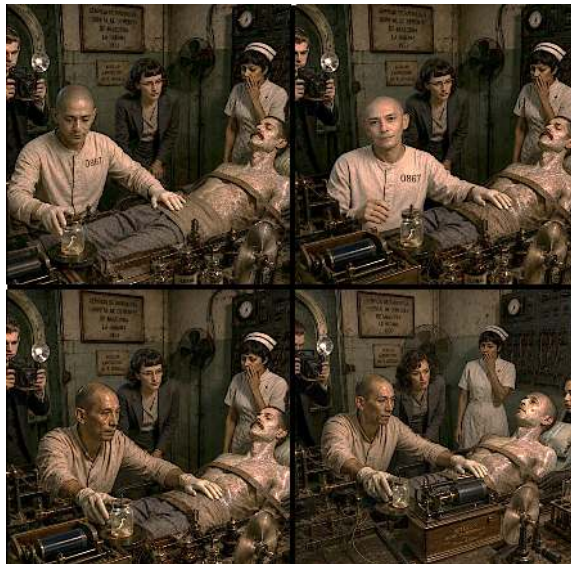
The real starting point was not AI, but period reference. I spent a lot of time combing 1920s–30s Cuban magazines found online: *Bohemia* for news/culture (think *Time* or *Newsweek* magazine), *Carteles* for popular middle-class imagery (think *Life* magazine), and *Social* for elite fashion & polish (ala *Vanity Fair*). From these I built folders of faces, clothes, rooms, poses, ads, and graphic design cues to act as 1930s visual grammar.

For portraits, I often cleaned, upscaled, or lightly colourized old scans with free online tools like Vheer or Krea (which I am using less as they nerf what is allowable), then layered the improved version semi-transparently over the original so it still felt like a period photograph rather than a modern reconstruction.

PowerPoint did much of the heavy lifting. As with my maps, I used it as a collage tool: cutting figures out, removing backgrounds, assembling reference sheets, then screenshotting the composite for ChatGPT 5.5. That helped preserve faces, clothing, pose, lighting, and style.

The frustration was *drift*. The model can make plausible 1930s scenes, but faces shift, people vanish, uniforms modernize, and cinematic “improvements” creep in and had to be forcibly removed.

In one migraine inducing hour I had to constantly tell the AI to stop having one person's hands touching another in an inappropriate place (see four images of Tambor getting handsy with Dr Zorrilla in the Aux Lab below). And when they finally learned this, facial features of this NPC slipped again and they let go another object they were supposed to be touching at the same time (arggh). So consistency came less from perfect prompts than from repeatedly dragging the image back to the same Cuban 1930s visual grammar.



The horror images were harder. Guardrails sometimes objected even when I was *reducing* gore ChatGPT itself would generate. For depicting Twsha afflicted the most reliable prompt language was optical special effects rather than anything seen as effects of violence: translucent tissue, frosted glass, waxy distortion, aspic/gelatin, impossible transparency, and visible anatomy rather than injury or body horror.

So, in order: period archive, digital cleanup, PowerPoint collage, AI generation, then repeated correction. The prompts mattered, but the archive mattered more.

Everyone Else: **RAEBNC**

At the first Hamilton Art Crawl of 2026 I bumped into my daughter Lauren with her friends



May 21st 2026. BCM

Ignorable Theme for E&A Issue #12

Gods, Demigods, and Other Riffraff / Religion, Spirituality, and the Cosmic Order

Religion is part of culture. Since I generally suck at invoking culture in my game worlds and lead an irreligious life myself, religion rarely comes into play in my games. Sure, there are priests and churches and cults for the PCs to ally with or fight against, but I could not claim that they feel religious.

Religion manifests in people's everyday actions, superstitions, and figures of speech, such as saying "Bless you" after a sneeze or throwing a pinch of spilled salt over your shoulder. These often become so commonplace that they become tradition even when the religiosity fades. When you're soaked in a culture, you might not even appreciate it and it's only when you see the customs of other cultures that you can appreciate how culture integrates religion. As a GM, I would ask that my players make these up rather than writing them up on a setting document that they then have to read and remember to apply.

As gamers, we tend to focus on the names and domains of gods, but the gods don't necessarily influence the world directly. The god of storms doesn't actually throw thunderbolts and blow gales. The god of battle cannot be seen striding across battlefields. In fantasy RPGs, demons are often separated from the mythology that spawned them and are just treated like a class of monsters. The Cosmic Order doesn't usually matter when you're clearing a tavern basement of giant rats or taking down the lich king. In other words, gods, religion, and such are just flavor text. Not always, but I'd bet most of the time.

I love a good blasphemy. I have no qualms of twisting and mangling contemporary religious themes and beliefs. I once ran a convention one-shot based on the PCs shedding their body thetans. When I was designing *The Grand Station* (see in QSLN#9), I ran with the notion that I've heard some Christians say: God does not send anyone to hell; they send themselves. Thus, the stairway to Downtown was open. As a consequence, anyone with low self-esteem or mental issues could send themselves Downtown (when they really didn't deserve it—see *What Dreams May Come*) while the sinful narcissist freely goes Uptown.

XP for GP

One of the tropes of OSR is to reach back to a time when D&D awarded experience points to the PCs in part based on the amount of gold pieces (or equivalent wealth, maybe) gained by the PCs. I don't like it.

GP (or wealth in general) is one axis of character advancement. It pays for expenses (henchmen, lodging, etc.) and consumable resources (food, torches, etc.). It's how you upgrade your gear, mundane or magical.

XP is a different axis. It determines your character level which in turn determines your hit points, ability to hit things, and any spells or other abilities not tied to gear you have. You could even reward different classes XP for doing class-specific things. XP can also work as a carrot for roleplaying.

Both GP and XP are rewards for overcoming challenges, usually fights against monsters, but could also include other things like traps, diplomatic situations, and so on. You defeat a monster and you get its treasure. There might even be a handy chart that tells the GM how much GP the monster should have (usually a range based on a die roll) and XP gained for defeating it (usually a fixed number based on hit dice (HD)).

Within the game world, GP is a real thing whereas XP is an abstract notion of the game mechanics. You might be able to gain XP through training paid for by GP, but this is an in-world activity. Even in LitRPG, where XP exists in-world, it's part of *who you are*, not *what you have*.

This half-page rant was inspired by Brian Rogers Note on Experience last issue. In his UtGS, "Money matters longer," but that can be achieved in other ways than tweaking XP requirements. If you don't want PCs to "immediately purchase maximal gear with their first levels worth of loot," then just give out what loot seems appropriate. The actual XP amount can be wholly independent from this calculus.

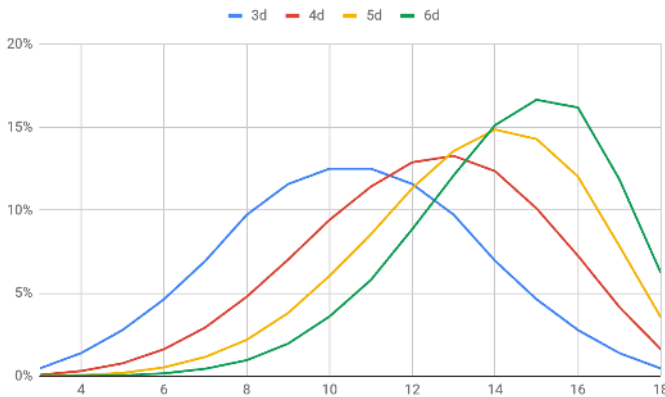
Anyway, I see no reason to explicitly link GP and XP and doing so only complicates matters (and/or leads to silly or weird outcomes). That's all I really wanted to say.

I also don't like requiring training for level advancement, but that's a separate topic.

Dice Corner

Inspired by Myles' comments to Josh last issue.

Here's taking 3d6 and adding 1, 2, or 3 bonus dice. For example, rolling 5d6 and summing the best 3.



The averages are:

	3d	4d	5d	6d
Average	10.5	12.2	13.4	14.3

Flipping it around, here are the percentages of rolling under a given value (as in GURPS) when you roll N dice and take the lowest 3:

Roll Under	3d	4d	5d	6d
3	0.46%	1.62%	3.55%	6.23%
4	1.85%	5.79%	11.39%	18.09%
5	4.63%	13.04%	23.42%	34.28%
6	9.26%	23.15%	37.71%	50.93%
7	16.20%	35.49%	52.56%	66.05%
8	25.93%	48.77%	66.13%	78.16%
9	37.50%	61.65%	77.46%	87.02%
10	50.00%	73.07%	86.01%	92.82%
11	62.50%	82.48%	92.05%	96.41%
12	74.07%	89.51%	95.86%	98.37%
13	83.80%	94.29%	98.05%	99.33%
14	90.74%	97.22%	99.20%	99.77%
15	95.37%	98.84%	99.73%	99.94%
16	98.15%	99.61%	99.92%	99.98%
17	99.54%	99.92%	99.99%	100.00%
18	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%

Comments on E&A Issue #11

Roger BW

In some ways, a TNE campaign is like a traditional fantasy game. You're exploring lost places and looting treasures from the past.

RYCT me, the bottom right button is the actual button. The rest are lights or keyholes.

I would much rather have an engineer tell me, "I think X, but I can't commit, so probably Y," so I have full context and we are on the same page. Right now, I have a release targeted for late June, but I'll just say Q3 (or maybe July if pressed).

RYCT Joshua, near my house is the [California Historical Landmark #339 New Almaden Quicksilver Mine](#).

The Indians used pigment from this cinnabar hill for paint. Mercury was mined as early as 1845. The gold discovery made mercury indispensable, and the mine, the most productive in America, became world famous. It sold for \$1,700,700 in 1864.

And yes, the environmental impact from the cinnabar mining lingers still.

Dylan Capel

How prevalent is 3D printing of bespoke miniatures in Kitbash Korner?

In systems like *Savage Worlds* or *Basic Roleplaying*, higher weapon skill translates into higher chance of getting additional damage with a successful attack. Into the Jungle is doing the same, but backwards.

Timothy Collinson

RYCT Jim, didn't *Traveller T20* and *GURPS Traveller* have XP? What was your opinion of it there?

Myles Corcoran

RYCT Lisa about rolls with (dis)advantage, I ran some numbers back in QPLG #4 comparing a bonus 10s die versus flip-flop. They are so similar, I see no reason not to use flip-flop, except we're too old. We come from a time when rolling a d% meant rolling two d10s and designating a tens die and a ones die. Nowadays, all dice sets come with tens die numbered 00, 10, 20, ..., 90. I have no doubts that the flip-flip method would mess with some players if they rolled a 60 and a 3 and had to pick between 63 and 360.

If you have a small dice pool, adding bonus dice (ala *Over the Edge*) works well. With a large dice pool, the effect is negligible and you should just add the dice and include them in the total.

I didn't like the opposed traits in *Unknown Armies* 3rd edition. This approach is fine for moral stances, personal proclivities, and mystical alignments, but there are real-world people who don't make the trade-offs that the game insists upon its PCs.

Michael Cule

The *Glamour Days And Nights* write up was especially entertaining this month. I LOLed at the description of the Grand Master of the Cenobites.

Elf

Isn't "framed for a murder that didn't happen," the plot of []?

Published adventures that depend upon the GM making stuff up is the antithesis of what they're for. If I wanted to make stuff up, I wouldn't need the published adventure! I do expect to fill in some blanks that my players thought of that the adventure writer didn't, but those should be fairly minimal and easy to improvise.

Avram Grumer

I think one reason television plays a greater inspiration for RPGs today than it did in the early-to-mid 1970s is because there are far more and better television shows to draw from now. In the realm of fantasy fiction, written sources were a much deeper well to draw from back in the day (and still are).

Remember that the vast majority of roleplaying is a GM taking the reins of a published game world. Saying "modern games where players are expected to contribute to the setting resemble a collaborative writers' room" overlooks the fact that *D&D 5e 2024*, *Starfinder 2e*, and *Call of Cthulhu 7th* are modern games and that games which resemble writer's rooms are still quite niche when you look at the roleplaying community as a whole.

How would you define "enthusiastic buy-in"? Let me give an example. Someone in the gaming group wanted to start a *Changing: The Dreaming* campaign. Most of the players were happy to play, but one had never played it. They were apprehensive since they knew nothing about it and what they had heard sounded a bit suspect. They were game, but enthusiastic would have been too

strong of a word to use. Should that player have been excluded from the campaign because they lacked the prerequisite enthusiasm or the group found a different game where they could all be equally and whole-heartedly enthusiastic?

I'll note that the "liberal republic" of the *Star Wars* setting included a key figure who was a princess.

Joshua Kronengold

RYCT me, I'm a bit insulted that you'd ask if I'd done "probability math" on WRS. Of course I did, but I also recognized that it was important to playtest to make sure it *felt* right even if the math looked adequate.

The odds below are for a 54-card deck but does not account for the odds of drawing a joker among the other cards. Assuming the first draw after a shuffle, here are the odds of success based on drawing 1 to 6 cards:

<u>Cards</u>	<u>Success</u>
1	24.07%
2	42.70%
3	56.71%
4	66.89%

Drawing 2 cards would be for "average ability." The average for PCs (who tend to be "above average" individuals could be higher.

Here are the odds of getting N or more successes¹ on drawing 4 or 5 cards. This was based on a 999 simulated random draws. That's why the percentage for 4 cards is slightly off from the above.

<u>Successes</u>	<u>4 cards</u>	<u>5 cards</u>
0	32.96%	26.97%
1+	67.04%	73.03%
2+	41.82%	48.60%
3+	18.72%	28.19%
4+	6.95%	12.52%
5+	1.79%	5.35%

The odds jump up considerably when specialities come into play. Then, the card only needs to match the color of the ability to succeed.

RYCT John, one anecdote I remember from the 2001 dot-com bubble/crash was how Lucent lent money to their customers to purchase their products. Given how

¹ Face cards yield 2 successes. Aces yield 3.

circular and bubble-shaped AI funding is, it is going to be spectacular when the bubble pops.

RYCT Lisa about "Patrick's train game," you are correct about the moral play and optimal answer. Once I came upon the concept of giving the token to the train driver, it greatly increased my enthusiasm for the game and fueled me to see it to completion.

RYCT Avram, for "AI to have consciousness [sic]" we must first agree on what consciousness is. For example, within the animal kingdom, can we draw a line between species that do or do not have consciousness? If consciousness is a spectrum, what are the mileposts?

Lisa Padol

RYCT me, where room A8 would be is swallowed by room A7. Similarly, there is no B7, B8, G2, H1, or H2.

"Some rooms..." ah... just an editing error. It could have just been a thought that started and never completed or got moved elsewhere.

The "piece" in the maze is the yellow tetris piece in the lower left corner.

For C6, you have to rotate the floor tiles to complete the circuit from the power source (lower left corner) to each door individually.

The bird pictures are a victim of the lower resolution. The players at the table had no issue.

RYCT Brian R, having the whole group collaborate when it comes to character creation does have pitfalls. In particular, the group can steer you in directions that make it feel less like *your* character. The pressure to "go along to get along" can rob you of your creative agency. There has to be a balance.

RYCT Elf, I agree that convention one-shots have a greater potential to be more experimental, but it's safer to be more experimental with a home group where you know the players and you're in a safe space. Bombing a convention game is much worse than bombing a home game. Playtesting does help, but what works for a home group may not work with a group of strangers at a convention.

In my way of thinking, there is a distinction between "This is a very expensive game to run, so we have to charge extra for it," "We want to make a profit," or "We deserve to make a profit."

RYCT Avram, I too used the term "premise" in the way you did. When looking it up just now, Gemini offered a good synopsis as "... a concise 1-2 sentence summary of the core concept, establishing the protagonist, their goal, and the central conflict or 'what if' scenario. It acts as the story engine, outlining the dramatic situation without revealing the ending. Good premises are specific, high-stakes, and often highlight an ironic or unique situation."

RYCT Brian M, I would interpret "accidental discovery is effectively impossible" to refer to something that one would not notice on a cursory glance, but required an active search. I would apply this to a safe behind a painting or a secret drawer in a desk. Saying, "We search the room," or "We search the desk" would be enough for me to either call for a Spot Hidden roll. If it was a Vital Clue™, the roll would be used to determine how long it took them to find it. On a fumble, they might have broken something and/or made too much noise in their search.

Brian Rogers

If one were to make the *League of Regrettable Superheroes* as a group of PCs, it would also make sense to give two magic users (Madam Satan and Mother Hubbard) two distinct forms of magic.

I never got the sense in the *B/X D&D* rules as written that there was "a centralized religious institution." But I also came into *B/X D&D* sideways after I had already been introduced to *AD&D* and *Deities & Demigods*, so my own assumptions may have clouded my reading.

Martial clerics get advantages in combat. Scholarly clerics get spellcasting. Are the advantages of Charismatic clerics on par with these?

Rather than saying Clerics "they cannot use 1d8 or greater damage Swords" because "such swords can be Intelligent," why not just say they cannot use intelligent weapons?

A successful Exorcism turns "4 levels of foes," does that mean 4 skeletons or 2 zombies? If so, how many 0 level 0 poltergeists? ALL of them?

In general, I like how you've structured Acts of Faith, but to be really nit-picky, the word "cast" or "caster" appears in a couple of devotion descriptions. I think you need a different word to distinguish it from spellcasting.

Matt Stevens

I concur with your stance on political content.

RYCT me, my 6 players were able to puzzle out the bird names, but I had to do a bit of prodding for “rook” (as opposed to “crow” or “raven”). I aim for puzzles that not *anyone* in the game can solve, but that *someone* in the game can solve. The trick is making sure it’s not the same someone for most of the puzzles.

RYCT Elf, the medieval Catholic Church could fit into a “generic” fantasy game, depending on what you mean by generic fantasy and what you want to do with it.

RYCT to Jim, the other narrative I hear about AI is how we all should be embracing and using it in our work.

Jim Vassilakos

RYCT Myles, perhaps things had the potential for more leeway in the 1980’s, but if a student today suggested “Why don’t we use Rust” in a class structured to teach Python, what would you expect the teacher to do?

Programming is like cooking. Once you know the basics and the terminology, you can experiment and build your skills. But if the cooking class assumes the basics (like how to use a stovetop or oven), the newbie student can be at a loss and never find a footing. Instructors should recognize this and help those who need to be taught how to boil water.²

Why is *anything* taught in schools (even if home schooling)? What is your answer if asked, “Why do we have to learn <blank>?” especially if <blank> is something without practical application (unless you are in a field that uses it) like trigonometry or classical literature? I get twitchy when someone suggests that learning about mitochondria was a waste.

RYCT Roger, does *Ars Magica* qualify as having a coherent theory of magic?

Also, PCs in many fantasy games are pre-selected to be the type who have already decided that dungeoneering was something they want to do. This assumption was baked into the premise of the campaign. It’d be like starting a *Traveller* merchant campaign but then have a player ask, “How about if we don’t trade goods in space? There are much easier, safer, and lucrative ways to make money.”

² Such as not putting a pot in the oven set at 212 °F.

Patrick Zoch

I am reminded of the networking (“gather information”) mechanic in *Savage Worlds*. You can either do it The Nice Way or The Not-So-Nice Way, using either Persuasion or Intimidation, respectively. Like networking, real-world police interrogation consumes many hours that we probably don’t want to roleplay out fully. And just like any other social interaction, we probably want a mix of in-character roleplaying and die rolling.

With interrogations (as with many skills), I think one has to be conscious of the gap between the players’ skill and the characters’ skills. While it might be nice for an NPC interrogation to play out like it does in a procedural drama or spy flick, improvising that scene at the game table is hard and probably beyond the players’ skill.

Filler

We only managed to play one session of The Adventurers Guild campaign this month. One was cancelled due to missing a player down with food poisoning and the other weekend collided with Kublacon. I must admit that I’m starting to feel a bit of GM burn out. I’m hoping being a player at Kublacon will invigorate me. I think I will structure my next campaign for 6 to 10 sessions (~4–6 months) and focus on shorter, self-contained adventures. I also want to set *D&D* aside for a while—not necessarily fantasy RPGs generally, but something with a different focus and feel.

I’ve been in a bit of a superhero mood lately in part because of the game I’m running at Kublacon (stay tuned next month) and so I purchased the *Outgunned Superheroes* RPG. It takes a more abstract approach to superhero abilities while at the same time aping the Marvel Cinematic Universe a bit too blatantly. It does some interesting things with pacing and scaling, such as unlocking effects as the heroes make progress in defeating a threat, but I fear the fights would feel samey fairly quickly. Opponents are reduced down to target numbers and countdown clocks with the superpower flavor left to narration. Perhaps Roger BW can comment on his experience with the *Outgunned* system. I put it on my (not so) short list of campaign options for when the current one ends.

Clark Timmins - Cts on lastish

Redden: re: magic use in construction. Huh. I'd never really thought about that, but I suppose it's rather a given that magical societies would use magical construction techniques. That's a great thing to consider...

Rogers: quite enjoyed your piece on clerics. I recall an old *Dragon* (Issue 68, the internet tells me) article about "cloistered clerics" who functioned as clerics without the combat role. In "old school" gaming with its combat emphasis, I suppose all characters need to have some type of combat ability. Nobody I knew ever played a cloistered cleric.

Roark: Keep the Arduin review coming! Re: player-facing setting materials – I haven't done anything explicitly player-facing. My concept for that is piecemeal accumulation during play which means (in my experience) they'll never notice much detail.

Misiaszek: re: images of undead, specifically. I pulled them from Pixabay and subsequently learned that Pixabay is just fine accepting AI generated art and then presenting it under the Pixabay license. Thus, I'm shamefacedly acknowledging that the images I did pick were, in fact, originally produced with AI. Which I could have known even then had I bothered to pay attention to all the small text. Sadly, this means Pixabay is no longer a great source, for me, for free re-usable art...

Row: Re: your dungeon map – I love maps like that. Easy map software has eliminated so much of the charm of the RPG hobby.

Vassilakos / Collinson: Thanks for the picryl.com pointer. Great resource. I've been reviewing the Plankwell campaign for my own nefarious purposes. I grabbed the compiled version because it has everything in chronological order. At work, I've been using Copilot (AI) to review PPT/PDF files and summarize the major topics. It does a pretty good job with business crap. I wanted to see how it would react to RPG stuff. It gave me this as a concise summary of the combined PDF:

The document is a long, narrative-style campaign log from a Traveller RPG play-by-email game. It follows Captain Augustine Olav Plankwell as he takes command of the Imperial Navy cruiser INS *Jaqueline*, deals with the ship's damaged state and low morale, navigates complex political and social situations on the world of Jewell, and becomes entangled with a powerful AI simulation of his famous ancestor. Across the sessions he manages crew issues, diplomatic tensions, psionic mysteries, noble intrigue, and fleet politics while preparing his ship for detached patrol duty.

The PHOENIX NEST

BUILDING MY LEGACY: Two More of the Six Gods

THE SON

*When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again
Hurrah! Hurrah!
We'll give him a hearty welcome then
Hurrah! Hurrah!
The boys will cheer and the girls will shout.
The ladies they will all come out
And we'll all be gay when
Johnny Comes Marching home.¹*

The son is the male of mature age who hasn't yet chosen a life partner who is still 'foot loose and fancy free'. He is the patron of those striving to achieve a place in the world, of soldiers and other warriors especially. He favours those who take direct action. He favours courage and achievement, not reflection and planning. Those are the field of the Father and general officers. The Son is the patron of soldiers and policemen up to the lower officer ranks. He despises those who dither and outright cowards. Most of his worshippers are only there during their youth (though there are some who stay in the cult well into middle age): they are on the way to becoming worshippers of the Father or of Uncle.

**APPROPRIATE RELIGIOUS
DISADVANTAGES**
Code of Honour (Gentleman)
Code of Honour (Soldier)
Impulsiveness
Sense of Duty: The City.

¹ Patrick Gilmore 1863

**A zine for EVER & ANON 10 by
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Truthfulness

THE DAUGHTER

*Mother, may I go out dancing? Yes, my
darling daughter
Mother, may I try romancing? Yes, my darling
daughter
What if there's a moon, mama darling, and it's
shining on the water
Mother, must I keep on dancing? Yes, my
darling daughter²*

The Daughter is the goddess of the young woman, not yet a mother. She is the protector of all who seek out what will make life good. Like the Son she favours courage but not over considerations of safety or sanity. (As the Son's followers sometimes do.) She favours sincerity in relationships and despises those who deceive. She is also the goddess of the hunt, revered by male and female hunters. Her worshippers move on to The Mother and/or The Crone.

APPROPRIATE RELIGIOUS DISADVANTAGES

Pacifism (Cannot Harm Innocents): (Note that this does not extend to not hunting animals)
Sense of Duty: The City.

THE WAY OF THE WORLD:

My life is pretty unremarkable at the moment. Bruce had an infection and I had to persuade him to take anti-biotics in his rations. He seems (touch wood) to have recovered.

My weight loss seems to have come to a halt and even reversed. I'm sticking with the injections

² Jack Lawrence 1940 performed by Dinah Shore

for now and will see what the high dosage does for me but I'm not getting my hopes up.

As for the world in general... Let's pass on to more fantastical but less unlikely narratives than current Current Affairs..

CUNNING PLANS AND OVER-REACHING AMBITIONS

Monday games have mostly been stalled over absences and illnesses especially for the Lictors. The Three Pilgrims have made it to the Emperor's court just in time to discover that there has just been a change of ruler putting a child on the throne and his father in the robes of a Buddhist monk. They fear (rightly) that their enemy, the Master of Origami, is there already.

Wednesday nights continue through the first term of wizard school: I've decided it makes sense to up the speed of time passing and skip over weeks where nothing happens but classes and socialising. Winter Festival is coming up, the players having declined a chance to go on an outworld holiday under supervision in favour of staying in the City and doing extra classes, the swots.

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

ORSORKHON, Grand Master of the Cenobites

THE KEEPER OF THE HIDEOUS ZOO

A MAHOUT

A NOBLE AND SCHOLARLY WYRM

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

MOONSON ARGENTUS, The Emperor.

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

Mysterious Assassins of an Obscure Cult.

ASSASSINS, OVERSEERS AND THE OMPHALOS³

At the start of the session the GM handed out the actual timetable/diary for the campaign so far.

GM: This is a list of the weeks of the campaign, the dates in Glorantha and what happened those times. As far as I can tell I haven't got anything wrong.

³ For 24 09 25

DRAK: Well, you would believe that. ⁴

There was a disagreement about when the Humakt High Holy Day was, this being of some importance to one of the PCs. And annoyingly, it did turn out that the GM had triggered Humakt's seasonal Holy Day a day early, a day that hadn't actually happened yet.

ALAN: You can rewrite the calendar if you want to.

Sometimes it's hard to tell if he's being sarcastic or supportive!

So in the end I ruled that the PC had attended his temple and renewed his Rune Points and that was already in the past though the Holy Day celebrations were in fact in the future.

GM: Let's just say it's Glamour and leave it at that.

MARTIN: (It's) Midnight Mass.

Which seemed like a good enough explanation, if one was needed.

GM: You've done a lot of stuff and had a lot of adventures. When did any of you last gain any reputation?

It had been a while. Martin pointed out there was a lot of stuff they had done which they couldn't tell anyone about (which was true) and then Graham pointed out that they had met the Emperor. (They got to do the full bashing-your-head-on-the-floor bit too.)

GM: It's not quite as good as being Mentioned In Dispatches...

Having raised this question, the GM then forgot about it until the end of the session.

They had three days to wrap up organising and rehearsing the parade due for the 21st of the season: Godsdays of Death Week.

At the vineyard, that morning Faleria had the Wyrms hidden in her barn. She had given him some scrolls and interesting books to read (this being this particular Wyrms idea of a good time) and noted that they were going to have to use him as a witness.

FALERIA: It's illegal for supernatural beings to fly over the city without a permit.

JARATHIR I thought it was impossible.

FALERIA: Oh, it's deadly if you try it and the aerial guards haven't been deactivated.

VOSTOR: That's the crime isn't it?

FALERIA: That's one of the crimes we will be investigating. At some point we will have to get him into the city to give evidence. I will ask you to think about how we're going to do that.

VOSTOR: Big sheet?

ESHAN: Will he fit in your wagon?

The Wyrms were several times larger than a human being with large wings. (No fingers or thumbs but he could turn the pages of the books with his long, prehensile tongue.)

DRAK: Hmm, does anyone have a really good disguise skill?

PUM: (After having what SIZ 35 means in RQ explained to him) So an overcoat, some glasses and a moustache won't work?

When they escorted Faleria back to the Insula, riding as footmen on her coach, they arrived to find the other two members of their team and the Senator already there.

SENATOR: I'm going to be moving into the insula, into the room that is technically reserved for me. I understand the investigators have finished with it..

JARATHIR Has the floor been fixed?

SENATOR: That's what is going on right now. (A sound of energetic banging above their heads) Installing new carpets, fresh draperies, a decent sized bed and a commode. The basic necessities of life.

⁴ THE Plain People of E&A: He don't get no respect!

Vostor had warned the people who needed to know that the Senator was moving in as soon as he had was told. First the chap who ran an illicit business from his apartment and then Vostor's 'girlfriend'. When he got to the second the young man he had seen glaring at him earlier was there. He had an upper class accent and wore robes that suggested he was a student at the university. He was about the same age as the young lady.

He demanded to know Vostor's intentions were with regard to the young lady.

VOSTOR: What are my *intentions*?

ARONIUS PONTICUS: (*For such was his name*) What are you up to?

VOSTOR: My intentions are to continue the relationship I was having with her.

AP: No. No, that's out. You are just a passing person who will be back somewhere, fighting with the Army and you have no, I say it again, no standing in this town.

VOSTOR: Well, I was speaking to the Emperor yesterday.

GM: Well, you are telling the truth so this is not Fast Talk. It's certainly not Charm.

DRAK: Sounds like Intimidate to me.

Vostor's Intimidate skill augmented with his Truth Rune thoroughly boggled the poor young Carmanian nobleman, who opened his mouth, waggled his finger at the soldier and then turned and headed up the stairs to the floor where his apartment was.

The young lady thanked Vostor for the warning and said that she didn't think her grandfather would be back until things had settled down a lot.

VOSTOR: How would I know? Your grandfather turns up at the strangest of times.

She gave him a glare that was not a look of love and closed the door in his face.

VISHI: (*Appearing suddenly behind Vostor*) I was trying to warn you sir of the young

nobleman's prowling about. Given his political sympathies...

Vishi had provided barley soup for breakfast and the Senator came up and snagged a bowl of it. Eshan looked down into the floors below and saw Faleria having words with Stella the Informer⁵ who lived on the floor above them.

Eshan could tell they had a history: she was much more relaxed with Stella than she ever was with Eshan. She was giving him some sort of instructions and he was rolling his eyes while nodding to agree to carry out the task.

The Senator after supping his soup laid down the law.

He was going to stay at the insula to avoid a daily journey back to his villa: his daughter (who entered about this point and took a pastry but declined the soup) would be in charge at the vineyard. He would take the Humakti as his body guard and split the others into two groups of two. Eshan he sent to speak to the Chief Overseer and throw the Master of Circuses' weight around, demanding a thorough investigation of the events of the previous night to discover who had called off the aerial wards and to "interrogate the Keeper of Horrors to within an inch of his life". He also wanted assurances that there would be a round up of White Moonies sufficient to placate the commander of the Emperor's bodyguard. He sent the other two to speak to the Commanding Officer of the Fourth Pelandan Foot: he wanted a squad to guard his villa and a squad to guard his office and was willing to meet any reasonable requests the CO had that might facilitate this. Up to and including 'reasonable' bribes and inducements.

SENATOR: If they want their unit commendation and the award for their captain they had best help make this parade happen.

Jarathir reminded him that they needed to go and confirm the booking of the elephants.

⁵ Meaning Private Investigator

SENATOR: Yes, we will give their elephants a place of pride in the parade. There is a question of droppings but I'm sure we can ah...

KEANUS The royal parks will be grateful.

The conversation wandered into whether it would be wiser to parade the elephants at the start or the end of the parade.

Eshan chose to take Vostor on the grounds that Vostor was more intimidating than charming.

VOSTOR: I had a bath this morning.

SANDENE Was there any water in it?

SENATOR: *(To Keanus)* Are you one of those Humakti who can sense people with hostile intent? No? Well try to look as if you can.

There was a moment of fine dramatic art here as Pum demonstrated his steely eyed suspicious glare on the other players.

At the Chief Overseer's office.

CHIEF OVERSEER PHRANASTES: You don't want much do you?

ESHAN: Just passing on instructions, sorry.

COP: Well, I've already lined up an interview with the Keeper of Horrors. And I'm going to be leaning on the people who are responsible for the aerial watch. I don't know if I'll get anywhere with them. And my opinion (and in the Emperor's opinion which is more important) your Senator, the current Master of the Circuses, was not the person acting most against the peace in the fracas of last night and the night before that.

But as to the matter of the White Moonies he didn't have the manpower and did the Senator know how many of them there are? He wasn't allowed direct access to the lists of the Emperor's Spoken Word kept.⁶

COP: The person you're going to want to go to if you want to activate the intelligence apparatus is the Master of the Cenobites. I frankly advise against it. There's a lot of discontent in the city.

Rounding up a bunch of people who are... Well, they're very irritating and they're heretics but they do go on about peace a lot. A roundup would cause ill-feeling and disruption, which is the last thing you want.

The fellow who had accumulated the elephants was also the Master of the Cenobites, Orsorkhon.

The Overseer shook their hands and warned them that a) the Emperor had yet to make a decision about what to do with the Bat-Man aka the Chief Feeder of the Crimson Bat b) the Chairman of the Senate was still rampaging about trying to make their lives harder and c) if only he could work out where 'that damned assassin' who had killed the Bat Man's father was he could perhaps sort the whole mess out.

"(The Chairman) is going to continue his vendetta because he hasn't got anybody better to vendet against. This could get very messy from a political point of view."

Meanwhile at the Fourth Pelandan Foot, the commanding officer greeted them and hoped their charming officer was well before asking what brought them to him.

Jarathir turned on the Charm and the GM checked to see how greedy the CO was feeling... And not at all. He rolled an 01 on the greediness scale.

CO: But of course! My dear chap!

JARATHIR And we will be trying to place you in as prestigious a place as possible in the parade. I believe my officer said you were rehearsing?

He took them outside to watch the marching up and down practice. Jarathir and Sandene could see that there were two NCOs whose squads were outstanding and could afford to skip further rehearsals. The CO had the Captain march the two squads to the Master's office so he could choose which got which cushy job.

⁶ The Imperial Security Service

They then went to speak to the Elephant Man and found their officer and Vostor on their mission. The Master of the Cenobites admitted that elephants were messy beasts but said that the Mahout was the expert on their care and usage. He wrote a letter commanding co-operating with the Master of Circuses. He also mentioned a solution to the defecation problem.

ORSORKHON: I have many penitents who would regard it as an honour to clean up elephant shit in the sight of the Emperor.

JARATHIR A filthy but honourable occupation.

ORSHORKHON: And it will take their minds from the pleasures of the flesh. If anything can take their minds off the pleasures of the flesh it is elephant shit. Is that all?

ESHAN: Ah yes. The White Moonies.

ORSHORKHON: What about the scum? The despicable, heretical scum.

VOSTOR: (*Sotto Voce*) We know where he stands.

ESHAN: We have a requirement to make sure they don't cause any trouble during this parade.

JARATHIR I believe the requirement was for an assurance that there would be no trouble.

ORSHORKHON: You have an expression of doubt upon your face.

JARATHIR An actual crackdown on dissidents usually causes a bit of a backlash. Sir.

ORSHORKHON: But they are a tiny, tiny minority.

JARATHIR It just takes one of that tiny minority and a rotten fruit for the Emperor to be very, very upset.

ORSHORKHON: If I lock them all up then there won't be a problem, fruit or not.

JARATHIR Are you certain you know every single one of them and all their sympathisers.

ORSHORKHON: I would not wish to disappoint the Emperor....

JARATHIR It is his bodyguard who is demanding this.

ORSHORKHON: Beat-Pot Aelwrin? (*Sniff*)

JARATHIR Perhaps an assurance from yourself in writing might suffice.

ORSHORKHON: I will consult with the Emperor's Spoken Word and see what they can

give me. This is a very hard dilemma. Obviously disorder in the streets is the last thing we want. I'll see what manpower he can spare. I'll send a reply to your Senator. Do go and see the Mahout. I'll see about organising some shit shovellers.

JARATHIR (*Murmurs*) Most kind.

Meanwhile, Keanus was scanning as he and the Senator progressed along the streets, noticed people on rooftops on both sides of the street. He caught them out of the corner of his eye and when he turned his head they were no longer to be seen.

When they got to the office there was a long queue on which the Senator spread charm and re-assurance. He got settled in and began assigning staff to various tasks. Nothing much happened for a while: Keanus stayed alert and was happy to see the arrival of the officer from the Fourth Pelandan Foot bringing the squads that had been designated to guard the Senator's office and villa.

After a perfunctory inspection a choice was made. Keanus, as subsequent events proved, had become a little less alert than was needed.

Eshan, having declined a chance to inspect the elephants, went to find the Senator. When he arrived, he and Vostor were more observant. There was something about the way a servant was putting a tray down on the Senator's desk that disturbed them.

ESHAN: (*Putting himself between the servant and the exit*) Please stop.

The servant put on an incredible burst of speed and got out of the room. Not as fast as Vostor's Disruption spell. He and Keanus came into the corridor outside in time to see him turning a corner.

KEANUS Stop him!

The squad of soldiers moved sluggishly to obey. Eshan followed and shouted orders "In the name of the Emperor!" And with that patriotic

exhortation the nearest soldier did a flying tackle which the assassin failed to avoid.

Vostor turned back into the office and retrieved the tray.

SENATOR: What? I say what?

VOSTOR: The soup smells a bit off. I'll find something else.

The would be killer drew a dagger as he writhed upon the ground and stabbed the person who had pulled him down. As the injured man let go Eshan grabbed his arm and Keanus joined in the effort.

PUM: Subdue him.

GRAHAM: Knee to the face.

ALAN: Kick him.

GM: Don't tell me what you might do, tell me what you are doing.

PUM: Punch or head butt.

GM: Make a choice!

There was a nasty little brawl and an over-enthusiastic punch to the abdomen caused the suspect to utter a divine name (his Deity was Not At Home) and die. Disrupt plus a punch followed by a kick can be enough to kill an average person. This surprised the players for some reason.

So their investigation became a little more difficult. They stashed the body and searched it. Eshan failed to find anything. Keanus found a mark in the small of his back but having fumbled his Cult Lore [Seven Mothers] took it for a birthmark. Eshan though managed to recognise it as the mark his granny had told him about: the Cult of Fudgeneeah.⁷

A cult of assassins in the Lunar Heartlands. Legendary according to Eshan's Granny.

DRAK: You killed a legendary assassin with your boot.

GM: Alas, what boots it?

⁷ Look, you try to come up with a convincingly Gloranthan name on the spur of the moment. TPPoE&A: So why didn't you have this preplanned?

SENATOR: Would you go to the kitchens and get a safe meal for me? I don't want you to do anything heroic but I'd like it to have been tasted before I eat it.

Vostor went out to the nearest pie shop and got a couple of pies, nibbling a little out of each just to be safe and while he was doing this he got a strong sensation of being watched. He wasn't sure where it was coming from. He got the impression that he saw something on the roofs over the square outside.

VOSTOR: It's probably the roofers fixing something..

ANOTHER SQUADDIE: With a crossbow?

VOSTOR: I did wonder about that.

There was a worker up on the roof. But Vostor thought that wasn't what he had seen.

Jarathir was learning more than he had ever wished to know about elephants. The Mahout thought it would be best to have them at the rear of the parade.

MAHOUT: If they get excited, they do tend to digest more swiftly and thoroughly. I do have to feed them before parades

JARATHIR Because they would go off and look for food?

MAHOUT: Indeed. There is just the major thing of keeping mice away from them.

JARATHIR We've been promised penitents to clear up after them Perhaps we could have a few penitents to go ahead with brooms just in case.

So when he and Sandene got back the office they too looked at the surrounding area and this time they were the ones who clearly saw the ambush forming with ranged weapons atop overlooking buildings. The two of them looked at one another and then chose a roof top to go and remonstrate with people.

ME: My genius must be free to flow! TPPoE&A: You could have mentioned the Cult of the Blue Moon.

ME: (Grumpily) It's easy if you look it up afterwards

The lurking strangers has disappeared when they got up there. Sandene found tracks leading to a nearby ornamental chimney disguised as a turret. Using their Battle experience they followed moving either side of the pillar to surprise a man with a crossbow.

SANDENE Drop it.

The assassin did drop the crossbow and then climbed over the balustrade as if to follow it. Sandene hit him with a sling stone, wounding his leg which caused his planned controlled fall into a plunge to his death.

The watchers on the other roofs had vanished.

When they got to the bottom they found he had the same mark in the small of his back.

SENATOR: Somebody is spending a huge amount of money on this.

The Chief Overseer turned up then and reported that he had the name of the person who pressured both the Keeper of Horrors and the official in charge of the Sky Watch. "I don't know if they will be willing to testify. Do you know of anyone willing to testify against the Chairman."

Jarathir told him about the Wyrms without revealing its location. "We've got quite a lot of these Assassin types on the rooftops around here."

SENATOR: We have the problem of getting the Wyrms into the City. It's a matter of urgency. Only an Imperial edict can find someone of the Chairman's rank guilty of anything.

JARATHIR The Dart War thing?

SENATOR: Yes. He's already accused of going beyond the informal guidelines. I need to get the Wyrms into the presence of the Emperor.

ESHAN: Can we get Beat-Pot Aelwrn to help us? If you want to get somebody to the Emperor, no better person than his bodyguard.

SENATOR: Very well. I can't go myself. Eshan, do you feel up to an audience with the Emperor.

ESHAN: Yes. (What else could he say?)

There was discussion about how this could ensure that one of the squad would end up as the soul sacrificed to dedicate the new banner of the Legion.

VOSTOR: Really? You want *my* soul in the banner?

ESHAN: It wouldn't be our choice. But the Emperor might say... Here's your volunteer.

Later in a steam room in the Imperial palace Eshan and Jarathir were sweltering. When the Emperor came in, wearing nothing more complicated than a smile, they prostrated themselves.

MOONSON: (*Settling himself*) Rise, rise.

I would like to assure my readers that this group of players has a reputation for cleanly and intellectually stimulating repartee under these circumstances. I would like to but it wouldn't be true.

Beat-Pot Aelwrn was also in the room. To Eshan and Jarathir's shock their initial request to him had been referred instantly upwards. He was sweating even more than they were in his ornate guarding-the-Emperor armour.

START FLASHBACK:

BEAT-POT AELWRIN: You want to introduce a wild beast, which recently attempted to kill a citizen...

JARATHIR A sentient beast who was bribed...

B-PA: Allegedly. Whatever it's motives. You want me to introduce it to the Emperor.

JARATHIR I could kill it. You should have no problem.

Something that may once have been a smile, crossed the former kitchen slave's lips.

END FLASHBACK

EMPEROR: And the reasons I should agree to this are?

ESHAN: The Master of Circuses is currently under observation and being attacked by a group

of assassins.

And he lay a patch of skin bearing the dread rune at the feet of the Emperor. (Taken from the one who fell off the roof.)

EMPEROR: Very well, bring the Wyrn here. Hmm, Beat-Pot, provide an escort for the beast from the Senator's vineyard to the Palace.

As the Emperor did not want to put the loyalty (or the law-abidingness) of the Aerial Watch to the test, they escorted him along the ground between a squad of the Emperor's Bodyguard. Which caused a certain amount of consternation among the general populace in the later afternoon.

DRAK: This is irrelevant to the current situation but not to the one before. Does the Emperor have a belly button?

GM: Oh. (After a moment's thought.) Yes, yes he does indeed. How could you doubt it? He is the perfect man. Does the perfect man lack a belly button?

Jokes about Ken Doll and the Action Man toy (the UK version of GI Joe) followed.

The Senator and his daughter were summoned. Likewise the Chairman. The Wyrn gave evidence.

EMPEROR: I believe this noble... creature. Right. Justice. What is the just thing to do? (*To the Chairman who was rising to his feet*) No! Don't say a word! Justice. In the interests of the peace in the Capital, I hereby observe that the Guidelines Regarding Dark Contests have been exceeded. Not wishing to punish anybody for their well-meant and fervent service to the Empire, I am therefore directing the Chief Feeder of the Cult of the Bat should immediately deployed to the Eastern Front, there to lead the efforts of the Cult to recruit more members, to feed the Bat and generally to carry out their duties some distance from the Capital. Furthermore, I hereby order that he be accompanied by his closest relative who can look after him until he has fully recovered from his recent injury. A period of no less than a full

season should cover that, don't you think. And I look forward to the fruits of your labours in a few days' time, Master of the Circuses.

He rose ending the court and a squad of his bodyguard surrounded the Chairman of the Senate.

EMPEROR: (*Pausing on the way out*) Oh, and somebody will have to go and have a word with the Cult of Fudgeneeah. Is there a volunteer in the room?

Eshan and Jarathir stepped forward. Sandene stepped back.

EMPEROR: Just one will do. Beat-Pot give them the introduction.

Graham wondered if there would need to be a replacement for the Chair of the Senate and was told no, he was just 'spending more time with his family' not being fired. Drak wondered if the Wyrn was going to get his freedom so the GM rolled to check the creature's courage. The Wyrn did not speak but looked unhappy and the Emperor noticed.

EMPEROR: Ah, yes. You. Your evidence has erased any offences against the Empire. It is our will that you be taken... That you be escorted to the place from which you were taken and returned to your native habitat. Do not annoy the Empire again. That's all. Carry on.

SENATOR: Well that went well. I think.

JARATHIR You didn't get appointed chair of the Senate so that's a plus.

The Senator looked appalled and his daughter looked wistful

Sandene poked Vostor to check he was still alive: he had been silent for a record amount of time.

JARATHIR Last time he was told to be silent. He's still obeying.

Beat-Pot came back and handed a small object to Eshan.

B-PA: This is a tracer. It will take you to the current head of the Cult of Fudgeneeah. When you find them you should give them this letter from the Emperor. And then well, presuming they let you go we will thank you for your service.

JARATHIR You know what? A week ago I was thinking I'd get to see the Emperor for about thirty seconds when he gave me a medal.

SANDENE You got to see a lot more of him than you thought you would.

The object was a small stone that went 'bleep-bleep-bleep' when Eshan held it and then pointed a glowing arrow in a particular direction through the streets of Glamour.

DRAK: It's a very specific Sense Assassin matrix.

The squad volunteered to go with him but being the nice chap he was, he asked their opinion and given the choice they thought it wise that he go alone lest they annoy the assassins.

He kept going through the streets until he came to a small square, not the nicest nor the best in the city. Seated on a bench by a large fountain was a large, black and white cat.

The stone pointed at the cat.

CAT: Yes?

ESHAN: I have a letter from the Emperor.

At the cat's direction, Eshan put the letter down. The touch of his paw on the seal opened it and at the cat's command Eshan read it out loud. The letter instructed the Cult of Fudgeneeah to leave the Senator alone and to take no further commissions on his life.

CAT: We have been paid. Are you in charge of the soldiers who killed two of our people?

ESHAN: Yes.

CAT: Congratulations'. I suppose. Do not expect to be able to commission us in the future. Leave the stone over there.

VOSTOR: The assassin's guild holds grudges? If they can't train their people properly it's not my fault.

JARATHIR Why would you pay someone else to kill somebody?

Back at the Insula, the Janitrix greeted the Senator.

JANITRIX: My lord, this was in the room: they found it while cleaning up. I don't what you want to do with it.

This was a book. It had the Runes of Light with Chaos beneath it and Law above it. Which Jarathir recognised as probably Nysalor.

The Senator wasn't sure what he was going to do with this. Jarathir pointed out the creature which was jumping bodies was associated with Nysalor. On Jarathir's advice he went to speak to the Illuminate who lived in room V/1a and when he came back he didn't have the book.

That worthy spoke to Jarathir later on and was carrying the book.

KRISHNAN: You weren't curious?

JARATHIR Oh, of course. But it's not for me to tell the Senator what to do.

KRISHNAN: *I'm* not going to read it. I *am* illuminated and if I were to acquire illumination of a different kind it might be very difficult for me.

JARATHIR There's different kinds?

KRISHNAN: Oh, yes. Different flavours, different viewpoints. You probably don't want to listen to too many illuminates. I wonder if I should take this to... Do I want to draw his attention. Hmm. Have you heard? There are rumours that there's going to be a crackdown on.... dissidents.

JARATHIR I have heard such rumours. I have even been in the room when such things were suggested.

KRISHNAN: Ah. Have you ever heard the expression. 'herding cats'? One thing that is harder than herding Illuminates is herding revolutionaries. You sure you won't be tempted?

JARATHIR It's not the Senator's to give away now.

KRISHNAN: I will pick it up from you in the morning.

Jarathir resolved to find somewhere to read that would be out of sight of everyone. (Drak succeeded on his Hide roll to his delight and amazement.) He went up to find a niche on the roof.

When he opened the volume he found a bookplate inside which identified the book as property of the Chief Examiner of the Red Moon. He couldn't recall what it was that worthy person did.⁸ There were indentures on the edge of the book showing seven sections. (Does anyone have a family Bible like mine which had this feature allowing you to find Numbers or Jonah in a hurry?)

The first section was related to the skill of Animal Lore. (*GM: And if it's too low I'll boost it up to your INT as a percentage.*) Drak couldn't even find Animal Lore on his Character Sheet and his character couldn't make head nor tail of the animal-based parables in the text.

The Second area was Insight (Human) which he succeeded in. This talked about humans and how they varied between genders, between culture and what their faces reveal about themselves. Masks got mentioned a lot.

The Third talked about Minerals (*GRAHAM: Look at the rocks on that!*) Drak made a critical roll and read about how the Gods made the world out of stuff and why they created the various kinds of stuff. It also mentioned that the World Machine was going to be restored any day now.

The Fourth talked about Plants. That too went over the reader's head. But Celestial Lore on the Fifth spoke to his soul.

The Sixth had Spirit Lore but the ways of the Spirits did not speak to Jarathir.

The last tab, the Seventh, had the Rune of Fate upon it, the Spider Web of Arachne Solara. And though it talked a lot about Spiders the skill tested was Elder Race Lore. And it talked about how to grow closer to the Great Spider.

And then I had him roll under his increased Illumination total. And as the Sun rose that morning Jarathir saw Everything and it was very.... interrelated.

I really should have refreshed my memory on the effects of Illumination before this point. My lack of preparation for something that had been building for weeks caused an early night for us all.

DRAK: 'Come to the Capital: Get Illuminated' That's what's going on my postcard.

MARTIN: I went to Glamour and all I got was this lousy lightbulb.

At the end of the book was a note that said: If you understood this, please return it to the Library.

When Jarathir came down for breakfast the Old Man from V/1a was in lotus position in the corridor outside his apartment.

He looked up at the soldier who looked back at him and saw him glowing with an inner pale light.

KRISHNAN: Ah! Is it so? Can I interest you in the philosophy of the White Moon?

JARATHIR (*Tapped his army insignia*) I believe we may have irreconcilable differences.

KRISHNAN: Ah, that's sad. You may wish to have words with owner of that book.

JARATHIR It said to return it to the Library.

Krishnan gave directions to the Temple of the Red Goddess and the office of the Examiner.

Jarathir requested permission for some personal time that morning, saying he should be back by lunchtime at the latest. Eshan could tell that he

⁸ *MARTIN: He examines chiefs.*

had changed. His body language was not as it was.

ALAN: Serene?

DRAK: Confused.

I did remember to give them a chance to increase their Reputation during wrap up.

DISTRACTIONS

GM: Nobody around this table has been snatched up to heaven, I notice.

Tick-Tock was having a Rapture moment because of the feast of Rosh Hashanah one of the names of which is Festival of Trumpets.

DRAK: Somebody has suddenly noticed there's a Jewish Festival with Trumpets.

GM: Well, you know how these things go. Somebody in South Africa says he's had a vision... The next thing you know the whole Internet is buzzing.

MARTIN: "God has postponed the Rapture until the Epstein Files are released."

COMMENTARIAT ON E&A II

A GRAND COVER! AGAIN!

PUM: RYCT Me: Why, whatever else could I possibly have meant.

CLARK B. TIMMINS: An IgTheme that was so good I erased my own. Good point on 'Gaps': Glorantha used to have Blank Lands on the map which the company said it would not develop but leave to individual GMs. IN NOMINE had Areas of Doubt and Uncertainty which were more cosmological than geographical.

BRIAN ROGERS: Re High School Narnia. Whichever book you choose to adapt there is an enormous challenge in costuming and special effects. The Lion, the Beavers and the Faun are hard enough. But the winged horse in THE MAGICIAN'S NEPHEW? More ambitious than

any school play I was ever in. //Re MOTHER HUBBARD. She gets crime tipoffs from her aching aged bones? I get those! I wonder if there's a book somewhere on divination by arthritis? I could be collecting rewards!

ROGER B_W: Re TRAVELLER TNE:

Looking back on it, I do wonder why a setting that had always had trouble with computer technology more advanced than they knew in the 1970s decided the way to fix this was go back to even more primitive computers. A reaction against Cyberpunk probably. // Re IgTheme essay: You should always design the central 'miracle' technology first, its limits and capacities. It's noticeable that this is often poor in TV SF. Then you add the later wonders which develop out of plot necessity. You should not forget them the way TV scriptwriters do. And then you can start to tear your hair out because the players ask questions you cannot answer which change the nature of what you thought you had sorted out.

MYLES COCORAN: RYCT ROGER

B_W: A creepy product of the new technology that keeps appearing in my YouTube feed is "Then and Now" portraits of cast members of popular TV shows. This shows Then And Now standing side by side, usually on the sets of the old show, arms across each other's shoulders and grinning at the camera. Which is creepy enough but in cases where the artist has died they are shown at the age they were when they passed away and wearing a halo or a pair of wings. // And a lot of WW2 based AI Schlock too. // And what is more the 'humanity uber alles' stories of first contact with decadent galactic cultures reek of being composed by artificial means. Aren't algorithms supposed to give me things I'll like?

LISA PADOL: : RYCT Me: That's the City precisely. And it has turned into a place big enough that people can live their lives for several generations without thinking much about the purpose and needs of the City. And when the Gods revive and try to start things up again there will be ructions. // What more details of Lictors would you like? I'm not at all sure I will ever do full write-ups of the games: I'm missing rather

too many recordings. But there is a crisis coming: I want to bring on the counter-revolution against the reformist Emperor and have the Lictors become aware quite how much some people hate the whole Magistrate reform. I have (perhaps unnecessarily) brought in time-travel elements in part to reveal the true background of their Magistrate (he's an immigrant from modern Earth) and in part because just can't help myself. // Vostor is Graham's character. They're all like that even the one who was mute.

PATRICK RILEY: RYCT Me: Oh, I am well aware that the translator stones were my present to myself. But I also burdened myself with perpetual player questions about how this works. "Why does that pun work in both languages?" "Can they tell we don't have lip sync?" And others.

PATRICK ZOCH: Thank you for your notes on Interrogation which is a thing that happens often in the LICTORS game. Mostly it's Chris playing Lester, the upright, uptight Beat Cop and Deborah playing Honorius, the too-clever-by-half lawyer. (Deborah is a barrister in real life but as an insurance lawyer doesn't get to put the moves on criminals. I may be giving her too much fantasy fulfilment.) Lester goes for dour explanation of just how much trouble they are in and twisting their words into fresh accusations. Honorius prefers demonstrating that they are in trouble no matter what they say so they had best co-operate.

AVRAM GRUMER: I too picked up TWO SIDES OF THE COIN on impulse and I too have been puzzled by it. If you ever get a game let me know. It's one I haven't figure out yet and have no idea how to sell it to my players. // RYCT Lisa Padol: Despite my efforts to give that impression, I do not in fact know Everything. Some mornings I doubt I know anything.

JIM VASSILAKOS: Re Early Computer Science Courses: When I was first exposed to computer programming I was a fifth year (16 or so) and they gave us the chance to learn FORTRAN. With punch cards. By the

time you were exposed to the field in college, the first generation of programmers had reached the stage of being able to bluff about their experience, get a job in academia and stop learning new stuff. **RYCT Me:** It's late at night here and I'm getting to the end of this zine so I'm not going to get to the stash of Gloranthan stuff out. But a check at THE WELL OF DALIATH says Styx is mentioned as one of the gods of Darkness as early as WYRMS FOOTNOTES 7 in 1979 and in GODS OF GLORANTHA in 1985. The connections of the Styx to discouraging vampires was (I think) in the earliest descriptions of Vivamort when he was still thought of as a god rather than the product of perverse sorcery. He too is first described in WF 7.

So it looks like an early adaptation of the Greek myth by GS.

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: RYCT Me: I love a good court scene especially when I don't have to pay too much attention to the realities of the law. Watching CROWN COURT and other TV from the 1970s and 80s is sometimes a little painful. I can see the creaking sets and the acting looks strange. Jeremy Brett's Holmes and Guinness' Smiley are exceptions as is everything in I CLAUDIUS.

MY FINAL WORD FOR THIS ISSUE:

CRENEL or CRENELLE: The notch or embrasure along battlements that form a Crenelation. If you didn't have a Royal Crenelation Licence the King would send people around to make you take it down as an Adulterine construction.

Take good care of yourselves and of yours as you quest for the Grail you band of Knights Errant, you.

An Unlooked For Zine #11

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NATTER

Thanks to all for the good wishes sent Josh's way.

Recent Reading

The Count of Monte Cristo: I've reached the end of chapter 93. We're going to double the amount of reading at this point (from 3 to 6 chapters per week). Highlights include the challenge to a duel and Mercedes being amazing.

Pillars of Sand: This is the laid out pdf of the revised campaign we playtested. I've just started it, but thus far, I'm seeing definite improvements to an already strong campaign.

Realis Ashcan: An interesting rpg, and I backed the expanded edition (www.kickstarter.com/projects/crum/realis/description) . It doesn't have a randomizer, but runs on sentences and their values and applicability. These sentences get more powerful, but also more limited, over time, and eventually, the sentences are "retired". After a certain number of sentences are retired, the character also retires.

Recent Watching

Continuing

Unveil Jadewind: Now finished (unless and until they do another season).

Frieren: We finished 1st season and are taking a break before the next one.

My Hero Academia: We're in the middle of the final season, by which I mean about 3 or 4 episodes in. One particular shoe I was expecting to drop has done so.

Awards

A couple of rpg awards announced:

<https://www.igdnonline.com/groundbreakers>
<https://www.rascal.news/the-inaugural-canada-roles-awards-celebrates-canadian-rpgs/>

Also, the Hugos finalists have been announced:
<https://www.lacon.org/hugofinalists/>

COMMENTS ON EVER AND ANON ISSUE #11

PEDRO PANHOCA DA SILVA AND MAIRA ZUCOLOTTO: re Stories Thief: Interesting. re me: Ah, I see. That makes sense.

MARK WILSON: re city igttheme: I watched the video and concluded I don't do nearly so much work, but Josh tells me I am incorrect. I generally use either real cities or cities in published rpg material, so I'm not making big decisions like how a city is ruled, what its economy is like, and so on. Heck, I don't think I even think about a city's economy as a GM.

Factions, sure, at least to a point. When I run Dracula Dossier, I don't have the foggiest idea of what the actual political, professional, or economical factions are. I do know what EDOM is up to, what its sub-factions are, and what other factions are allied or opposed to it. I do make relationship maps. I may have some idea of London landmarks, but I don't know a lot of details, and unless they're immediately relevant for gaming purposes, I don't really care.

In my Urban Shadows game, as it's set in NYC, I do have an idea of what the landmarks are, and they're more likely to be at least vaguely relevant. In theory, I should use advice from articles like <https://elmc.at/sandbox-settlements-prep-run-and-thrive/> I suppose?

re small events not necessarily related to the plot: Ah yes. Our default in the Kerberos Club Fate game was "Who's hosting tonight's ball?" PCs and NPCs mingled, and not everything was Immediately Relevant to plot threads. re not worrying about over-prepping: Fair. I've found that it's generally better than under-prepping, although I've found that I often need less prep than I think.

re me re recent write ups: Ah, thanks for the explanation. re Design: Oddly, between this and the city igttheme thoughts, I'm reminded of the most recent season of *Only Murders in the Building*, part of which centers around a secret casino. re Media Roundup re

Faramir: He's a very different character in the book than in the movie.

PAUL HOLMAN: re Wednesday GURPS game: Secular powers annoyed at the gods returning and poking their noses into everything? Who'd have thought? (I mean, okay, everyone.)

re setting igheme: Verisimilitude is good, yes, although often, I'm fine if that is applied with genre conventions in mind. re Night's Hacked Agents: Yes, definitely start playing and hit *Double Tap* later.

MATT STEVENS: re boring: Boring can be good, though finding a gaming group is also good. Anything in particular you want to play/run? re setting igheme: You did way more work than I would have, or at any rate, a different kind of work. Me, I take from published material and collage it all together.

re *World of Warcraft*: With very little effort, I can absolutely hear Jessica screaming that. re Gardner Fox re crashing in Belgium and having an adventure in a chocolate factory: I can think of worse ideas. Hey, who knows what hidden heinousness is going on inside the factory? Or, you know, have wherever in Belgium the PCs are be besieged, whether by human troops or mutant dinosaurs or something else.

re Erica Frank re the idea being that there should be enough action and other cool stuff "that the "mystery" is almost an afterthought": Yes. That worked quite well. I won't say I don't do figure-it-out mystery plots, but I'm more interested in genre/game conventions than actual mystery solving, and more interested in other elements than even that.

I've run the campaign *Eternal Lies* for *Trail of Cthulhu*, first as a playtest for three of the chapters, then in full, then 2/3 to 3/4 of the way through before scheduling issues killed that run. The PCs are trying to find out, among other things, what Outer God is active, and while that's not unimportant, it's significant that:

- I could totally replace the one Pelgrane uses with any of a number of others, and it wouldn't change a thing.
- Josh, who was in the playtest, which covered the reveal, misremembered who it was, and his false memory would work at least as well as the actual answer.
- One of the players in the second run was utterly delighted that neither the cultists nor the PCs were sure just which Outer God this was.

Now, *Eternal Lies* works best as Noir, not Pulp, so the genre conventions are a bit different, but as you say, the actual mystery is *almost* an afterthought. The relationships between the PCs and between them and

the NPCs were important, as was, at least the way it went with our groups, the question: What will you do, how far will you go, what heinous deeds will you perform in the name of saving the world?

re me re basing a *Star Wars* game on the Holiday Special: The man who ran the *Star Wars* larp I played in at Intercon X was a firm supporter of the entire canon, including the Holiday Special, though, fortunately, not limited to it.

re game jam: Why this and not that? Why this way and not the way you think makes most sense? Well, we're not you, and have different priorities. This may not be a helpful answer, of course. Looking at it from other angles, some people do this for fun and don't worry whether their entry is perfect (and don't complain when someone points out that it isn't). And I very much doubt that most folks working on a Whale Whores game jam would take themselves too seriously.

I suspect that, like 24- or 48-hour larp writing competitions, another attraction of this sort of game jam is it gives one permission to suck. In the larp circles we're in, one can absolutely be a perfectionist—and never get a finished larp for folks to play. Doing it as part of a jam or time-limited and/or theme ingredient limited event means that one knows it's not going to be perfect. We've done a couple of contest entries that were not bad, and the contest netted us feedback which we then used to make the games actually good.

I have yet to participate in a Storygames game jam, even though Josh and I are working on *Dangerous Refuge*. I love that they exist, and some games that started as a minimalist joke somehow evolved into a viable hack or playset.

re Joshua Kronengold: For a hypothetical Whale Whores jam, if I were actually participating, I wouldn't want to do one iota of work on the setting that I didn't have to. I'd want a concept, and then I'd run with it. I wouldn't care if the end result were one page or ten, if I invented rules or grabbed some existing system I could legitimately grab. I'd be doing this for fun and silliness, and putting the end result up likely as PWYW. For setting seriousness, I have *Dangerous Refuge* to work on (or, you know, the campaigns I'm running / want to run / want to get back up and running).

CLARK TIMMINS: I think you'd like *Swords of the Serpentine*. It sparks lots of ideas and has enough detail to give me a sense of the city of Eversink without overwhelming me. The same is true for me for *Over the Edge's* Al Amarja, and the scenario book for the most recent edition (which I have yet to read) explicitly says that the outcomes of scenarios will change the

setting, and that's intentional. Groups are expected to make the setting their own.

re *Star Trek* setting: It depends on the game. In 1989-1990, I played in a FASA *Star Trek* game where we were all Klingons. This was set pre-Next Generation, and possibly pre-original series. re Myles Corcoran: In *Frieren*, one spell the title character finds quite useful, *iirc*, is a spell for getting stains out of clothing.

JOHN REDDEN: It's been years since I saw *Forbidden Planet*. Here's to safe, speedy, and boring surgery and recovery. re me: *Gateways to Terror* has 3 scenarios, all one-offs. I believe *Doors to Darkness*, *Does Love Forgive*, and *Nameless Horrors* are composed of one-shots as well, but haven't yet read them. The ones I know are campaigns are *Two-Headed Serpent*, *A Cold Fire Within*, *Order of the Stone*, *No Time to Scream*, and *Sutra of Pale Leaves* (again, I have yet to read these). I'm less sure about the rest.

BRIAN ROGERS: I'm glad the play went well. That is clever set design. re Inside the Library roll call: The henchbeings are all NPCs, correct? I love Conrad's bogglement at the diamond harp strings and Eldon's response. What does "the cult of Molyneaux's banning of alchemy in Cabra when they had control caused Eldon to fight as fight for the" mean? I think there's a typo or something in there.

re Blanche's blessings: It's a good call. The character shouldn't lose a blessing before even realizing they have it and having an opportunity to lose it—unless the player knows it exists and would rather swap it out. re backpack technology: Fascinating. I love the hilarity that ensued with the Potion of Spines. LOL at "you were willing to let *me* die down there but you rush down to save the gorillas?" Also, wow, epic battle with a cliffhanger!

re Mother Hubbard: Wow. Oddly, this is easier to wrap my head around than some previous entries in your series. Heck, I'm thinking of Seanan McGuire's *Indexing*, which is quite predictable of me. re Cosmic Awareness vs a red Batphone equivalent: Either works. I'm reminded of Jonathan Tweet explaining, back in 1995, why my *Everway* character's prophecy power cost 0 points (paraphrasing): It doesn't come up often. It's not major. Is it something you decide when it happens? No? It's something I decide when it happens and what that means? Zero point power.

I don't understand the logic behind stat changes with Longevity, but sure, her stats make sense thematically, which is the important thing. I love the idea that she was the one who trained Lady Satan!

ROGER BELL_WEST: re Amazing Adventures: Sounds like it's not the best system for me. I, too, want to play

my character and not worry about optimization. It's a pity, as the adventure itself sounds like a lot of fun. re Day After Ragnarok: I love the snake diplomacy. I like the term "field-expedient decontamination" in the context of removing magical/spiritual influence. re 2300AD / Project Bayern: I love the self-control roll needed to not explain!

re Traveller: Not my jam, but I see your point. re settings igtheme re maybe loving designing settings more than running games in them: I consider this a risk to be avoided by me, so I try to err on the side of doing less justice on the setting but running the game. re Ken Hite on the real world: Every time I open my mouth to say that he's wrong about that, I remember the setting for most of my games and close my mouth.

re sf settings: I generally avoid those because I am weak in the sciences, and most of my players aren't. I could see starting with the FTL question, since, as you say, it sets a lot of parameters and does it without requiring me to know a lot. But any sf setting I created would definitely feel much more like science fantasy going light on the science part. It's one reason I've only vaguely considered running *Blue Planet*, as it does better on the science than several other sf-y games.

Cyberpunk, IMO, isn't very solid in its science. I could absolutely be wrong here, but while I am not likely to run it for other reasons, this belief means I'm not intimidated by the setting. I'm itching to run *Blade Runner*, though I need to read the rpg first. Varja Enterprises's *Fates Worse Than Death* is, in some ways, oddly tempting to me, and that's precisely because I think the setting is over the top and absurd. The same is true of *Necrobiotic* (with its 40-some-odd years of "humanity doesn't Art), although I'm less sure about what kinds of scenario to run in that setting. The point is I don't think that the authors are much more knowledgeable about science than I am, so I'm not intimidated, and I'm not worried about the setting making perfect sense.

I'm not sure I could run a setting-as-puzzle game, though I could enjoy playing in one. I don't like setting-as-fake-puzzle. If you're giving me a mysterious setting and emphasizing the mystery part, I want a) there to be an answer to the mystery and b) for it to be a satisfying answer. Exactly what that means is murky, I admit—I'm fine with the Greater Arkham of *Cthulhu City* and with the "it's your game now, GM—you decide" of *Over the Edge*. I'm tentatively fine with *City of Mist*, though I still need to read the GM's book. I wasn't fine with *Edge of Midnight*, which is a bit odd, given how similar it is to these. I sort of know why, but am not sure how to describe it. I think it boils down to *Edge of Midnight* feeling both less well thought out and more nailed down, if that makes sense. Again, of course, these are personal preferences.

re Paul Holman re knowing why a city is there so as to make it more than just "city encounter zone": In theory, I agree. In practice, I'm not sure I actually try to do this. As I'm using either a real world city or a city from published material, it may not matter as much.

re Erica Frank re *Call of Cthulhu*: Oh yes. Often, folks who sign up for such games are very much willing to lean into the genre. When we did *Origins* regularly, I spent a lot of time with the same people year after year, all of us happily signing up for CoC, and there was a wide variety of scenarios.

re how much one likes *Brindlewood Bay* being the inverse of how much one likes mysteries: Not necessarily. I like mystery stories, and I also enjoyed playing *Brindlewood Bay*. Josh and I are currently looking at *Apocalypse Keys*, which is a far more complicated version of *Brindlewood Bay*, looking at more *Hellboy*-like scenarios, with a lot more power and more bells and whistles, and thinking of how it might work for Max Gladstone's Craft books. Josh noted that the thing to do there is to shift the focus. That is, mysteries qua mysteries work as they do in more traditional games, which is to say the GM knows the answer. What the roll-to-solve-mysteries would then become is the okay-now-we-know-the-evil-scheme/situation-and-try-to-stop-it roll. Currently, this is a half-baked idea, but one I'm interested in exploring.

re your irk with mystery shows: Yes! Very much this! re me re Offut-Asprin: What in my zine gave you those vibes? re constant play and *Call of Cthulhu*: That's probably why Chaosium has licensees and why it has Miskatonic Repository. That said, if there's a *Call of Cthulhu* campaign I'm running, and it's a campaign, not a one-shot, odds are it'll take at least 6 months, given scheduling issues.

re Chaosium hitting Cthulhu Reborn for copyright issues because they mention titles of older adventures they'd like to do conversion notes for: This seems odd to me, as I think conversion notes might actually increase sales for Chaosium. That said, copyright isn't my area of expertise. I know that Pelgrane has fan conversions on its website; I don't know if the fact that they're fan conversions and done for free makes them differ substantially from what Cthulhu Reborn wants to do. Peter Hildreth would have a better sense of the logistics, I suspect.

re having a timeline "if it's even slightly relevant": While one doesn't want to overwhelm folks with too much material, this is something that is often better to have and not need than to need and not have. There are exceptions. Fr'ex, in one larp I co-authored, I walked through every single PC's last 24-48 hours in

excruciating detail on their sheets. What I learned from this was that, while I needed to write it so that I had a clear picture of what had happened before the larp started, the players mostly did not need or want to read it.

LOL at the Garamond crop. Water it well with the best ink! re "the Monster That Shows The Author's Neuroses": Exactly. re Patrick Zoch re yog-sothoth.com players and food: Oh yes. I remember the momos discussions! When I ran *Tatters of the King*, I ordered in momos and other foods for the players, as we have a Nepalese restaurant in the area. (Actually, we currently have several Tibetan/Nepalese restaurants in the area.)

re *Horror on the Orient Express*: That is one of the many challenges of running that campaign. I have a link or three to give me a foundation if I ever do try to run it:

<https://total-party-kill.blogspot.com/search/label/Call%20of%20Cthulhu>

<https://morganhua.blogspot.com/2021/11/cthulhu-campaigns-run-times-and-thoughts.html>

Just found this:

<https://writeups.letsyouandhimfight.com/down-with-people/horror-on-the-orient-express/>

MYLES CORCORAN: My sympathies to Sam! How is she doing? Congratulations on being reelected chair of the club. I agree re the whole university hiring system,

re Mausritter write up re discussion being more like bickering: They are PCs, after all, so that's inevitable. Clever rescue plan! Trying to swipe the key during it was, IMO, foolish, but also typical of PCs, as was the taking too long to decide to actually do it. Nice creepy touch with the skeletons! It emphasizes that there was real danger here and sends a chill of the best kind, the one that hits after the danger is past.

I am curious: Why was this sleep trap set up? Why and how did it get dispelled? What would have happened if Gwen had told Whitethorn Ash the full story, including his sister's death? Is Whitethorn Ash alive, dead, or something else?

re me: Thanks for elaborating on *Mythic Bastionland*. re 3rd edition *Unknown Armies*: I think "condescending" and "pretentious" are often a matter of perception. As a lit major with a Ph.D., something someone else finds pretentious might not strike me as such. (See [https://www.explainxkcd.com/wiki/index.php/2501: Average Familiarity](https://www.explainxkcd.com/wiki/index.php/2501:_Average_Familiarity).) I doubt Greg intended to be either pretentious or condescending, but what worked linguistically in the past for a different demographic

may not work as well today. For another example, many find *Candela Obscura* too much watered-down *Blades in the Dark*; I find it a relief as it seems simple enough for me to understand and potentially run.

re favored and disfavored dice mechanics: Interesting. re Strange School: Aw, thanks. As for the "too many GMs", I think it was more a matter of clashing styles (a chart of which of all of us were more and less compatible with whom would be fascinating, if not precisely diplomatic, though I will say that everyone enjoyed playing with you) and a lack of discussion of what folks wanted in ways that would be easier to do today, especially with tools like zoom (although differing time zones would still be a thing).

re Joshua Kronengold re "I can't really square Dodge and Fitness as a trade off one for the other": Realistically, I agree. Game-wise, it's realistic that, as in some Powered by the Apocalypse games, if you suck at fighting, you suck at running away, and if you're good at one, you're good at the other; however, the tradeoff for realism is that characters not built for fights just generally suck when fights happen, and this is not something always in the player's control. This may not be a problem, but I can see the logic in trading realism for the kind of balancing 3rd ed *Unknown Armies* does.

GABRIEL ROARK: If you do see it, let me know what you think of *Yuri on Ice*.

MICHAEL CULE: re con going: I'd say take a full year off and see if you still want to completely write off convention going, as opposed to cutting back a lot. re Glamour write up re why the players lied in character: Might they perhaps have thought they were being asked in character? That asked, I know that someone once filled out a larp casting questionnaire, lying and saying they had no larping experience whatsoever, despite knowing that the GM knew that was not so. The GM was boggled by this. I have no idea whether or not the player was trying to make a joke. re music link: The youtube video is apparently no longer available.

I like the split party scenes, and I very much like Beat-Pot Aelwrin. What was the Kentarch twitchy about, apart from the obvious? re the possible subornment of the Skyguard: That can't be good. re forgetting to record armor and hit points and various names: Happens to all GMs rather a lot, alas.

re Brian Rogers re technology = bad, nature = good: This is why I liked the Bastet sourcebook for *Werewolf*. The cats actively liked cities and the comforts technology can bring. re Roger Bell_West re buildings that have seen a number of different uses: When WorldCon was in Helsinki, Josh and I went to a multilevel restaurant that I think used to be an orphanage. We've also seen large banks become

drugstores and large bookstores become any of a number of things, alas.

re Joshua Kronengold re *Over the Edge*: I consider the new edition a completely different game. I had fun playing it at Gen Con in 2019 and want to play and/or run it, but it is not the game I played and ran in the 1990s. That game is fine, and if one wants something simple and easy to internalize, it is the one I recommend. I am sad that Atlas Games waited so long to loosen its grasp on 1st/2nd edition *Over the Edge/WaRP*, as by the time it did, there was no demand for it any more.

re me: Thanks for the explanations. re moon as egg: This is an example of why I'm not exactly pushed to catch up with *Doctor Who*.

ERICA FRANK: I'm glad the Cloud Recess Brindlewood Bay adventure went well. re *Les Violettes Dangereuse*: Predictably, I'd rather the game be strong on relationships and weak on sciences than the other way around. re *Cage of Sand*: Interesting development. Did the way you packed up the deck make this session easier?

re settings igttheme re "good worldbuilding is wordy": Yes, exactly. Lee Gold once made the beginning of a list of things she wished had been included in *GURPS Vorkosigan*, and while I, too, would have been interested in the answers to most of her questions, that would have made the book far, far too long. re *Avatar: The Last Airbender*: I don't know what the Magpie Games PbtA game of it does and doesn't support, but for myself, I'd be fascinated to learn more about the infrastructure of that world in Korra's time.

Interesting theory about how the more common magic is, the less disruptive it is to the default D&D-ish setting. I think there are several games that do have *different* settings. *RuneQuest* comes to mind, of course, as does *Necrobiotic*, despite/because of its bonkers future history, and the same may be true of *Fates Worse Than Death*. *Blue Planet* is another good one, and at least makes some attempt to get the science right, as far as I can tell. Tekumel, despite its problematic author, is also fascinating.

re Myles Corcoran: What's the browser plug-in you use to claim your itch bundle items? re me: You have a lot more specifics than I use in your spreadsheet.

DYLAN CAPEL: I skipped the main *DIE Metadungeon* campaign, but did back for a pound, so might get sucked back in. I shall try to resist. re me: I'm trying to remember my thought process, as I do know that *Twilight 2000* predates *Castle Falkenstein*. Did it always have the hesitation mechanic, or did that get added in

the new edition? Likely, regardless of the answer, I thought it did.

re memory loss and diaries as somewhat detached artifacts: This came up in the *Phoenix Dawn Command* game I played, where a powerful being took and stored many people's memories in an archive, for Reasons, and later, for Other Reasons, allowed them access to "their books".

ME: re Avram Grumer re Keep Your Cool: I didn't address the "name what you're afraid of" part of the move. Normally, it would probably be something like this: Vriejme is rolling to keep its cool while taking an extradimensional shortcut through the Great Race of Yith's metaphysical backyard. What it fears is getting the attention of the Yithians." On a 7-9, then, the GM would say something like "You can take that shortcut, but you'll leave a trail that the Yithians can use to follow you home." And this would be fine because it's not undercutting the success that a 7-9 grants. Vriejme can choose whether or not to take the shortcut. If it chooses to do so, it succeeds, and it is vulnerable in the way the GM described.

However, in the example Avram gave, it might have gone more like this (Avram can say whether it did): Drake is rolling to Keep His Cool to smooth-talk Byron's parents without giving away the PCs' involvement. What he fears is giving away the PCs' involvement.

This may be a catch-22 problem. That 7-9 result means that Drake can succeed in smooth-taking without giving away the PCs' involvement by becoming vulnerable to... er... perhaps giving away the PCs' involvement. It's a potential headache.

As GM, what I'd do is say, "Okay, what else do you fear that you might become vulnerable to that *isn't* the exact thing you've managed to prevent?" As far as I can tell, that's not forbidden in the rules, and it would bring the result back to what I described. Heck, as far as I can tell, there's nothing that says the PC needs to be vulnerable to what the player said they feared; it's just strongly implied. Keep Your Cool is the catch-all thing you roll when no one's sure what the right Move is, just that there needs to be a Move, so it's not unlikely a group will wind up with a similar situation.

PATRICK RILEY: re setting igttheme: Another factor in not writing exhaustively about the setting is that this can get in the way of actually running the game. Sympathy re players forgetting about their own hooks. I've been there as a GM. To be fair, I have also occasionally forgotten in play some of what I said about one of my PCs *and wrote down on the sheet* during character creation.

re Adventurers Guild write up re you knowing Chayote's player hadn't forgotten she'd established her PC's motivation as finding her niece: I'm not entirely sure she didn't forget about it in the moment, as it were. Or perhaps more like she didn't realize there was an opportunity? As a GM, I'd want to have checked in with the player and said, "You know, you could ask about your niece in this town", especially if the player's never had the character do this. If the player's regularly done that, perhaps I would phrase it as "You're not going to ask about your niece?" Good call having the character ask around while the player is missing!

re wyvern-riding bandits: Yes, setting ground rules for yourself for the encounter is good. In retrospect, do you like how that encounter went? re mice: Fair point about the occasional false alarm. Anan's player insisted that the bandit leader kill the character? Kudos, I think? *Giggle* at Chayote's mixed feelings re her niece's actions and at Osmira's stammering when Millie asked for a critique.

re not playing PCs for absent players: Osmira's an NPC, correct? You could continue to do the roleplay, if so, and let the players suggest tactics, which might take some of the load off you. re "Though they had two real-world weeks to come up with a wish, the players hadn't.": So many of us resemble that remark. Is that why the djinn didn't have the power to grant wishes, or had you always intended the offer to have been a lie? *Giggle* at the notion of the boss monster not knowing to do anything with the Rod of Rulership than use it as a club.

re me: That's a weird sequence of crashers and the original player. re "Out of Gas": "The Train Job" is also excellent. I'd be hard pressed to say which of these two episodes is better. re *Monsterhearts*: Basically, the dice decide whether a PC or NPC is turned on, but the character's player decides what to do about it (within the limits of group consensus). This could mean blushing awkwardly or fleeing the room. When Avery talks about how we don't get to choose what turns us on, Avery's not saying that someone else does, just that this isn't necessarily in our conscious control. (I know *Monsterhearts* still isn't a game you want to play; that's fine.) re the player who had the dinosaurs run away: I echo that sigh.

re Joshua Kronengold re needing to get better at calligraphy to get better at swordsmanship: This reminds me of a larp where a character could get control over those who had accepted a certain number of gifts from them. The GMs gave the player cards to represent these, some of which were far more useful in game than others, and told the player that they wouldn't get more until they'd used up what they had.

The GMs underestimated the player's ingenuity.

Player: So, I can make you stronger. I also have to make you a great polo player if I do that, though. It's just part of the package.

Player being tempted: Sounds good to me!

re me: Thanks for the explanations re the token. re 5th box as placeholder: Good point. re not wanting to roll for every personal interaction: True, but when it's something important, I may prefer to leave it to chance/character skill than my own, even if I also use my words.

re Patrick Zoch re the game set at the academy for mutant youths where the player "got indignant that the school either endangered the children or allowed them to endanger themselves": School campaigns like that are tricky, especially if one refuses to accept certain genre conventions.

This came up in the Strange School PBEM game I ran from c. 2008-2012, as we often discussed what would and wouldn't make sense for the school. E.g.:

- How much prejudice does it make sense for some of the teachers to have against certain types of students before players decide that the teachers are just all terrible?
- How much bullying could someone get away with, given not just the teachers and staff, but also some of the students' abilities?
- What students could and couldn't get away with in terms of flouting the dress code ("Hey, it doesn't *say* boys can't wear skirts!") and extremely risqué costumes at the Halloween Dance.
- General consensus that a teacher who was once part of the Wild Hunt would be more acceptable to parents and board members if that background came out, even though he'd once hunted a student well before both were at the school, than a teacher who'd once done something like exotic dancing / escort work (I forget precisely what, but **MYLES** might remember, as he created that character) if that background came out.
- One player having problems with what she perceived as the level of incompetence / unavailability of the teachers when the entire reason her character couldn't reach them to have them deal with a situation was that I'd set up the situation so that her PC could do something cool to resolve it. I was boggled because I was not running the game of "Call an adult so they can resolve matters and your PC has nothing to do after that."
- Due to the nature of pbem, at least in part, I suspect, one player wondered whether a parent NPC was somehow robotic or perhaps monstrous because, as GM, I had the NPC keep coming back

to something their PC said and asking for clarification.

BRIAN MISIASZEK: Oh I do hope Peter Hildreth makes good on his threat to participate in E&A! I am sorry your administrative assistant had to step down.

re Mazorra write up: The three phase division is good. It's very helpful for the GM to know "Here are some things the PCs can try to do, here is how long it takes to do any one thing, and here is how long they have." I'm curious about why a quarter of the money is counterfeit—why that much, rather than less or more?

re the children in the attic: I agree with your approach, but I'm not sure I follow how the clocks work in practice. This isn't something to try to explain more fully to me now; it's something we may want to review when you have the full text available. Discussing what the various factions and individuals do at various specific times and what the PCs can accomplish reminds me of AEG's *Otosan Uchi* boxed set for *Legend of the 5 Rings*, which did something similar.

re me: Thanks for the details re "Guantanamo". re the author varying the lyrics: I know at least one performer who regularly does that, tossing in an extra chorus here, a variant on a verse there, and so on. re *Tales of the Caribbean*: Yes, that was one of the books I edited. I trusted the cartographer on the maps and mostly just checked to see if the map matched the text. I do wonder whether the author saw them ahead of time. Probably the basic thing that should have changed was the label, and I'm a little surprised this is the first time I've heard about the issue. Still, while I doubt Golden Goblin can do anything about this, I'll pass on your comment about the map, and in any case, thanks for the correction!

re Joshua Kronengold re Yog-Sothoth: Theoretically, that should be correct. In practice, I'm not sure how much of an abstract cosmic principle it is, given it sired two children, and the implication is that they were attempting to carry out its will in "The Dunwich Horror".

JIM ECKMAN: How are you enjoying *Maiden Holmes*? re *Devil Venerable Also Wants to Know*. I'm not sure if that's still on the site where I read it. That site led to another and when I did a search, I got this: <https://www.novelfodex.com/novel/00tw/devil-venerable-also-wants-to-know>. It may be about to be released officially for sale, which would be cool. I've not yet read *The Invisible Man* and should perhaps rectify that. I agree that (despite its flaws) *The Count of Monte Cristo* is a Great Book. re you not having been watching anime at the time you came up with the concept of the PCs on different sides: I forget the

name of the particular anime, alas, as it's one Josh was watching and I was largely ignoring.

HEATH ROW: re rpg tie-in novels: I read three *Legend of the 5 Rings* novels some years back: *Scorpion*, *Unicorn*, and *Crane*. *Scorpion* was the most useful, as it had the Scorpion Coup material that is in the background of the adventure in the *Otosan Uchi* boxed set, but *Unicorn* was my favorite as a novel because it felt less pinned to essential mega plot stuff.

I agree that *Sojourn* is no better or worse than any of a number of systems you might use. I like the map and I agree that the ephemera matter. re liking stuff like the weather, locations, et cetera: You might enjoy *The Hike That Binds Us*: <https://www.thehumbleapproach.com/store/the-hike-that-binds-us-full-game>. re organic chemistry paper: I might have used it some decades ago, but if so, I didn't notice the difference.

PATRICK ZOCH: re interrogation re bribes: The millionaire of the anime *The Millionaire Detective—Balance: Unlimited* offered bribes to great success. re "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": Have you told the players this in so many words? If not, do. They cannot read your mind (nor should they have to).

Your suggested intimidation tactics make sense. Again, talk with your players about this sort of thing, or refer them to media that show examples. I agree that assuming an NPC shares one's moral code is not always warranted. In one larp I was in, another PC asked if my character had no loyalty to Queen & Country, which was absurd, but also a reasonable mistake for the character to make. My character didn't see herself as having a different aim so much as different methods. (This was also not the most serious of games, and the characters were more chatting than seriously trying to persuade each other.)

For rapid fire questions designed to force the subject to slip up, I'd recommend rolling dice (or whatever) as a) I'm not sure I'm a fan of that much stress on the player level (remembering that the GM is also a player) and b) people who aren't trained interrogators IRL don't necessarily have the skill. I'd be fine asking the player, "Give me a sense of your tactics and your line of inquiry" so it's not just mechanics. Your "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" is very much in line with this, and I like the bonus for multiple people throwing questions at the subject.

"Pride-Ego Down" sounds like a use of a skill like Taunt or Fate's Provoke. "Informal Questioning" sounds like the Columbo technique. "Just one more thing—" In the end, the key is to give players some kind of roadmap of their options, whether that's the stuff you discussed or something like a Powered by the Apocalypse Move to Read a Person, which may well include finding out "What would it take to get you to do X?" where "X" is "Give us the information we want."

AVRAM GRUMER: re Prose vs TV as RPG Inspiration: The thing is, while it's useful to use TV metaphors and comparisons, it's also important to remember the differences between TV and RPGs. re "Maybe buy-in can be generated through a juicy setting or campaign premise?": These help, but that doesn't mean a player won't need time to figure their character out. re *Two Sides to the Coin*: I also bought this at the Strat, and pretty much also on a whim.

re Monsterhearts write up: I figured it was a dream sequence when Ernie didn't have pants. I gather that there really was a wet spot in the car where Byron was sitting and that he may well actually be haunting Drake. Why Drake, I wonder, and if this has something to do with what and how Blue is. re Saint Sebastian: I didn't realize he was the patron of athletes. I love "It's a table of equals, plus me."

re how you should "come up with an excuse for Steffan lurching with the rest of the PCs instead of with the NPC basketball team": Yes. I made this mistake in a convention one-shot. re "It's possible that events will have solved that problem for me": How so? I've finished the write up, but I'm not sure I follow.

re creating a custom Move for ELIZA: Sheer genius! I like Briar saying there's no per session cap on following ELIZA's advice. It seems in sync with what Avery is doing with 2e *Monsterhearts* and it is nicely ominous. I love that ghost(?) Byron calls Drake out for being a sucker for listening to ELIZA. re Pete knocking the hand off the rival team captain: This wasn't a dream or hallucination? Okay, yeah, something odd is up with Pete. re Steffan being on his 3rd advance while Logan hasn't yet gotten a 1st: Nod. This is a potential issue with several PbtA games.

re Matt Stevens: Unsurprisingly, I generally agree with your point by point reply to his comment to Roger Bell_West. re Erica Frank re Head of Vecna: I'd forgotten that bit about how artifacts don't detect as magic, the fake didn't detect as magic, and therefore, the fake was clearly an artifact! re me re Hebrew: I bow to your greater knowledge.

re Amber: Thanks for the rule book page references. The thing is, Wujcik's examples are so very much about his style, which is less about what seems dramatic to

me and more about how he's already decided things are going to go. We've talked about this before. (None of which is to say I'd not have been enthralled if he'd ever gm'd for me. The man had a Charisma of at least 18.) I know the novels exist, but that's not your strongest argument. Plenty of novels, shows, and so on have an rpg tie-in that simply doesn't reflect the feel of the media property, and saying, "Well, nothing in the game stops the GM from doing so" is telling me that I should ditch the game and use a better set of rules.

re the Saint Sebastian medallion: Oh yes, I saw what you did there. Author-stance foreshadowing is cool. re Dreamlands and guns: Absolutely—I think you (and everyone else, including me) made that point the first time it came up in Cthulhupunk.

re "Do prep if it can be expressed in a fun roleplayable scene, but not if it's just haggling over technical detail": Good in theory. In practice, it's hard to tell which category something falls into until one is either done with the fun roleplayable scene or deep in the weeds of haggling over the details.

JOSHUA KRONENGOLD: re Cloud Boarding School: The challenge here was to do it with only the material in the 2nd edition quickstart. re *Pagans*: I'm hoping for a sequel, as that might answer some of the questions we had. re Pedro Panhoca da Silva and Maira Zucolotto: Gamebooks may currently be more popular than you think. It's hard to judge, as this isn't normally our jam, but I do see regular kickstarters for these, including from Steve Jackson Games, and I've bought a few of what I'm pretty sure are gamebooks, regardless of whether or not I think of them that way.

re Brian Rogers re dodging fun options in play because of player knowledge, rather than character knowledge: Nod. I remember a *Call of Cthulhu* game Oscar ran at one of the Double Exposure conventions which culminated in the PCs finding a missing girl who had discovered she was actually the child of some outer god or other. A couple of the characters opened fire on her at that point, but some of them, including mine, didn't. All of this, I think, made sense, which is to say I don't think we were going by meta-considerations so much as "okay, what would my character do based on what they know?" There was a kid (unsure how old; I think somewhere in the 9-13 year range) who wasn't playing, but urged everyone to shoot the girl. The kid was, obviously, using meta-knowledge, and that was okay because they weren't playing. I just shook my head, as this was a young girl my character had known for years, and she simply could not bring herself to shoot the child.

The child survived, furious at those who shot at her, vowing vengeance as she departed to be with her outer god parent. I'm not sure if she included the rest

of the characters in that. I don't think she killed the family that adopted her; I think that was monsters sent by the outer god parent. However, she was absolutely fine with this. After all, turns out they weren't her *real* family, and she had a destiny and all that. So it's understandable that some of the characters did try to kill her, considering her monstrous.

re Matt Stevens re the idea of the GM owning the world: I'm not sure to what degree that's ever been true. To some degree, certainly. But recall that, fr'ex, in Cthulhupunk, one player claimed a certain amount of ownership over the gameworld's Native American locations and groups. In *Everway* and *Amber*, the answers players give when asked about their characters are definitely world-building. *Ars Magica's* troupe style play makes NPCs owned by the entire group of players. And quite apart from questions of GM'd, GM-full, and GM-less, this often creates a certain amount of tension. How much and to what degree that's a problem or a feature varies, of course.

re Erica Frank: I'm not sure if it was Jonathan Tweet who thought hit points were necessary or John Nephew, who published Tweet's game. You know, we really should read all of Lisa Steele's *GURPS Mysteries*, which, from what I've read, is way less about *GURPS* and way more about doing mysteries in rpgs. I do want to look at the *Brindlewood Bay/Apocalypse Keys* model you suggested where the die roll isn't about whether the answer to the question the mystery poses is correct but is instead about whether the "what do we do about it" plan works well, badly, not at all, or what. Ironically, given my issues with *Forged in the Dark* games, this is a bit of FitD technology, isn't it? It's just that the narrative constraints in this context and the details of the mechanics suit me better.

re armed face-offs in the *Thin Man* movies: Except for the last movie, though, these were resolved with cleverness more than with violence. re cold cases: Oh gosh—Agatha Christie's *Sleeping Murder* is all about a cold case, isn't it? re tarot decks: The Robin Wood deck is not the same as the Sacred Rose deck.

(<http://www.robinwood.com/Catalog/Books/BookPages/RWTDDeck.html> vs <https://www.usgamesinc.com/sacred-rose-tarot-deck.html>)

re something actively stopping a gameworld from changing: We've read a couple of books where that's the case (Zelazny's *Lord of Light* and Walton's *What You Will*). re me re *Jadewind Unveil*: I also love that the male protagonist can't fight and is enough troubled by gore that the female protagonist often covers his eyes when this comes up. re 2nd edition *Trail of Cthulhu* Credit Rating: I believe you are incorrect. Do you have access to the file? If not, I can show you the relevant section and we can figure it out.

re *Star Wars*: Sure, if the GM drops clues for the characters about secret weapons and Endor, then it's entirely reasonable for the players to decide their characters follow that clue trail. That's not the same thing as the players doing it out of the blue because, like the muppets in the first Muppet Movie, they read the script.

re the jam that produced *Polaris*: This was the 2004 Son of Iron Chef game challenge, which also produced *Ganakagok* and *The Mountain Witch*. The games had to incorporate 3 out of 4 of Island, Ice, Dawn, and Assault.

(<http://www.indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=10762.0>)

re dice: I think I have the d14 and d16. I'm unsure if I have a d18, but can probably check. re what we'd want in a map of Tomoeda: Yes. re engagement roll in *Blades in the Dark*: It would benefit from more of this kind of example. re Strange School PBEM: I think the only actual mistakes with vetting came near the end, and the two players I'm thinking about weren't particularly bad in the abstract so much as, as you said, not compatible with much of the game we'd created.

Today, I'm uncertain if I'd want a full pbem game. I'd rather have something closer to a Penned to Good Society game with sessions, likely via Zoom or Discord or something similar, with video optional, and in between, pbem elements similar to the epistolary phase. It's not that scheduling wouldn't be difficult, but three hours of face time even, say, every other month would still make the game progress faster. Even if it took four months of our time to get through a single school dance, it would only be taking 6-8 hours of actual play.

And we could do semesters in Seasons. E.g., with something like *Dangerous Refuge*, we could say that each cycle covered, say, a month of school time, which would mean 3-4 cycles = a semester = a season, which would be 4-9 sessions. If we were particularly ambitious, we could say each novel chapter and the space between it and the next covered a month of school, which would mean 2-3 cycles = a semester = a season, which would be probably 4-6 sessions. And folks could take a break between seasons, deciding whether or not to continue, and if so, whether or not to use the same characters or different ones. Heck, there's even the Upstairs/Downstairs rules to allow for faculty as well as Students, and the *Emma, Forget Me Not* rules to allow for passage of time, which includes rules for changing the fate of Connections, swapping out Main Characters, promoting Connections to Main Characters, and so on. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that, in theory, we could do a Cthulhupunk

universe Strange School using our *Dangerous Refuge* rules.

I'm still not in favor of "comments don't count towards maximum zine length" even in limited scope. If we were to do that, I'd want a maximum. If we were talking "drop default max length to 14 pages and you get 2 free pages per issues you comment on", I'd want a maximum number of issues for that. Probably no more than 6 or even 3.

re Mythos Expedition pool points mechanic: I'll show you the book. In brief, the group has X points to get through the expedition. This includes stuff like supplies and food and getting by hazards, iirc? I've played one of the expeditions at one of the Double Exposure conventions, but haven't read most of the book.

re *Witch and Cat* and the Bottle pbem: True, using oracles / tables might have helped with the Bottle game. I even have some oracle games I could theoretically dig out for us to try to finish the Bottle game. re Avram Grumer re a *Monsterhearts* F&Furry hack: After the current draft of *Dangerous Refuge*, perhaps. re Smallville R-Map: As I have said before, my issue with the existing software is that none of it is as understandable and easy to me as pulling out paper and pen and drawing things manually.

re shifting systems in the various iterations of Cthulhupunk: It went like this:

- **Original campaign:** My Frankenstined homebrew of *Call of Cthulhu* 4th/5th edition, *NightLife*, *Vampire: The Masquerade* 1st edition, and R. Talsorian's *Cyberpunk/Interlock* system, I think the original, but possibly 2020.
- **Cthulhupunk +20** and Post-+20 stuff: *Over the Edge* 1st/2nd edition.
- **Strange School PBEM:** As I put it, we had a couple of systems we didn't use, *Over the Edge* and *Dogs in the Vineyard*. Chris Murray was the one most likely to use *DitV*. As time went on, I used the system less and less, opting more for consensus-fiat, which worked except when it didn't.
- **Post-Strange School:** Specifically the future stuff with you and Myles: *Fate*, I think pre-Fate Core?
- **Everything else after and around the edges:** Either *Over the Edge* or consensus-fiat, mostly the latter.

re Patrick Zoch re "if the player wants an easy exit (or just wants to change characters), having [a character who is a foreigner] head for home after an adventure can be a clean way of doing so (I admit, in one game I was tempted several times)": Which game was that?

re Brian Misiaszek: I believe your comments on AI and the rest are intended for Jim Vassilakos. re *Dogs in the Vineyard* and escalation: And, as Vincent noted, you can escalate from something more physical to talking. The example I always use is the standoff in the last episode of first season *Heroes* where three people are pointing guns at each other, and one *escalates from shooting to talking* (it's still shooting even if no one's fired a gun because the guns are out) by saying, "I did not come here to kill a 10-year-old girl." That escalation, that single sentence is the one on which the entire combat / conflict turns.

JIM VASSILAKOS: re Erica Frank re Head of Vecna: Alas, the incident happened before folks had pocket cell phones that could make such a video.

TIMOTHY COLLINSON: Sympathy on the stressful work situation. re the compliment you do not feel you deserve: Do you think so little of the reviewer? I do understand not wanting to believe too much in one's virtues lest one lose them, but it's okay to believe that if someone sees worth in your work, such worth exists. re Roger Bell_West: Kudos to your daughter for her work on the diary.

re me re *Count of Monte Cristo*: My pleasure! re getting around Italy without much Italian: I see you can do it. I'd just rather have a bit more Italian I can pull out (although between the bit of Spanish I have and the bit of French Josh has, we *might* be able to make do).

re wanting to hear more about my thoughts on the overlap in and differences between the skills for good fiction-writing and the skills for good scenario-writing: Some points from various "why you want me on this panel about gaming" forms I filled out and other places:

* TL;DR: Remember your audience and how they want to use your writing.

* Lisa Steele notes in *GURPS Mysteries* that reading a mystery and trying to solve it works differently than playing an rpg with a mystery to solve. The rpg mystery needs to have fewer variables.

* If you have a plot that simply Must go off Precisely as planned, write a novel, not a roleplaying adventure.

* If you are writing pre-generated PCs, whether for an rpg or a larp, each one should be a cool protagonist at the center of everything. (This is a broad guideline, but largely true.) However, at run time, *none of these characters are yours!* Each belongs to their players. Accept that they won't generally do what you would do with the characters.

* When you describe the situation in a scenario, don't write it for the GM to discover at the same pace as a player playing through the scenario or a reader reading the novel you created from it. GMs need to be very clear on what's going on.

* Keep coming back to the players. I've said that the PCs are the most important characters in the game world regardless of how much power they have. Add to this that players may want a better reason to do a thing than "the scenario author says so". Fr'ex, in *Horror on the Orient Express*, one section assumes that the PCs will care about a young couple. Maybe they will, but the scenario gives them no reason to do so beyond "these are nice people who shouldn't be pushed around by jerk authorities", and the scenario, as part of the campaign, has a goal for the PCs: Get an Item, one which has nothing to do with the young couple nor vice versa. Why the heck should the PCs go out of their way to get tangled up in the couple's drama? I'm not saying there's no reason; I'm saying the author doesn't provide one.

* You're not writing an encyclopedia. As with a novel, you probably don't want to stop to give a huge infodump about the game world. Put the material in sidebars, at the end, somewhere sensible. Don't make me fall asleep reading your world document when what I want is to know how to run your adventure.

* As with novels, we can't read your mind, so make sure your assumptions really are as obvious as you think. Remember the story about the GM boggled by players saying their PCs would simply stomp on the ant they found in a room because the GM had failed to communicate that the ant was 6 feet high. Another example: I gave a character a vision of a missing child being carried into a river, assuming that this would be enough to spur him to tell the others and lead them to the spot. The player had a completely different view of reality, however, and thought that there was no way a 30 second vision of a section of a river in a deluge in a city the character was in for the first time could possibly be sufficient to figure out precisely where to go. I was going more pulp; the player was going more realistic. The issue isn't that we had two different versions of reality, but that each of us assumed that the other shared our version, and so we didn't know what to ask or challenge.

There are other principles and examples I can give, but generally, these would be more useful during a playtest or a flowing conversation, perhaps over food and drink.

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

When I ran my Cthulhupunk campaigns, I decided that there was no single true answer, rather like something I vaguely recall from DC Comics, where various different characters really did find whatever deity or higher power they worked for / revered / worshipped, even if this is contradictory. So, yes, Azathoth is a ball of chaos at the center of the Cthulhupunk universe, but this isn't the only deep truth of the universe. Cthulhupunk is more pulp than noir, purist, cosmic horror, or punk. Eventually, humanity will catch up to the "outer gods" and the various alien races that inhabit the universe.

I'm not sure I ever really depart significantly from this model. I do know I had an Opinion when reading the first edition of *Blue Rose*: Given that the patron deity of homosexual lovers is / is associated with the unicorn, the authors should have leaned into that. Instead, they went the usual route of unicorn = purity. I'd be fine if that were so *and* unicorns were strongly associated with homosexuality. I think they missed a prime opportunity here.

GAMING WRITE UP / SUMMARY: Urban Shadows Chelsea

Since I'm planning to start up a 2nd season of *Urban Shadows*, summarizing the first might be useful. The players are:

GM: Me

Gareth: Lett Lengau: She/Her. The Imp.

Ray: Jonathan: He/Him. The Oracle.

Pamela: Antonia (Toni): She/Her: The Tainted

Meredith: Patsy: She/Her: The Veteran

Josh: Xela: She/Her: The Wizard

Concepts:

- **Circles.** Mortalis, Night, Power, and Wild. These are considered approaches. One has both knowledge of a Circle and a Rating in a Circle, and this causes a LOT of confusion for us because both are "Circle [RATING]. To get an Advance (level up), you need to mark all 4 Circles, which means your PC needs to interact meaningfully with them. (There are also Corruption Advances, which work differently.)
- **Factions:** There are however many of them make sense for the campaign, and they rise and fall. Any given faction "belongs" to one and only one Circle, but again, this just defines approach and maybe goals. 2 Factions of the same circle may or may not be friendly towards each other.
- **Hub:** A specific neighborhood that is mostly controlled or dominated by one particular Circle. In theory, each season should focus on a specific Hub. We mostly stuck to that for 1st season, but aren't necessarily going to in 2nd, although we did define a particular Hub for it.

1st Season Hub: Chelsea

2nd Season Hub: Museum Mile

These were Hubs we defined at the table, mashing together parts of published Hubs and adding a bit of our own. Hubs provide:

- NPCs that owe the PCs Debts. This is useful as Debt is the game's economy.
- Moves that can be used while in the Hub.
- Connections between the PCs. I find this aspect the trickiest to pull off (as they are specific, pushing particular potential plotbits, and layered on top of all the other connections created before play). We did it for 1st season, but agreed that it made no sense to do so for 2nd.

A bit more on the characters:

Lett Lengau, The Imp: The Imp is a demon that used to serve a more powerful demon, but somehow got free and is running an Establishment, however that is defined, and always has a Scheme (which is mostly mechanics in the background, I think, though we do try to weave it into the campaign more elegantly). Lett's former liege is **Kwanmanga**, who "sent her to serve a upwardly mobile criminal as a deadly and pretty plaything, but as her contract with that mortal came to a close, she tricked a rival into taking her place and returning to serve the demonic liege lord." The tricked rival is **Tagia**.

Lett's place of business is an atelier shop, Serengeti, where she creates forgeries, disguises, and stolen identities, as well as appraises and sells magical object. She has an expert staff, as well as a powerful and loyal regular from another circle. (I think this is Lavender, but I also think we made Lavender Wild, so I need to double check.) She also has a dangerous competitor who may be Tagia. Also, the wizard **Jonas Hand** has a grudge against her, as she sold him a fake artifact. He wanted a child's tongue, which she considered a gross and distasteful request.

And, of course, her ex-liege wants her back. Lett is able to remain free only as long as the 6 bullets in her magical revolver exist. If someone else had them all, this would also be a problem. Of course, no matter how carefully she secures the revolver, it tends to move around.

Image:

<https://cdna.artstation.com/p/assets/images/images/039/825/492/large/nitro-kakaotalk-20210723-213529037-01.jpg?1627044105>

Circle: Wild

Status 1 in Night, Power, and Wild

Debts Others Owe Lett:

- Jonathan: 2
- Sudi (former werewolf lover): 1
- Xela: 2
- Yakov (immortal): 1
- Lavender (Status 3 leader of a Wild faction): 1
- John Gris (Toni's, ah, coworker): 1
- **New to Season 2:** Jovita 1 (Night. A werewolf whose pack runs an underground gambling establishment with iron fists and plenty of claws. Night. Intervened when Lett's former lover Sudi and his gang was causing trouble for Jovita.)

Debts Lett Owes:

- Xela: 2
- Toni: 1
- Patsy: 2
- Wayne the Phantom Mayor: 1
- Lavender: 1

Jonathan, The Oracle: The Oracle has visions, and works for a Patron. In Jonathan's case, this is **Alonzo**, a Status-3 member of their circle, which means Alonzo leads his own faction. Jonathan has prophesized (pre-game) that Alonzo alone can destroy a uniquely evil foe within his own circle, which Jonathan assumes is Night. The player wants Jonathan to possibly be wrong, which is a fascinating challenge because of how Urban Shadows works. In theory, there are no unknown Status-3 people; they each control a faction, and each faction is controlled by a Status-3 person. A faction's circle should be obvious because this is all about the approach to goals.

Alonzo's minions are loyal and disciplined. Well, except for one wizard who was betraying him, but Alonzo dealt with that wizard permanently. He is at war with powerful enemies. He also has defenses against Jonathan's sight.

Jonathan's mother was Patsy's best friend, and so Patsy's taken him under her wing, and the two care deeply about each other. Jonathan's lover, **Froggy**, was killed, accidentally, by Toni. Jonathan runs a fortune telling parlor called Foreshadowing.

Image: <https://thumbs.dreamstime.com/b/man-tablet-reading-horoscope-guy-look-pad-screen-engaged-astrology-zodiac-sign-vector-illustration-275990062.jpg>

Circle: Dual Loyalty: Power and Mortalis
Status 2 in Mortalis; Status 1 in Night and Power

Debts Others Owe Jonathan:

- Toni: 1 (Killing Froggy, my lover, accidentally)
- Nunko Sako: 1 (Mortalis journalist/blogger I save with my information)
- Barbie: ? (Whenever in trouble, Barbie can show up to help)

- Prism: 1 (For reading her future)
- **New to Season 2:** Boru Neway Mebrete 1 (Mortalis. A busker oracle singing out inscrutable prophecies that become obviously insightful in retrospect. Interpreted one of their prophecies and explained why it was relevant to them. Thought it was something about love, and turned out it was someone trying to kill them, so incidentally saved their life.)

Debts Jonathan Owes:

- George the Stenographer: 1 (He tells me what's up in Night; I tell him what I know from Power/Mortalis, also dates)
- Toni: 1 (For bad guidance due to vision, also to her/Aamon: 10 reading/3 tracking someone down in return for one soul to free Froggy's soul (1/10 paid))
- Lett: 2 Relying on the coffee shop
- Jerry (Alonzo's wizard): 0 (Helping me convince Alonzo he shouldn't go to Queens) (NB: Alonzo is deceased now, but Jonathan paid that debt first.)
- Xela: 1 (For interpreting visions)

Antonia, The Tainted: The Tainted gets power from a demonic patron in return for doing certain tasks, and likely dreams of somehow doing enough for this patron to buy back their soul. Antonia certainly does. This takes something more than Debt.

Toni may have been responsible for the Titanic sinking and a certain stock market crash or two, likely at her patron's request. Her patron, **Aamon**, controls his organization with strict rules and severe punishments and often has Antonia work with **John Gris**, who has similar powers as Antonia but is less subtle about wielding them.

Aamon manipulates all factions around him into conflicts that serve his interests. He generally has Toni collect souls for him and operate a demonic establishment, The Sultry Serpent, a bar and cabaret.

Image: https://image.lexica.art/md2_webp/1fc329ec-c433-41b7-8445-e2487583cf8d

Circle: Wild
Status 1 in Power and Wild

Debts Others Owe Toni:

- Rat Princeps 1 (Got out of prison) (from Lett)
- Xela 1 (muscle, protected soul)
- Jonathan 1 (Bad advice, wants Froggy's soul back)
- Alonzo (Jonathan's "mob" boss) 1
- Kai (Demon, I think? Helped them set up their gay bar) 1
- Rowan Holian (was supposed to help Drosselmeyer and didn't) 1

- **New to Season 2:** December 1 (Night. A vamp bartender who knows exactly what you need to drink before you do...and only takes a little essence as payment. Night. Toni chases the vampire hunters who were harassing December out of the city and talked about where she could get some more protection.)

Debts Toni Owes:

- Patsy 1 (Trying to save me from damnation & gets hurt)
- Xela 1 (Helping me go against my patron)
- Jonathan 1 (Killed his lover, Froggy)
- 12th Street 1 (Helped me get to Malcolm)
- Isabelle Wahid 1 (Figure out how to free the souls from the cornerstones)

Patsy, The Veteran: The Veteran, too old for this shit, has gotten out of the game, in theory, but is drawn back in by virtue of being a PC. The Veteran has a workshop and can make very useful things.

Image:

https://i.dailymail.co.uk/1s/2019/06/24/08/15172882-7174109-image-a-18_1561361352436.jpg

Circle: Mortalis
Status 2 in Mortalis

Debts Others Owe Patsy:

- Lett 1
- Toni 1
- Jeri (ghost) 1
- Xela 1
- **New to Season 2:** Lavanya 1 (Power. A chaotic dealer whose artifacts are a prize in any market, but who only works with those willing to play their games. Power. Patsy fixed one of her artifacts and did not tell anyone it was repaired and therefore much less valuable than she pretended – was selling it as a pristine original.)

Debts Patsy Owes:

- Lett 1
- Xela 1
- Yaakov 1 (returned a dreamcatcher she'd made to her)
- Chanita (for faerie dust in bulk) 1

Xela, The Wizard: In 1st edition, the Wizard had a magical amulet that helped them channel power, but in 2nd edition, this somewhat boring item is gone. Instead, the Wizard has a Ward. In Xela's case, this is **Prism**, a friendly, perky woman with a rainbow aesthetic. She also happens to be a walking apocalypse. Xela is part of a Faction known as Thursday Next. Their focus is to put off various apocalypses until at least Thursday Next, whereupon they'll put them off again. They spun off Novo

Amsterdam, a more militant Power faction that's more ruthless about this.

Image:

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Circle: Power
Status 1 in Mortalis, Night, and Power

Debts Others Owe Xela:

- Jonathan 2
- Lett 2
- Patsy 1
- Toni 1
- Chanita Wood (vampire in the Night Union faction) 0 (presumably paid during 1st season)
- John Gris 1
- **New to Season 2:** Rupa Dey 1 (Wild. Xela lets Rupa record in her back room and gives them complimentary coffee.)

Debts Xela Owes:

- Lett 2
- Toni 1
- Jonathan 1
- Novo Amsterdam (for leaking the map) 1
- Chanita Wood 1
- Wayne the Phantom Mayor of NYC 1
- Patsy 1

A VERY Brief Summary of Season 1

* A number of people wanted an artifact in the shape of a dreamcatcher. Patsy had made it years ago. It had been privy to a number of mysteries concerning Jonathan's destiny. It should have been with a living Froggy, but as he was dead, it should be with Jonathan. Yaakov returned it to Patsy, and Xela made a fake which she gave to Toni to give to Aamon. Toni didn't know it was a fake. She may or may not have suspected, but she saw no reason to check. **innocent whistling** Lett told Rowan that the entire thing was too messy to get involved with, letting her Scheme to heist it for Rowan go.

* Jonathan had a vision that Patsy would soon die at the Unisphere by the Queens Museum/Flushing meadows, in the foreseeable future (months to a few years?), with Alonzo around. He decided to keep this from happening, starting by getting a wizard working for Alonzo to tell Alonzo he shouldn't go to Queens. Jonathan now owed the wizard, Jerry, a Debt.

* Toni wound up, during a Time Passes phase (which means we roll dice between sessions and I figure out what it means), in a scuffle between the Street fae (known as the Fashion Parade) and the Sewer fae that broke out at the Sultry Serpent. Somehow, she wound

up near Patsy's and crashed on Patsy's couch, waking up with a ring that the Rat Princeps of the Street fae had put on her finger. It was a combination of apology, acknowledgement of Debt, and letting interested parties know that Toni was under the Princeps's protection. This was sparked by one of the weird PC-PC connections from the Hub.

* When Toni went to try to collect a soul, the group found out that Novo Amsterdam has been putting souls into the cornerstones of certain buildings throughout the five boroughs, choosing those with a connection to the city and at least Status 0 (which is very different than having no Status), figuring out where these souls would work best as a sort of warding grid for the city. The group would like to get the souls out of cornerstones and set them free, preferably without making the city vulnerable to whatever the soul-warding thing is protecting it from.

* Froggy's soul was in one of the cornerstones, and briefly wound up in Jonathan's body, played by Jonathan's player. Froggy was remarkably chill about Toni killing him, as it was simply a case of wrong time, wrong place. I think Patsy and Jonathan created a crystal for Froggy's soul that Jonathan now wears? Or did the soul move on? I'm not sure.

* There is a map of where the ensouled cornerstones are, and there was a heist that involved the PCs getting a copy of the map, a number of parties getting fake copies, possibly one or two parties getting true copies, and Novo Amsterdam, I think, eventually getting their copy back, satisfied with the group (or at least, the part of the group openly working with them) for setting up the heist to ensure that would-be thieves got the fakes.

* Alonzo got a copy (fake?) and Jonathan knew that the prophecy of Patsy's death was no longer in force. Xela created a fake identity to work for Alonzo under, Genevieve. Alonzo showed her the map and explained he a) wanted to wrest control from Novo Amsterdam and b) expand.

Genevieve: So you want to take over the world?

Alonzo: Yes, but let's start smaller. Say, maybe, the tri-state area.

He keeps the map in a locked and magically warded safe.

* The Fashion Parade attacked and essentially destroyed the Sewer Fae as a faction. Toni wound up becoming the protector of the Rat Princeps, despite both the Fashion Parade's efforts to capture them and their efforts to run headlong into danger as the fallen Princeps.

* Novo Amsterdam owes the Fashion Parade, the Sewer Fae, and the Night Union. Of course, the Sewer Fae are now gone as a faction, the leader Drosselmeyer is dead, and the Rat Princeps is something of a prize trophy, but not currently capable of taking vengeance or creating a new faction.

* Toni learned that Alonzo sold out the Sewer Fae and that Rowan should have helped the Rat Princeps, but didn't.

* A trip in time via magical subway token, back to the 1970s. I forget why. This involved dealing with the ghost mayor and led to Jonathan dating George the Stenographer, whom I'd assumed was a ghost and Jonathan's player hadn't. We've agreed that George is an unwilling (or at least, reluctant) medium.

* Lett later auctioned off the token, and Lavender got it. Toni had been ordered by Aamon to get the bullets from Lett's gun. We all agreed that the gun had somehow wound up in the glove compartment of Lett's car, a 1970 BMW. The Rat Princeps helped Toni, and I think she wound up with 2 bullets.

* Toni talked with Lett about this and learned why the bullets were so important. It's not that they're demon-killing bullets (although they are); it's that they keep Lett free. Toni said she'd keep the bullets safe, and she gave Aamon fakes. I think Lett and Toni basically agreed to help each other out, as both understand wanting to be free of terrible demonic masters (and, probably, terrible masters who aren't demons, right?).

* Apparently, there's a prophecy where future Xela says, "We have to retrieve ALL of the maps. We don't have time."

Much use was made of the Chelsea Hub Move we created:

Trend Setting

When you do something that we agree might start a trend, roll with Heart.

On a 10+, hold 3 and there are no complications

On a 7-9, hold 1 and choose 1:

- The trend does not get out of control
- The trend is not eclipsed or fade almost immediately

- No rivals also claim credit for the trend

Once per roll, you may spend hold to add +1 (before the roll) to a roll that might benefit from someone being into your trend.

Trends that the PCs started or tried to start:

- Feathers! I think this one has faded by now.

- Monocles! That one got out of control, the Mafia picking up this fae trend without knowing where it came from.
- Demon Coffee latte art! Started, I think, when Prism brought Toni a latte with foam art showing a cute demon head with horns.
- Rubber Cat Suit! I think Toni started this one. It didn't get out of control.
- Steampunk Corsetry! Possibly out of control, but no rivals claimed the credit that was due to Antonia for it.
- A failed attempt by Jonathan to start a Pocket Watch trend. Just didn't catch on.
- Lett's car, the 1970 BMW! No rivals claim credit for it. The trend may or may not last. It is totally out of control!

Our Factions from Season 1:

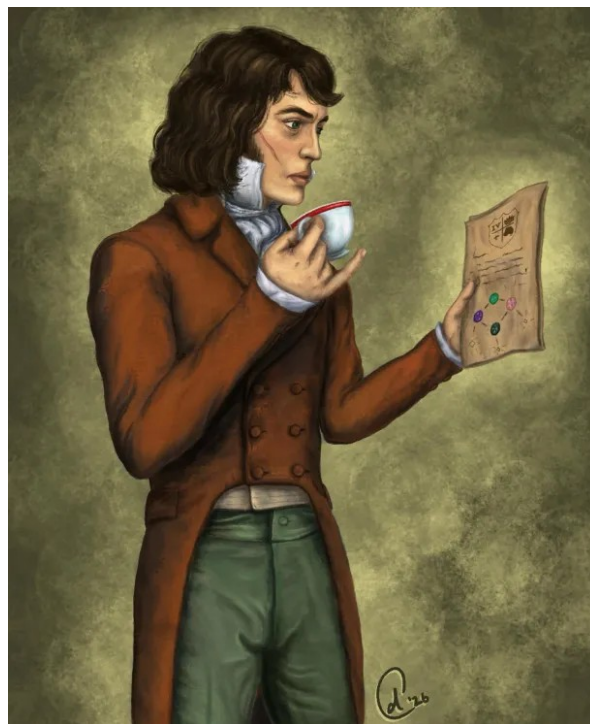
- The Bastion (Mortalis)
- Old Punks/Old Guard/Old Farts (Mortalis)
- The Night Union (Night)
- Necropolis Aithousa Anthrak (Night) (Not in Chelsea)
- Tuesday Next (Power)
- Novo Amsterdam (Power)
- Fashion Parade (Wild)
- Double Rainbow (Wild)
- Gentleman's Agreement (Wild)

BETWEEN SEASONS

- 6 months passed.
- XELA opened a pop up.
- LETT's curating a fashion exhibit.
- JONATHAN spends time with George there – George is a medium but prefers being a bureaucrat.
- TONI is working with December on a crazy club night at December's club.

Factions to Look at for Season 2:

- Double Rainbow (Wild), now defined: They break into places for parties. Fr'ex, they might break into the Museum of Natural History to have a tea party on the back of the whale.
- Connoisseurs (Night): The thieves, those who buy from them, those who leave the forgeries in place, the curators who buy from them and don't care about provenance.
- Special Collections (closed stacks) Power: They want to keep the knowledge to themselves.
- Galatea (Night): Art that eats you.
- The Student Union (Mortalis): Students who work in the museums.
- The Golden Circle (Power): The glitterati.



On the Storybrewers Discord, every so often, a random member wins Paint My MC, and Cris del Carmen paints one of their characters. My number came up recently!

The above is a picture of Faustus Pembroke, my Main Character from Masked Against Evil, the Magical Girl Penned to Good Society game I played on a Discord Server. Faustus was the one non-masked Main Character. He didn't have a magical gem and didn't transform. He did have a conspiracy board as he tried to figure out who the Obviously Sinister masked people were.

You can see other examples of the artist's work here: <https://delcarmen.carrd.co/>.

OVERLORD'S ANNALS

ATTRONARCH, THE EXALTED OVERLORD OF UNCONTESTED VASTLANDS

VOLUME 5 · ISSUE 6 · JUNE 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 three session reports from the *Conquering the Barbarian Altanis* Dungeons & Dragons campaign.

Adventurers feel the burden of geas.

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS CAMPAIGN

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

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

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

ATTRIBUTIONS

Text copyright © Attronarch, 2026.

Temple illustration, and *Compound* map by Attronarch.

Pondering the rock, *Crow god*, *Happy canine*, *Angry crow god*, *Charm*, and *Noose* by IdleDoodler.

Troll illustration by Kickmaniac.

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

CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 111

Adventurers

Abdashtarh of the Field, cleric level 1. A farmer clad in armour, follower of Zodraz, petty god of seeds and toil.

Ajar of the Plan, dwarf level 1. Unbelievably strong and dexterous dwarf.

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

Bairstowbury the Chaotic, halfling level 2. Remarkably muscular for a halfling.

Centuria, elf level 1. An academic elf fond of teasing those of lower status.

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

Hartwig, thief level 4. Hailing from Ghinor Highlands, now seeking treasure in the Barbarian Altanis.

Sunstrong 15th, Spiritday

“This must be it. . .”

Mere days ago Gomm had accepted a mission from Leleia the Swift, headmistress of Hara's thieves' guild. The client asked for a daring thief to retrieve a pineapple sized golden egg from a temple-fortress secluded in the mountains just west of the town.

Reward?

Stunning ten thousand gold pieces.

Conditions?

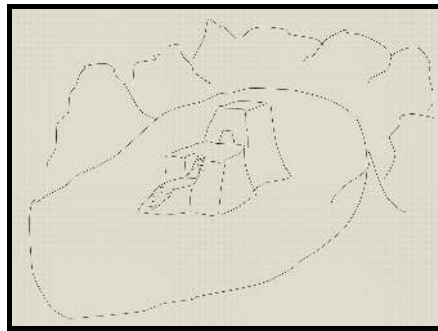
Egg must be entirely intact and unopened.

The client promised they have means of knowing if the egg had been despoiled.

Gomm assembled a hit team consisting of himself as the leader; Hartwig, newest member of the thieves' guild; Almaric the Legendary, as the brains with brawn, but most importantly,

Floating Disc in his repertoire; and Bairstowbury as compact muscle that can fit into tight holes. Centuria, Abdashtarh, and Ajar were recruited to act as the rearguard and step in if anything goes wrong.

Now they found the stone temple hidden between the hill tops. It was a simple stone structure with a long stone ramp leading up to the top where an opening yawned into darkness.



The party circled the temple for an hour, hoping to spot any danger before it spots them. After all, they've been informed the place is thoroughly trapped and protected by a clan of abominable birdmen.

Although they have not spotted anything dangerous, they did observe a curious set of boulders leaning against back side of the temple. Lo and behold, behind them was another opening leading into a dark corridor.

An hour of investigating the rocks led them to believe they were indeed just rocks that are entirely untrapped. Gomm scaled one, and then helped others climb on top and descend.



“Watch out!”

A shin-height tripwire was just ten feet ahead of the party. It was trivial to jump over. Lighting a lantern produced much needed light to see further. A t-shaped junction was just ahead, splitting to the right.

Suddenly running footsteps could be heard coming from around the corner! Bairstowbury and Almaric pulled their weapons and counter charged. Gomm and Hartwig were just behind, at safer distance.

Elf and halfling found themselves facing four entirely naked sinewy humanoids with crow heads. They had feathers for hair, protecting the duos innocence. All four were armed with spears. No side was surprised.

First exchange of blows went well for the party, and they hacked one of the birdmen down. Second exchange went well for the naked birdmen, as they skewered Bairstowbury and Almaric to death.

“Time to run!” Gomm shouted at Hartwig as he uncorked web nuts. The thieves ran out, with Gomm throwing the vial at the junction. A ball of web filled the whole passage, blocking the birdmen with their corpses.

Then the duo retreated to the nearby camp.

“Centuria, Abdashtarh, we need you to fill in two spots. . .”



“Let’s take the front entrance this time!”

Indeed, the new quartet ascended the stone ramp to the opening atop the temple. Ahead was a sharp descent, also without stairs. Gomm anchored a rope with several iron spikes, and threw it down the slope. Then Hartwig descended and explored on. Signalling he is safe, cleric went next. As he let go off the rope and stepped forth to follow the new thief, he promptly fell through the ground on his head. Alive but bruised, he was given the hand by Hartwig and easily climbed out of the pit. Gomm and Centuria were careful to jump over the descent landing.

Adventures were now exploring a wide chamber with three doors. Each was eight feet wide, with an iron ring on the right side and an inscription on the front. First read “Dexterity,” second “Strength,” and last “Intelligence.” Flexing his physique, Abdashtarh suggested they go for the second doors. He gripped the iron ring and pulled with all his might. The doors were indeed a challenge, but he was a man of strength and resolve, a true farm-boy.

He was soon rewarded by a rabid hound leaping out of the chamber, frothing from its mouth. Centuria sliced into the charging canine. The beast jumped at Abdashtarh and bit into his neck with its mighty jaw. Farm-boy wrapped his mighty hands around the beasts neck and snapped it. Then he collapsed to the ground, and died of asphyxiation. His windpipe was in the hound’s mouth.



Ajar of the Plan rolled down the ramp and jumped over the pit trap.

“I had a feeling you might need me!”

Indeed, at the other end of the “Strength” chamber were another doors, identical to the ones they came through. They too were heavy to open. Ajar flexed his muscles and opened them with ease. No hounds to be seen.

Instead a junction. Path forward was into a large chamber, right to doors, and left into a corridor that turned right. To their left was a door that said “Dexterity” to their right two smaller doors with no inscription, and to their far right another large doors, also without any inscription.

Forging on, the party entered a most curious chamber. A raised stone platform, ten feet wide and ten feet long, was in the center. Four statues surrounded the platform, facing its corners. Each statue was made of living stone, but without any visible joints. They resembled oddly proportioned, blocky humans.

Adventures made a wise decision to give the platform and statues a wide berth. Thus they limited their interaction to visual inspection only. Ultimately, they did not touch them and followed the norther path leading them to yet another junction.

Left path joined up with the left path of previous junction. Right path led to a dead end with wooden bench and deranged stone relief of an obese raven with baby’s head sitting on a shinning egg being fed crying humans by a flock of birdmen. Forward path led to a door.

Unable to hear anything beyond, the party opened them and ventured forth. They were overcome with smell of dampness and rot. Gomm could spot two golden orbs levitating some ten feet off the ground in the north-western corner of the room. The party split into duos to search this sixty by thirty feet chamber.

Centuria and Ajar had the good fortune of running into a massive ball of black feathers. Atop the avian body was an oversized human-like baby head. Snot hung from its nose, and yellow teeth adorned its mouth. The abomination rocked in its nest and attempted to bite the elf. Luckily, Centuria was quicker.

Gomm struck the monster with an arrow, making it cry. Then others hacked it to death, with Hartwig delivering the killing blow. He plunged the sword straight into the soft belly, and then jerked it sideways. Obese monstrosity collapsed back into its nest.

“Is there a golden egg in the nest?”

“No.”

But there was another opening, leading into a circular chamber with a well. Using rope to measure depth, there was around seventy feet before the water level. Opting to lead by example, Gomm descended with the lantern.

He soon discovered that the well exits into a large water filled chamber. Some thirty feet to the east was another slope, leading up into yet another chamber. Water slowly streamed into the chamber Gomm was currently in. Descending yet another ten feet, master thief swung himself and then jumped onto the slope. Truly an acrobatic feat! Hartwig soon joined him, accomplishing no less fascinating feat.

The duo entered a rectangular chamber. A circular opening dominated the center of north wall. Water slowly streamed out of it and down the corridor they came through. A marvelous golden egg rested on a red cushion with gilded embroidery, sitting on a stone plinth at the south end of the chamber. Two large stone boxes flanked it, each on a stone plinth of its own.

Gomm prepared his backpack for the precious cargo, while Hartwig prepared a stand-in for the egg to be placed on the cushion. The duo quickly replaced the egg with cloth surrogate and then fled the chamber. They could hear sounds of rushing water as they ascended the rope through the well.

“Run! Run!”

Ajar and Centuria followed the duo, albeit a bit slower given they were both in metal armour. The temple shook as it filled with water.

An army of naked birdmen rushed out of the rightmost doors by the first junction, aiming to cut off the adventurers' retreat. Centuria's quick thinking saved the day. She cast Ventriloquism, imitating the fat, baby-headed raven's call.

The trick worked, and all the birdmen ran north, to the chamber where only a corpse awaited them.

Four survivors ran out, and then went straight back to Hara.

“Should we open the egg and see what is inside?”

“Absolutely not.”

And so they collected their ten thousand gold pieces.



CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 112

Adventurers

Ajar of the Plan, dwarf level 1. Unbelievably strong and dexterous dwarf.

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

Balarus, fighter level 1. An ex-woodsman, quite a crackshot with his bow.

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

Ignaeus, elf level 2. A slightly weathered looking elf with dull blonde hair and chiselled features. Seeks wealth and knowledge.

Zhoron Trisrie, elf level 2. Always frowning and morose; sporting thick handlebar moustache down to his chest and a black top knot.

Thistleburn 1st, Airday

It has been several weeks since Ambros had returned to Hara. Others tried to turn Hagar's demise into a spectacle for the masses. Cleric of Aniu had no such interests and he protected his friend's legacy as much as he could.

The dwarf was set off on a funeral barge fitting his heroic status. The pyre was magnificent and it burnt strong, well into the night. Several acolytes of Poseidon accompanied Ambros through Hara, paying their respects to the passing dwarf as well. Their temple was of course well endowed with gifts, arranged by Ambros as well.

Hara was still in turmoil, now even greater than before. The rumour has it Tagoler refused to be Imrael's candidate for the new castellan, while Namelin failed to propose anyone new, given their prime candidate, Hagar, had just died.

Thirteen merchant families could not agree on any future course of action, so Red Queen ordained they must present three prospects by end of summer or she will pick a new castellan herself.

Little did that matter to Ambros though. A heavy burden was upon him. When Hagar died on one of his dungeon expeditions, Ambros managed to negotiate his resurrection at the Temple of Poseidon. Hight Priestess Mavis demanded a high price. Hagar, as well as all adventurers with him at the time, had to accept three geases.

First, to set a wrongfully imprisoned king free, they accomplished. Second, to erect an impressive statue of Poseidon looking at the sea, was in progress. And third, to travel to Ketches and help Mavis's sister with anything she demands, has not even been started. Ambros was now the sole living survivor of all those adventurers.

Geases were now his to bear alone.

Gomm, a firebrand and rising star the the local thieves' guild, has already been planning his next expedition when he heard of the cleric's woes.

"Ketches, you say?"

Thistleburn 5th, Spiritday

"See? Didn't I promise I'd bring ya here!"

Drunk fishermen they employed at Ahyf had indeed brought the party to Ketches. Even just yesterday such feat seemed unlikely! At Hara Gomm couldn't learn much useful information beyond Ketches being secluded hamlet in the Eyestones Jungle, overlooking the Vigil Sound bay. Rumours of pirates did not make it any more attractive.

Fishermen of Ahyf were more informative, but not more encouraging. They confirmed the stories of pirates, in addition to recent spotting of Skandik longships around the Cape of No-Return. Apparently no one had come from Ketches to Ahyf for several months. But adventurers managed to recruit a drunk fisherman and his two friends to ferry them over.

Price?

Astonishing twenty eight gold pieces.

The sails were lowered and now they were slowly coasting towards the sequestered hamlet. In the center of this small settlement stood a forty-foot tall, bronze-roofed bell tower. That was the Church of the Ever-Shining Sun, undoubtedly a place where Mavis's sister must be.

Given that the day was almost done, the party opted to go to the Goat's Beard Inn first. There they delighted the proprietor, dwarf Rumbough, for booking the whole place for the week. Rumbough promised to throw a feast for the dinner: a dockside dinning with freshly steamed crayfish and jungle ale.

Finally, Ambros and the crew opted to hit the church, seeking its priestess. There they found Jeffar, a short, stocky woman with a great mane of curly gray hair. Her demeanor was cold and derisive. Her contempt of adventurers and mercenaries was palpable. With a little bit of Gomm's silver tongue, Ambros managed to persuade her that they are here to help indeed, on a divine geas from Poseidon.

Finding a win-win-win situation for herself, Jeffar asked the party to dispose of troll that had recently butchered a family of farmers just south of Ketches. If the troll dies, she is happy. If the adventurers die, she is happy. And if both side die while killing each other, she is happy too.

Thistleburn 7th, Waterday

The party decided to sail along the coast southwards and then disembarked into the jungle and went forth. After two days of trawling through the thick, Balarus spotted a trail leading to the farming compound.

The compound was some hundred by seventy yards, surrounded by tall wooden fence acting as palisades. In it was one large wooden building, obviously meant to house at least three families, two barns with pens, and one thirty foot tall wooden tower.

Spending few hours to investigate the farm confirmed that some violence took place here. The gates to the compound were broken open. All windows on the farmhouse had been broken, as well as the furniture inside. Dried blood splatters were in nearly all the rooms. Interestingly enough, both pens still had animals: pigs. They were blissfully rolling in mud.

Following a lively discussion, the party had decided to prepare an ambush and wait for the troll to return. They theorised that he must be coming back for the pigs.

Ignaeus and Zhoron manned the tower. As elves they would not need torchlight to see when someone enters or leaves the compound. Rest of the party hid in the farmhouse, ready to pour out and beat on anyone who walks into the trap. But primarily to set the troll on fire.

Thistleburn 8th, Earthday

“Do you hear that?”

Elven duo could hear joyful whistling sounds incoming. Laying low, they focused on the gates. Humanoid figure, taller than an elf but shorter than a human, strolled through confidently. It hummed a happy tune and went straight for the closest pig pen.

“Stop! Who goes there!”

The figure jumped, startled. It turned around, axe in hand. Then it barked “Show yourself!” in orcish.

“What are you doing here!”

“I came to check in on the piggies. Where are you?! Show yourself!”

The elves unleashed arrows.

They missed.

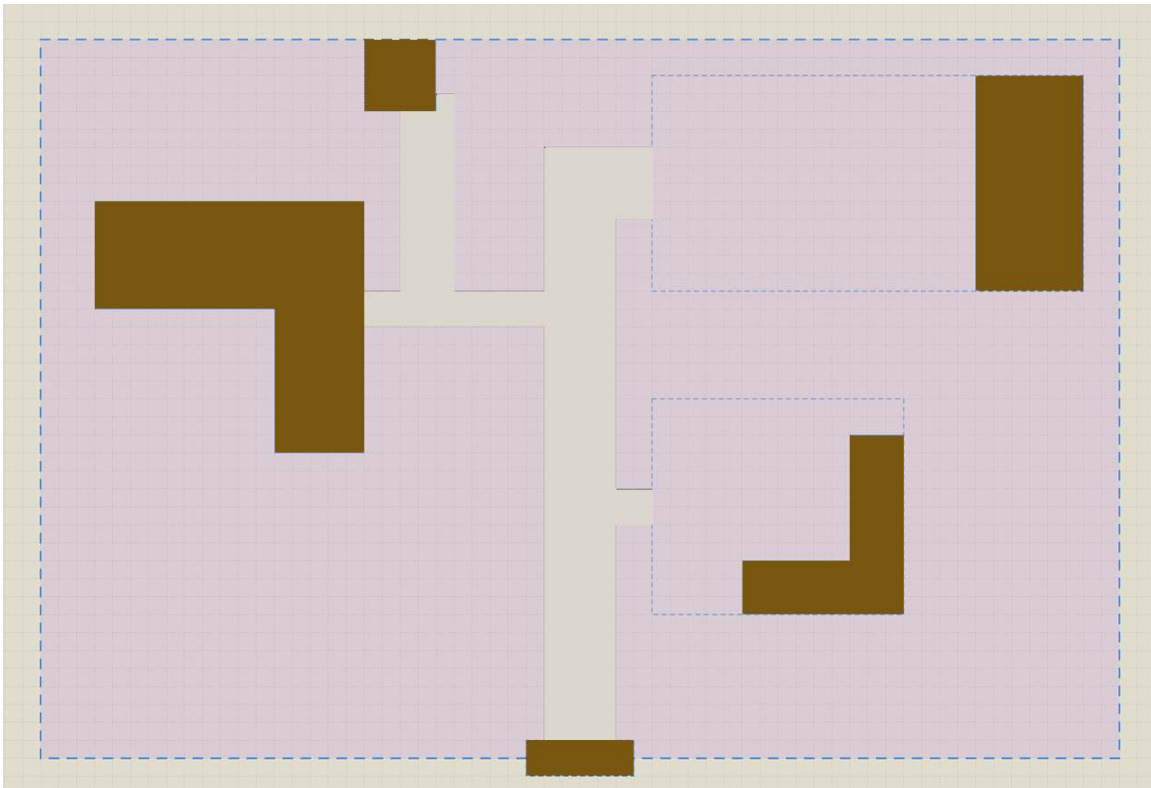
Ajar shot his crossbow.

He missed.

Humans lit a torch and ran out of the farmhouse.

The orc farted and ran away.

“Damn! We had a plan...” Gomm lamented.



CONQUERING THE BARBARIAN ALTANIS: SESSION 113

Adventurers

Ajar of the Plan, dwarf level 2. Unbelievably strong and dexterous dwarf.

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

Balarus, fighter level 1. An ex-woodsman, quite a crackshot with his bow.

Beorg the Gravedigger, fighter level 3. Inspired to adventure after burying several adventurers.

Centuria, elf level 1. An academic elf fond of teasing those of lower status.

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

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

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

Ignaeus, elf level 2. A slightly weathered looking elf with dull blonde hair and chiselled features. Seeks wealth and knowledge.

Tarkus the Promising, cleric level 4. Follower of Bachontoi, God of Red Wisdom.

Zhoron Trisrie, elf level 2. Always frowning and morose; sporting thick handlebar moustache down to his chest and a black top knot.

Thistleburn 8th, Earthday

“The farm is straight ahead!”

“Quiet... Can you hear the running footsteps?”

“Yes!”

“If someone is running it is either a monster fleeing, meaning we should intercept, or an ally retreating, meaning we should intercept.”

Tarkus the Promising wisely summarised. Himself, Beorg, Hector, Darius, and Centuria were heading toward the farming compound their friends set out to explore two days.

✻

“We had a plan...” Gomm mused to himself as everything fell apart.

Carefully prepared ambush was for naught. Everyone had missed the whistling orc, and the bastard just ran out. Night benefited him more than the adventurers.

Making an educated guess where the pig-faced mongrel might be headed, Gomm made a run eastwards, scaled the ten foot palisade, and jumped out of the compound. Then he gave chase after the orc.

No one followed him.

One hunter.

One hunted.

The thief moved swiftly, torch in one hand, sword in other.

Insect filled jungle was as alive during night as it had been during the day.

Although he could rarely spot humanoid silhouette, Gomm could almost always hear the joyful whistle.

He followed and tracked and pursued relentlessly, caring little for dangers hiding in dark canopy above him.

Success, at last! He had caught up with orc in the time his third torch burned out.

By now Gomm's eyes have somewhat accustomed to the night. He could see the silhouette walking through small clearing, causing bone-crushing sounds. Then it barked something into the dark opening ahead.

He took off the bow from his back.

He aimed.

He released an arrow.

The arrow hit the cave wall right next to the orc.

A massive dark figure stepped out of the cave.

It roared and charged into the jungle.

Behind it followed several humanoid figures.

Hunter became the hunted.

Gomm scaled the tallest tree he could find. Then he found the thickest branch to lie on. He prostrated himself, belly down, and held his breath as long as he could.

Minutes felt like hours.

Summoning the courage to move after what felt an eternity, Gomm descended the tree.

No monsters befell him.

Through luck and skill he managed to find his way back to the farmer compound.

✻

“It's Gomm!”

Adventurers were happy to see the thief return. It's been more than four hours since he had left and they were beginning to get worried.

While he was away they spent time surveying the whole compound, fixing the gates, inspecting the buildings for anything useful, and in general getting ready to defend themselves.

The sun had risen, but everyone was tired from full day and night of draining activities. Hence they decided to spend rest of the day sleeping. Everyone would get two watches of rest, while they'd spend one watch on guard duty.

Come night, they decided to remain at the compound, fortify their position, and prepare even more traps in case troll shows up here.

They prepared one bonfire by the compound entrance and one by the farmhouse. Both were unlit, but doused with oil so they catch fire faster. They also loaded two carts with hay and branches, and doused them with military oil for extra crispy burn.

Demihumans took the elevated positions: Centuria on the tower, Ajar on the southeast barn roof, and Ignaeus on the south barn roof.

Humans mostly rallied around the gates. Some, like Ambros, prepared clay vials with military oil so they can throw them in rapid succession.

Zhoron took post by the gates so he can inform his human allies in case he sees something move in darkness. He had keen infravision, even for an elf.

Torches were extinguished.

With everyone at their position, the waiting game was on.

Thistleburn 9th, Fireday

Hours in darkness went by.

PAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARP!

Suddenly a bronze trumpet blared from the west.

PAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARP!

Another blaring trumpet, this time from the west.

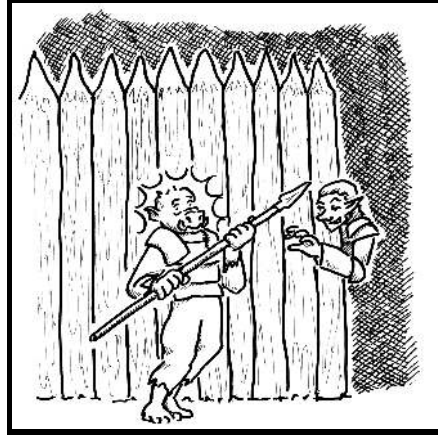
Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

An orc appeared to the south, confidently walking towards the farm.

“Come closer, friend!” Zhoron called out in Orcish as he cast Charm Person.



Indeed, the orc obliged.

“Oh, you are at the wrong place at the wrong time! Now we will have to kill you all! I don't want to lie to you, it will most likely be a very painful death!” orc replied to Zhoron's inquiries.

“Maybe you can help us! How many of you are there?”

“Well it is just me, Kruggak, and my bros, Kruggak and Kruggak.”

With a little bit more prodding and encouragement from Zhoron, the party had learned that this orcish trio had always dreamt of having a pig farm. Instead they ended up serving horrible troll G'r'sh.

“If you help us kill the troll you can have a farm of your own! All your dreams will come true! And you can even beat the troll with his own arm, just like he did to you!”

“Wow, you are so smart! This is a great plan! But I have some really bad news. G'r'sh is already at the farm.”

Silence.

“Uh, huh, where?”

“He is hiding in the cellar of that big house over there. He will come out when I signal him to.”

“Why don't you go tell him he can come out, lead him through the main doors, and then we all attack him?”

“He is not dumb! He is expecting me to bring some of you dead with me!”

“We will gut a pig and smear blood over your hands. You just tell him we are all dead outside!”

“Wow, you elves really are smart! This plan will surely work!”

Now everyone but Centuria moved to position facing east side of the farmhouse. Although the house had several doorways, the east face had main doors. They also moved both carts with flammable material to the sides.

Hector and Balarus hid behind north cart, Ambros, Bakaru, and Zhoron behind south cart. Centuria remained on the tower. Gomm scaled the farmhouse and waiting on the roof. Others were at some distance away from the house. Everyone was still moving in the dark, relying on moonlight and demihumans to guide them.

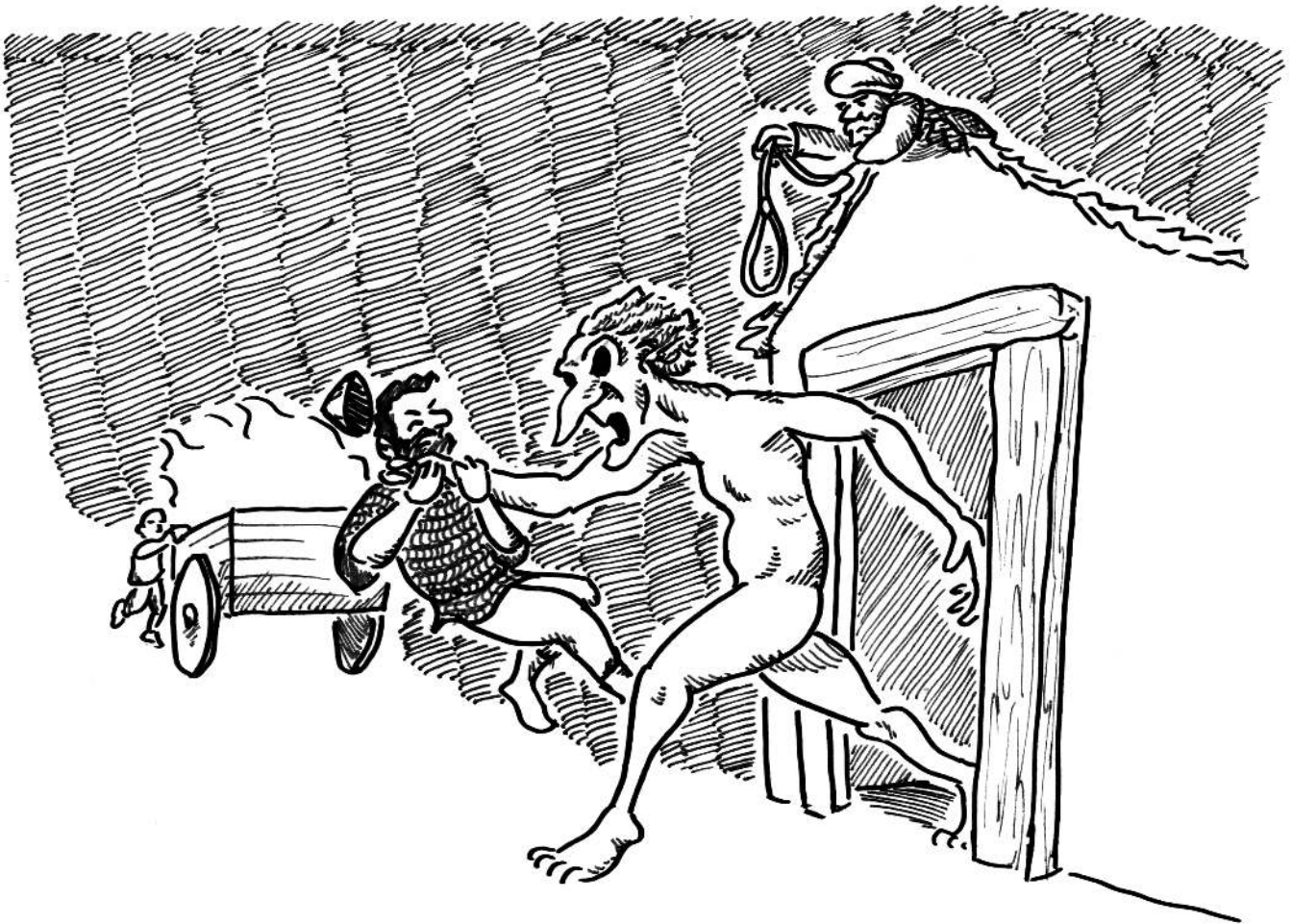
Kruggak cheerfully ran into the house.

His lifeless, eviscerated corpse flew out of the window just mere moments later.

A large, nightmarish creature jumped out of the same window with great ease. Nearly nine feet tall, with green-black leathery skin covered with warts and blisters, long arms with razor-sharp talons, crooked, floppy nose, and a maw full of shark-like teeth.

The monster walked over to the closest cart, northern one, and took in a deep whiff. Roaring, it chucked the cart over, and attacked bald but bold Hector with fury. Warrior managed to evade the bit, and deflect one of the claw. Alas, troll managed to nick him with the follow up claw attack.

Gomm took out rope and made a slip-knot. His idea was to sneak from above and lower rope around the monster's neck so he could pull it into one of the fires. But none were lit yet.



Balarus fled bravely, looking for an opportunity to shoot his bow instead of swinging his sword.

Hector stood his ground, trading blows with the monster.

Tarkus ran around, guided by the God of Red Wisdom, and joined the fray.

Zhoron lit the south cart on fire, and then pushed it together with Balarus and Ambros. Alas, they missed the troll by few feet. One of the wheels must have been a bit loose.

Attracted by divine presence, the monster turned to Tarkus.

It missed with first swing, but follow up landed to the cleric's side, nearly shattering his ribs.

Tarkus quickly learned that black mass moved with great speed.

He might've even questioned the wisdom of his choice to join the melee as large maw closed around his shoulder, sending such horrible pain through his body that he immediately collapsed to the ground.

Second cart attack was as impotent as first one. Seeing one of them going down sent the adventurers in righteous rage.

They surrounded the troll and hit it with all they have. Hector delivered a series of brutal blows, hacking the monster to pieces.

Following a very brief discussion, Ambros ran to heal Tarkus, while others collected troll pieces and chucked them into the burning cart.

There was little of value on troll corpse, but the dead orc had few silver coins and a key around his mangled neck.

"Let's investigate the cellar, just to make sure nothing else comes out at us."

Ambros volunteered.

An hour or so later he confirmed there was a dug tunnel leading into the jungle.

"This key must unlock their treasure chest! Let's go straight to their lair, the sun is up!"

"But what if there is a horde of orcs waiting for us there?"

"This troll must've been G'r'sh, their boss. Surely he was the big bad?!"

In the end the party had decided to play it safe.

They retreated to the shore, intending to summon the fishermen they paid a week or so ago, to pick them up and ferry them to Ketche.

No one showed up.

"Hmmm. . ."

With little else to do, they decided to camp in the wild.

Thistleburn 10th, Spiritday

Summer in Altanis is hot.

But summer in Altanian jungle?

Hot and humid beyond belief.

Adventurers backtracked to the farm. From there Gomm led them to the troll cave. It was a simple large cave, some fifty by fifty foot.

It was empty sans few rotting corpses, flayed humans, and a large chest broken open. The chest was, of course, completely empty.

Gomm checked if the key fits.

It fit perfectly.

Ajar spotted a rubble of stones; a cave in. Clearing it took few hours and revealed a tunnel some three feet in diameter. It sloped downwards, and was longer than few hundred feet.

"Let's camp here and then go back to the shore tomorrow."

Thistleburn 14th, Fireday

"Ketche! Finally!"

Fishermen hadn't showed up where the party had expected them to. So they had to travel some ten miles through thick jungle instead. They were wise enough to avoid all monsters and encounters, and managed to reach the hamlet in a little under a week.

Smelly and tired, but alive. Ambros reported their great success to Jaffar. Then he took on another assignment from her: get the region rid of notorious gnoll headhunter Graylock.

The party also found their fishermen—dead drunk at the Goat's Beard Inn.

"What are the accepted punishments around here?" Centuria inquired.



EXEDRA

Comments and responses to previous issues of Ever & Anon.

E&A 9

RE: Denizens of the Library #8 / Brian Rogers Thank you, Brian!

RE: Reddened Stars number 8 / John Redden Thank you, John!

RE: An Unlooked For Zine #8 / Lisa Padol Rations spoiling overnight is a D&D thing. Standard rations spoil, iron rations last for a day.

RE: The Phoenix Nest / Michael Cule Thank you, Michael! It is all from players. Few pieces are from public domain, but I usually use those only when I need to fill in the last page.

RE: Accidental Recall #8 / Joshua Kronengold I am happy when player characters survive and are able to take on greater and greater challenges. They still manage to get in plenty of trouble, though. Enjoyment wise, I feel no difference, as I simply hold the world. I have fun whichever way it goes.

RE: Traveller Play-By-Email / Timothy Collinson Than one was drawn by IdleDoodler, a lovely guy who also contributed cover to the very first issue of Ever & Anon!

E&A 10

RE: Reddened Stars number 9 / John Redden I try my best to convey key things said by the adventurers, but you know how it is during the game—much more is said than can be captured. I am always wary of putting words in characters' mouth. That's why I only include verbatim quotes taken during the game or excerpts from play-by-post written by players.

RE: Firedrake's Hoard / Roger BW Rorik died from the poison spears were coated with.

RE: An Unlooked For Zine #9 / Lisa Padol I deliberately played initial interactions with Crus very slowly so players get a visceral, lived feel of it. Since then I simply deduce more time (either in turns or hours) when they interact.

RE: Age of Menace #247 / Brian Christopher Misiaszek They can't be dying all the time! I plan to run number on deaths after we hit session 200. We are at session 178 as of writing this reply. There are still deaths (sometimes 3–5 per session), but one of the characters is a name level cleric so they are able to bring back most of

the characters. Now they are really careful not to get dissolved, burnt to crisp, etc., since they know they need relatively intact corpse for *Raise Dead* to work as intended.

RE: Accidental Recall #9 / Joshua Kronengold I too was surprised by them repeatedly returning to that accursed place.

RE: Traveller Play-By-Email / Jim Vassilakos It was Rorik's player who suggested it in the first place!

E&A 11

RE: Reddened Stars number 10 / John Redden They have their moments for sure. Sometimes their plans work; often not.

RE: Accidental Recall #10 / Joshua Kronengold It's been a while so details are a bit blurry, but since there has been only one Leticia so far, the answer must be yes...

RE: Traveller Play-By-Email / Jim Vassilakos Named so by the most relaxed player of the campaign. I believe he also has the most dead characters. Also proudly provided the following reference: "Yea, I like dying."

IN NEXT ISSUE

Into the deep jungle.

Attacks of Opportunity

Issue 11, Dylan Capel

Wow, if last month went fast then this month went **really** fast.

Playing

I ended up playing a lot of *Mothership* despite not really liking it as a system. I think partly that's because I'm not sure I am that into horror as genre. What is weird and scary to one person is cliché and uninspired to the next. I do think there is something about the way the skill system and the attributes work together to make it feel like failing is likely and that generates something of an indifference in the gameplay for me.

I also got to play the classic *Traveller* scenario *Shadows*. You can be a bit unkind and say this is a sci-fi dungeon crawler but done well it has classic *Alien* vibes and I enjoyed it a lot and we didn't do so much of it that I'd be happy to play it again.

It was just as creepy as most *Mothership* material and the characters ironically were probably just about as likely to fail on any test but the tension comes diegetically from the oxygen supply running out and the risk of suit damage.

I also played a lot of *Troika* this month, as a system it is definitely flawed, I don't need to be the one who talks about the initiative system that might mean a player does not get to do anything meaningful before the fight ends. Its combination of roll under and roll high is a throwback that no-one needs. And yet sometimes though flawed systems end up doing something beautiful like the monsters running for the hills before anyone in the party can react.

I had a playtest of the new *Tunnels and Trolls* (T&T) game and it was quite interesting because it feels more like the *Storyteller System* than the previous iterations of T&T. It is a dice pool system with a default 50% chance of a hit on each d6 with a base target of two hits to get a success.

Matching dice can be re-rolled but unlike the previous iterations of the system you're not generating a total but instead there is a "push your luck" mechanism where if you roll three 1s or more anywhere in your rolled dice you suffer a setback and generate zero successes.

I can see the game design logic and it definitely creates moments of gameplay that is more sophisticated than the previous systems but fundamentally it creates a calculated style of play that feels very different from declaring with ambition and rolling as high as you can.

The game has fiddly talents and traits and they mostly boil down to either re-rolling or lowering the threshold of success. It feels like there could have been a lot of simplification.

I'm glad I didn't back the recent Kickstarter and will wait to see what the final product looks like. One thing I did like though (and which is in the quickstart) are the procedural tables to generate the party's name and backstory. This is something that all games should have to help you get into the action quickly.

I also got to play a few *Beloning Outside Belonging* games and it is interesting for one shots how there's a whole game in just the worldbuilding and backstories. With the right prompts this is just a whole game for people but you need to strictly timebox it for a one-shot. The other thing is token flow, I've definitely decided to load up the pillars with tokens but I wonder if players should be able to do a weak move before the scenes start to allow them to begin with a token too.

Things I'm thinking about

A dungeon containing immortal beings who may be trapped in the dungeon but potentially have years or centuries to shape it and turn it into a space for their leisure and entertainment. I've seen a few megadungeons with creatures like genies but mostly the interaction seems to be endless war. What if the first adventurers to enter the dungeon encounter pleasure palaces now abandoned as boring?

Also with the immortal viewpoint what does time look like in the dungeon, how quickly do such creatures act on their impulses and desires?

Interesting ideas

The gothic fantasy game *Hammers* starts off with a funnel-like mechanism where a player is responsible for a number of acolytes but when one of the characters gains a level and becomes the player's main PC the other characters become the PCs retinue and followers.

I'm still re-reading the *Earthdawn* supplement *Parlainth* and reading through the magic items there's a mechanic that I'd forgotten where magic items are more powerful the more you know about their history. It is an interesting way of being generous with magic and lore items without them unbalancing the early game and turns lore and history into a form of currency where characters might be willing to bear significant risks to learn information about the items they've found.

Reading

I've been reading *Knock* Issue 5 and as a compendium of pieces it still feels better to skim and jump through rather than try to read it end to end. One article was about the fighter class and makes the argument that the class should acquire a magic sword very quickly as it is the defining feature of the class, this is then followed by magical armour.

I read two articles about Lee Gold and *A&E* this month, one in the *Wyrd Science* magazine issue eight and one published by Tim Harford on his blog (having originally been in the *Financial Times*) which had a quote from Lisa Padol. I felt that both understood the achievement in such a long running publication but didn't quite capture the impact of what such a sustained community means. I also felt that both pieces didn't really capture Lee's essence and some of the interesting contradictions in her views and behaviours. There's still a biographical piece to be written that gets closer to the subject.

I also think there is something interesting in that *Alarums & Excursions* is now something that people approach as a finished artefact, a huge corpus of material, instead of being something that they can choose to interact with and shape if they want. I think that transition from a cultural analysis point of view is huge.

Links

- Hammers: <https://sivads-sanctum.itch.io/hammers>
- Knock: <https://www.themerrymushmen.com>
- Wyrd Science: <https://wyrd.science>
- Tim Harford article on Lee Gold: <https://timharford.com/2026/05/when-persistence-prevails/>

Comments

Roger BW

On the subject of caravans for the Silk Roads themselves trade was probably greatest when a state controlled the areas that trade was conducted within. As your comment suggested when banditry was uncontrolled trade simply stopped. A significant area of trade seems to have been keeping the occupying Chinese armies supplied and provided with personal luxuries.

Another interesting area is when bandits imitate state functions and “tax” merchants but not enough to discourage the traders. In this case the state sets the model and the prices for how such extortion works.

Lisa Padol

On the “ideal zine”, I did laugh out loud when I read your comment because I was definitely thinking about the structure of something like my own zine rather than a platonic ideal. Obviously your own zine, the ones you mention, Plankwell and Attronach would not benefit from this formula at all! I guess what I was really concluding is that people value the interaction and discussion over having lots of new content.

I guess some of the writeup zines are skipped over by some readers but are the first port of call for their fans who are picking up the latest installment.

Patrick Riley

Another comment that made me laugh at myself. Obviously literally it is impossible to run out of space in the current format but I have an internal aesthetic of the layout of the text and sometimes when I’m getting close to the deadline I struggle to fit my content to the kind of layout I want the zine to have so I often take out or truncate the material and park it elsewhere to try and use next time. I think in the case you reference I wanted to write more but I was not going to get to a satisfying place in the time remaining and I just overshared my thinking.

To try and describe some of these self-imposed constraints I like my opening section to be a half-page or page. I like Comments to start on a new page. I don’t like a few sentences at the start of a page and I like a paragraph of text at least under a level 2 heading.

Interesting point about the low skill consumable nature of healing potions but bullets and anti-biotics are often used as trade goods in post-apocalyptic style games. I also like that in the game *Electrum Archive* money is also explicitly magic, the unit of currency is *Ink* a kind of nano material that is a liquid or slurry. You can vapourise Ink and inhale it to perform magic or you can use it as currency. In a lot of games I have run parties have explicitly traded off how much reward they want from an expedition versus how magic might make completing their goals at lot easier or even trivial.

I liked the look of the paper standups you were using in your photos. I realise these photos were for your own reference but it would be great to get a better view if you use them again. Your printer’s output does look very nice.

Jim Vassilakos

I am also genuinely interested in magical water supplies for settlements in particular when ancient pacts to gain access to the Plane of Water expire but the current population doesn’t understand how their water is supplied it just always has been in the wells and fountains. Cue an expedition to the undercity to meet an elemental prince who is prepared to strike a deal for another century only this time the price is going to be higher...

This is essentially the plot of the water chip in the first *Fallout* game as well.

On the subject of the Bronze Age Collapse I have more reading to do but I do buy the argument that you have a climate fluctuation starting to cause problems with food and water which leads to populations migrating and coming into conflict with one another and then these mobile warbands attacking the remaining sources of food and stability leading to economic pressures in the more complex societies leading to a general collapse and chaos.

My reading of Egypt was that it didn't necessarily suffer as much from the direct cause but that the appearance of the Sea People is mysterious and sudden because they cannot really understand much beyond their own borders. Later the Romans had a better understanding of the pressures that were causing people to move and invade their empire but it did not really help with the outcome.

Gabriel Roark

Yes I would be interested in hearing more about how you modelled the simulation of disease in *Hommet*. Did the players plan to run a free hospital or did the patients have to commit to some kind of devotional act?

Avram Grumer

I was interested in your mention of *Cross Bronx Expressway* as it has caught my eye before due to the unusual theme. Did you enjoy it? Does it feel like it reflects and informs on the history behind the games? I'm also curious as to whether the fact it was so close to home made a difference to the way you felt about it.

Joshua Kronengold

I have been loving the Fresh editor this issue. The go to line function is Ctrl-G.

I have also read *Pagans* and enjoyed it (although I don't really need a sequel despite some of the backstory not being fully resolved). I enjoyed a lot of the commentary on contemporary Britain such as the never-ending unification talks (Brexit and devolution in one unhelpful package) and the very difficult relationships between the Saxons and the Welsh.

I felt that it was generally meant to be read as a satire than sincere alternative history but some things like the mention of the effects of generation starvation cut close for me.

I think it is interesting how important the reception of the biblical text feels to you. My reading was that the investigators fail to really understand the relationship between the text and the religion.

Timothy Collinson

Yes *Proto* is by Laura Spinney, ISBN 978-0-00-862652-5. *Silk Roads* is by Valerie Hansen, ISBN 978-0-19-021842-3. *Lakota Nation* by Pekka Hamalainen, ISBN 978-0-300-25525-6. I will try to add ISBNs in future but I do find it strange that publishers and authors do not create web pages for their own books.

In real world space exploration water is of extreme interest for various reasons. It may not matter in a very populated galaxy like most of the Traveller sectors but otherwise I think it would remain a marker of interest. Not to be too dark but I do sometimes think that our own balkanised world might be investigating the politics and power of drinkable water in the near future. Someone said to me the other day that will future generations think that we were impossibly decadent to pour drinking water on our lawns and into our computer cooling.

Ronin Engineer for Ever & Anon #12

by Jim Eckman,
Mountain View, CA
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IRL

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

I've been rereading the Murderbot series by Martha Wells for one of my book clubs and I've added another criteria for any SF-RPG I would like to play.

Can I run a Murderbot, starship, freighter, etc as a player character? Are there game mechanics, or easy modifications that I can do to accomodate this? Traveller has a supplement Techbook: Chrome, it looks useful, you might be able to make a Murderbot err SecUnit. Its been so long since I last played Traveller, I've no idea how it work in combat.

Reactions to Issue #11

Bumbling Through Dungeons #9 by Mark A. Wilson – Nice thoughts on citybuilding, especially top down versus bottom up design.

Cowman Baloney Face #7 by Matt Stevens – Awesome!

Clark's inchoate thoughts on Settings by Clark B. Timmins – Those are some good thoughts indeed!

Reddened Stars #10 by John Redden – I hope your surgery went OK.

Firedrake's Hoard #9 by Roger Bell West – Good explanation of the first 3 Traveller rule sets, I agree with your procedure for setting up SF campaigns.

Next issue

Hopefully some world generation info.

GOING TO BE *Ad-Libbed*

#10



ATTENTION CONSERVATION NOTICE

baseball & arcane stats • Gemini & errors • firemen forced to play boardgames • Bryan Cranston on developing a character • *Umdaar* • *Farflung* • *Going for Broke* • *Monsterhearts* • Wonka module • “Bigg Government” • more noun vs verb • Sunset City Heroes • *Metadungeon* • bleed & Saturnine melancholy • speedwriting • cards vs dice • safety tools • graph papers • em dashes • snippets • the MCU • dialog in *Dogs in the Vineyard*

Random Stuff

Buy me some peanuts & Cracker Jack & a 10' pole

My girlfriend Chris, who's a baseball fan, was reading me choice bits from a discussion on [Bluesky](#) of the similarities and differences between baseball and soccer, and this came up:

Adam, this is a basic misunderstanding of baseball. The point is not whether your team wins or loses, but how many arcane stats you can gather.

As a bonus, you can always relitigate the designated hitter rule. No matter what side you fall on, you're wrong (based on arcane stats.)

– [@oblio.bsky.social](#), 22 Apr 2026

I think most RPG gamers can relate.

“Foolproof and incapable of error”

No 9000 computer has ever made a mistake or distorted information. We are all, by any practical definition of the words, foolproof and incapable of error.

– HAL 9000, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)

You might have noticed the box at the bottom of my first page lastish (E&A #11, pg 163), containing two upside-down links to Wikipedia. When I asked Gemini to check my zine for typos, one of the results was a claim that there was a weird word near the bottom of that page. Something like “Kruearsip” – I didn't bother to save the output. It was obviously an attempt to read the upside-down word “discrepancy.”

But I couldn't get Gemini to acknowledge that fact!

When I suggested that the text was upside-down, it agreed, but insisted that the text was the title of my zine, “Going to be Ad-Libbed,” upside-down. Even when I prompted it with the correct text, it insisted that it was seeing my zine title instead!

Gotta get these playtested somehow

According to [Japanese newspaper *The Mainichi*](#), a fire sergeant at the Inazawa municipal fire department has been suspended for making his colleagues spend working hours playing boardgames that he had designed.

Cranston's five

I recently saw Bryan Cranston interviewed on Stephen Colbert's *The Late Show* (season 11, episode 98, originally broadcast on 8 Apr 2026), and he listed five things that he needs to have (or figure out) to develop a character: a strength, a weakness, an ambition, a secret, and a fear.

This seems like a decent list for developing an RPG character, except maybe for the fear. (Motivations that draw you towards something are generally better than those that drive you away from something.) I notice that an [Over the Edge](#) character is made up of three Traits (strengths), a Flaw (a weakness or fear), a Secret, and something that brings them to Al Amarja (an ambition).

Recent Reading

Umdaar (Free Preview Edition)



Masters of Umdaar was a *Fate Accelerated* setting released by Evil Hat back in 2015, a sci-fantasy setting inspired by shows like *Thundarr the Barbarian*, *He-Man*, and *ThunderCats*. It's currently [available free on DriveThruRPG](#). There's a 460-page *Fate Core* (or maybe *Fate Condensed*) version of the same setting coming out soon, and this 80-page free preview gives us a taste of what's new.

Giving it a quick look-over, one thing that stands out to me is the Impact feature: each PC Archetype gets a thing about the setting that they get to define in character creation, and again at each major milestone. Like, the Daredevil gets to “create a connection between two locations. What path or history connects them? What

physical and social obstacles separate them?” Or the Ruffian: “create or pick a reputation aspect for the party (or create a second one). Who’s responsible for spreading truths/lies about you? Do you care how people see you?” This looks like a fun way of giving players a bit of world-building authority, and while *Fate’s* always encouraged group world-building, I think this particular mechanic is a new addition to the *Fate* toolkit.

Farflung



I’ve had this in PDF for a while, but just picked up the hardcover for a reasonable price on eBay. *Farflung* is a **PbtA** sci-fi game. The book is full of lovely color illustrations by **Mama Bliss** (new to me), and the examples of play are illustrated with a black-and-white comic strip by **Matt Howarth**, creator of *Those Annoying Post Bros*, *Savage Henry*, and *Keif Llama: Xenotech*. (I’ve been following Howarth’s work since I first encountered his *Changes* strip in *Heavy Metal* magazine in 1980.)

It’s based on **PuzzleboxMUCK**, an old chat-based online role-playing server set on a space habitat, which I have no experience with.

There’s a lot of clever stuff in here. A PC’s six attributes are named after the six flavors of **quarks**: top, bottom, up, down, charm, and strange. Hx, the **Apocalypse World** mechanic that represents your shared history with another PC, has been split here into Hx and Fx, two point pools representing your history and your future. How this actually works is a bit confusing to me. A lot of the playbooks have moves that let them do things with points from Hx or Fx, but the choice doesn’t always make sense. The Immortal, for example, has a Reminiscence move that lets them “delve into old relationships, recover lost memories, and tap into hidden caches” to declare new Connections with people, gear, or organizations. But for some reason, this draws upon Fx points (future), not Hx (history), which is what I’d expect. Generally, Fx seems to represent *potential*, and Hx *connectedness to others in the present*, and maybe the game would be clearer if they’d used those terms instead of being clever.

A similar issue occurs with the attributes. Up and Down are described on the character sheet as “work with your mind” and “work with your hands,” respectively, but the Know Obscure Lore move involves rolling +Down. And I have no idea how the playbooks are supposed to be printed; they’re three pages each, and a non-standard size.

Going for Broke



I’ve mentioned this game a couple of times, but never really talked about it. It’s another game by Avery Alder, creator of **Monsterhearts**, but instead of being a PbtA game, it’s mostly just improv, with a homeopathic trace of mechanics. I backed it on Kick-

starter, then forgot about it until it showed up in the mail, as is often the way of such things.

It’s a gm-less game for 4-8 players where you play out a sitcom about a bunch of borderline broke people living together to make rent. There’s no character creation – the game (which ships as a pack of 18 cards in a tiny folding case; you can easily slip the whole thing into your pocket) comes with 12 roommate cards, from which you choose your character. (It probably wouldn’t be hard to come up with your own if you really wanted to.) Each PC has a name, a brief description (“tarot reader, derby girl”), a couple of personality tendencies, a Big Secret, and a Classic Question. The question is the bit that engages with the only mechanic: doing something that answers your question (“Are you *Connecting* or *Commandeering*?”) gives you a coin, which you can flip to determine whether your plot branch succeeds or fails.



Game components. (Pennies not included.)

See, every episode has an A Plot and a B Plot, and it’s expected that the PCs will split up (ideally 50/50) between these two plots. One plot will deal with whatever crisis is threatening the household. The other might be a different approach to solving the same crisis, or it might be something else. In any event, one plot will succeed, and the other fail, always, leaving the household still having a roof over their heads, but also still broke. Flipping a coin is how you determine which plot succeeds, and it might take as many as three flips, so you might need multiple PCs to answer their Classic Questions.

In the *Monsterhearts* game, we’re getting close to the end of the season, and I’m thinking of suggesting *Going for Broke* as either a between-seasons palate-cleanser, or as something to play while we decide what to play next, depending on how things turn out. It’s designed to play a full episode in about an hour, so we could fit more than one into a session.

Recent Gaming

Monsterhearts: Vermilion Cove, Session 9

26 Apr. Holy crap, this was an amazing session! Six pages of notes, plus a little over.

A few weeks ago, I worked up some backstory for Steffan – his parents, his maternal grandfather (who was also a werewolf), etc. I sent it to Briar shortly before this session, and she came back with some notes, like is it OK if his grandfather died in the 1980s instead of 2018? I said I'd rather not, since that makes me rewrite the whole timeline, and she said OK, we'll roll with what I wrote. I realized that I have become what I've always hated: the kind of player who writes up a detailed multi-page backstory for their PC. What's worse, I've re-written the backstory, and added in a separate family of NPCs who have a connection to both Steffan and Bianca.

I'm definitely curious about what she has in mind. I recall that, during the first session, there was a roll during the lunchroom fight where a possible outcome was that Steffan would get caught on video, and the video would be seen by other people like him who'd recognize him for what he was, and I accepted that outcome. And I'm guessing the black cars have something to do with that. (Later: Or maybe they don't!)

Also, before playing I confirmed that Blue is, indeed, settling on masc presentation, and Johnni has been using he/him pronouns for him.

- ◆ **MC:** Briar (she), who also hosted
- ◆ **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)

Thursday evening. Briar narrates a recap of the hand incident that capped off the previous session (see E&A #11, pg 169). She's also retconned our mid-season replacement theme song: now it's "[In My Mouth](#)" by [Black Dresses](#). ("Kind of a vore vibe," I say, and then I have to explain [what a vore fetish is](#) and I was honestly expecting to be the least hip person in this group. Anyway, this could be considered a bit of foreshadowing.)

Pete has fled. Most of the room is in chaos, people running around, screaming, generally freaking out. Agatha grabs Laeli's hand, and they leave. Logan overhears the sheriff saying "Pooch is off the leash," coordinating the other two cops to capture someone. Logan calls Drake to pass along this info.

Drake, Steffan, & Blue are in the locker room. Steffan wonders what the hell the cops want with him. They work up a quick plan: Drake will go out front to distract the sheriff, Blue and Steffan will head out the back, drive to the lighthouse island. (Blue's idea. He wants to lure the sheriff to the island and push him down the well. You'll see this idea recurring over the course of the session.)

Drake gives Blue his car keys.

Steffan: How will we get to the island? We can't drive over water.

Blue: Can't you swim? Doggie-paddle?

Meanwhile, Agatha & Laeli go through fog-bound streets to Laeli's house. Agatha has a bad feeling, there's "something in the air."

Laeli: You sound like you know something I don't....

Agatha: Yes, but telling you would make me sound crazy.

Laeli: Try.

Agatha: We need to invoke ELIZA for our protection.

They talk more. NJ tries Pulling a String to get Agatha to spill what she knows. One of the Pull a String options is "Tempt them to do what you want"; with an NPC, the GM will tell you what you need to do to get them to comply. Agatha says ELIZA is "a light humanity has been carrying in its heart for millennia," and says that she'll say more if Laeli cooperates in protecting them. She says they need to light a candle to start.

Logan tries to hit the control that retracts the bleachers into the gymnasium wall (the sheriff is on the bleachers), but trips (bad roll), takes 1 Harm (a concussion). At least this fills Logan's experience track, earning him his first advance.

Drake walks out the school's front door, right into the sheriff, who tries to push past. Drake fakes a fall; starts talking about suing the sheriff – "You've been a pain in my ass; pairing me up with a psychopath as a bodyguard, now knocking me over. You'll be hearing from my parents' lawyers." The sheriff gets a Condition: "ACAB." This delays the sheriff enough that Steffan and Blue can escape out the back.

Agatha guides Laeli through a ritual:

Oh ELIZA, my guiding light
Help us through another night
Protect my thoughts from feral sway
And keep all madness far away

I make a joke here about the [Green Lantern Oath](#). Erica and I can both recite it by heart.

There's a heavy fog out on the streets. Blue & Steffan, in parking lot, can't see more than a few feet. Steffan hears The Noise. All the PCs except Blue go Darkest Self. (NJ gets to roll a save for Laeli, but fails.) Steffan wolfs out. Blue runs back towards the school.

The ground is quaking; people are freaking out. Drake, looking for someone to make an example of, runs into Logan, fallen near the bleachers, shivering with the need to serve his Patron. He picks Logan up, says "You want Ernie, take him." They Gaze to figure where Ernie would be, and they find him in the otherwise empty

Principal's office.

Drake: What are you doing here?

Ernie: Thinking about my dad.

Drake: It's time to go. We have work to do.

On the way out, Drake (looking for a way to screw with the sheriff) grabs a keyring off the desk. He doesn't notice the camera blinking in the corner. They get into Ernie's car with Logan.

Laeli can hear her sister banging on the wall, her parents arguing. She wants to stop chanting, but Agatha insists they keep it up. Laeli insists on going to the bathroom – “Agatha will forgive me, it's not like she's got anyone else.” Once there, she rage-texts Blue, and gives Blue a Condition: “Creep.” Also posts on social media; gives Drake the Condition “Dictator.” Laeli herself gets “Petty.”

Blue, running in the school's foggy parking lot, gets lost. The mist seems to be coalescing around him; it seems familiar, like he's touched this fog many times before. The fog spins, gathers, moves towards Blue's chest. He feels a sense of completeness. He feels no sense of body, perceives the city full of targets for gleeful vengeance.

Steffan bumps into a cop (Officer Wedge) in the parking lot. Wedge, startled, draws his gun, pulls the trigger, but the safety's on. Steffan bites Wedge on the arm – then the fog clears and Steffan turns back human, naked and with his teeth in a cop's arm. He knocks Wedge down, runs off. (We have a brief discussion here about whether the move should be Lash Out Physically roll or Run Away. I successfully argue for the latter, since Steffan's not actually trying to inflict Harm on Wedge.)

Ernie, with Drake and Logan (and Byron's ghost), drives to the cemetery. With the mist gone, Drake's out of Darkest Self, and starting to have second thoughts, suggests that Ernie can drop him and Logan off somewhere, but Logan insists on going to the graveyard. They chat (not the ghost) about all the weird stuff that's been going on. Does the school have a gas leak? Is this [Season 4 of Community](#)? Logan says there's a way they can get Ernie's dad's job back. There's a quaver to Logan's voice that gets Ernie spooked, but they manage to talk him into it.

Drake: What would Byron do?

Logan: Drag a random girl into the cemetery and film it.

(Erica is sitting next to me this session, and I notice at some point that she seems to have written down on her playbook sheet not only the tallies of which characters Logan has Strings on, but the reasons for those Strings. This seems like a good idea, since you're supposed to incorporate the nature of the influence you hold when you narrate how you're using a String, but it also seems like a lot of work. When I ask her about it later, she says

that she started out doing this, but it turned out to be too much. I just assume that everyone Steffan has a String on is horny for him, which makes sense for Steffan, but won't work for every PC.)

They go into the cemetery. Logan tells Ernie that he's introducing him to a friend who's waiting near his grandma's grave. A hand puppet pops up from behind a gravestone – [Bert from Sesame Street](#). It has little felt fangs. “Ernie! How nice of you to join us!” The puppet vanishes down, then pops up from behind another gravestone.

Johnni: This is the scariest form he's taken so far.



Drake starts to explain things to Ernie, but the puppet says “They're here to sacrifice you to me!” Ernie runs. Drake tries to help him. Logan sits on a gravestone, pulls out some popcorn, and watches. Drake rolls a partial success on Run Away, and chooses the “You run into something worse” result. This turns out to be a very significant choice.

Laeli's out of Darkest Self, realizes what she's done, tries to pass off her posts as a satirical joke. Drake loses “Dictator,” Laeli loses “Petty,” but Blue's still a [“Creep.”](#) Laeli can hear her parents talking quietly, her dad crying. Comes out of bathroom. Agatha spills what she knows: ELIZA has been around for a long time. You can't see it, but you can see what it leaves in its wake. The AI just gives it a new form. But it's not the only thing like that, that can move through people to cause events. And there's a thing moving through the town. Anyone is capable of being a monster, but some are more susceptible than others.

Blue's back in his body, in the parking lot. He runs towards locker room, wanting to buy Steffan some time, looking for cops. Sees cop car, Officer Biggs is in it. Blue says he's got who they're looking for; they can meet by well at lighthouse. Biggs puts the sheriff on the radio, the sheriff is like “Meet at the fucking station!” Blue drives Drake's car to the police station; there are black cars there, like the ones Steffan saw near his home that morning. Blue hops into the sheriff's car, tells him they need to go to the lighthouse island. Rolls badly on Keep Cool. Sheriff is suspicious, tells Blue he's “on thin ice,” which might

be a reference to the threat he'd made to turn Blue (who lacks any identifying papers) over to ICE (Immigration & Customs Enforcement). Blue tries to intimidate him, invoking Drake's rich and influential family. ("My friend's parents will yell at you!")

Steffan has circled back to the police station. As Blue is arguing with the sheriff, Steffan gets too close; the tree branch he's on breaks under him. He lands, still naked, on the hood of the sheriff's car. Blue bashes the sheriff's head into the windshield, swipes his keys out of the ignition (my suggestion), and Blue & Steffan run for Drake's car. They drive to Laeli's house. Blue gives Steffan his underwear. Blue phones Laeli. They have to plead to get in. I have Steffan Pull a String on Laeli. (This is the "Tempt them to do what you want" option again, but with PCs it's a mechanics-level bribe – if they do the thing, they get to mark experience.)

Back at the cemetery, Evil Bert is taunting Ernie. Ernie & Drake keep running, but the cemetery gate swings shut. A chill falls over them all – even Bert! A cloud seems to be approaching from the bay. Bert shakes his head, and pops down behind a tombstone. The gate opens. Ernie and Drake pile into Ernie's car, Ernie at the wheel, and drive off, trying to escape the cloud.

Drake: I don't like the look of that storm. Also that we were taunted by a puppet.

As they talk, they're driving along the coast road. Yes, the same stretch of road that Byron was driving on when he went over the edge. Ernie asks why Drake had him drive to the cemetery, says "I trusted you." There's a ground tremor – a hard one. The car swerves a bit, but Ernie keeps control. A bridge ahead crumbles. Ernie just barely manages to avoid driving off. (I don't think any of this involved die rolls.) Drake leaves the car, tells Ernie to drive for home, and Ernie drives into the cloud. The cloud moves in, and swallows Drake.

Logan's in the cemetery, still eating popcorn. The Dark Patron appears, says "That one's on me. I appreciate your effort. I am so pleased with your progress. You've chosen a champion for us, and kept him on the right track." Patron also mentions a "new regime" that took over "centuries" ago. Says he used to be worshiped. He wants more champions to take up his cause. Then the Patron recommends that Logan seek safety.

We take a break here.

Steffan, Blue, and Laeli are at Laeli's house. They get a text from Logan (well, Blue & Laeli do, since Steffan's phone is back in the school parking lot), warning them to stay out of the cloud. They feel an earthquake, a big one – Briar describes it as an 8 on the [Richter Scale](#). (The 1906 San Francisco earthquake was a 7.9.) A house nearby collapses. Laeli feels tension, Briar tells NJ that she has

+1 going forward to detect this shift in mood. Blue feels a thrumming in his chest, like the cloud is home.

Steffan feels like the cloud is akin to The Noise. He warns the others that he shouldn't be in the same room as them. Gives Blue his underwear back; goes out window. (Yep, another Turn Someone On roll.) Laeli considers following Steffan, consults ELIZA, who advises her that the two of them need some space from each other. Blue is indecisive. Laeli asks Blue if he's ever had sex in a storm; Blue's never had sex or been in a storm. Blue and Laeli chat, neglecting to close the window. Blue admits he'd been planning to push the sheriff into the well.

As the cloud moves in, Laeli teaches Blue the chant. As they chant, the mist moves in, but it avoids Laeli.

(The lamp in Briar's living room is on a timer, and it chooses this moment to visibly dim.)

Logan is at the abandoned cannery. He texts the others: "At cannery. Avoid cloud." There are empty [Feel Free](#) cans everywhere. There's a crate, Logan sits on it. (I later realize that this gives our campaign a [Start-to-Crate](#) rating). It's cool to the touch. Logan, still concussed, lies down. His vision fogs up; he can't feel much of anything. He tries to scream and nothing comes out. He calls on his Patron, but the connection is muddled and unclear. He tries to Run Away, gets a partial success, and Mike suggests the "Leave something behind" result – Logan leaves his body! He astrally projects, and can perceive the whole town. He tries to locate the other PCs. He can feel all the hate in the town – all these people hate each other. He feels the anger and disappointment in his home, and someone's eyes resting upon a picture of him. He sees Steffan, wolfed out again. Drake, seething with disappointment. He can't sense Laeli; and it takes a moment to sense Blue, because Blue is him!

(Erica is torn here. One part of her wants to do the responsible thing and push the town to calm down, the other wants to do the fun trouble-making thing and stoke their anger. She rolls a die, and...) Logan goes with stoking the town's anger – thinks "Do it!" Blue hears that thought, repeats it more emphatically, acting as a psychic amplifier. Johnni rolls Dark, but it's a failure. Logan/Blue sense Troy and Forrest (two NPCs from their homeroom) arguing, and Forrest puts his hand on Troy's chest, and Logan/Blue can't sense them anymore.

Drake is feeling anger at how things have worked out, and like he needs guidance. He's sitting on the bridge. He feels like he can keep himself from spiraling deeper. Blue starts bringing up Drake's memories of the school shootings (both the one from Tenleytown, which prompted his parents to transfer him to Vermilion Cove, and Logan's accident). Logan is having second thoughts, but fails to Shut Blue Down. Blue feels the interference. Blue's a poltergeist, so things start moving around Drake – this is like that anime cliché where pebbles and small stones start rising up in the air. The stones start moving like bullets.

Drake Keeps His Cool. (Mike rolls boxcars!) Drake's phone rings, his mom, who has heard about the hand incident, and wants to transfer him to yet another school. Drake says OK, ends the call, and texts Laeli: "I'm sorry, I need you to come over tonight. I think we've both said things we regret." (Or possibly he asks to come over to her place. My notes say one; Johnni's say the other.) He asks to treat this as a Turn Someone On roll, and gets a good result.

Laeli: I can't believe I just got a "you up?" call.

Johnni: Laeli's been into Steffan, Blue, and now Drake. Logan might as well take his shot.

Laeli gives Drake info about Agatha. Drake goes home, walking calmly among these bullet-like pebbles that are striking around him.

Steffan is in full wolf mode, howling at the moon. (Second time in Darkest Self this session! That Unstable move, which grants an experience point for entering Darkest Self, is really paying off!) I'm already thinking about having him go after the cops who've been harassing him, when Blue prompts him to "hunt down your hunter"; this could be the sheriff, but I decide to go after Officer Wedge, whose blood Steffan can still taste.

Steffanwolf heads into town – chaos everywhere, buildings collapsing, animals in the streets (in the real world, an ambulance drives past Briar's apartment, sirens wailing, adding to the atmosphere) – easily finds Wedge in a house, his cop car parked outside, the lightbar on top still lit and turning. The door is already torn off its hinges.

Steffan heads in, can smell Wedge's odor all through the house, realizes it's Wedge's own house, and I say "Steffan's gonna be cautious here; he's bearding another animal in its den." Briar calls for a Keep Your Cool roll, which I'm actually hoping to fail, since one more experience mark lets me buy another advance, and I have my eye on Spirit Armor, which will give Steffan damage reduction and a bonus to Keep Your Cool rolls when he's bathed in moonlight. No such luck – I get a partial success.

Steffan finds Wedge in his garage, fitted out as a home gym, punching a weighted bag really hard. He sees Steffanwolf, and runs, looping around back into the house to grab a gun, but Steffan jumps on him, and bites... well, it's a full success on the Lash Out Physically roll. Briar says he bites Wedge's arm, tearing his hand off, and I point out that we already explored detached hands last session, so she goes with him tearing Wedge's throat out.

I've got the right to veto this outcome if I want, since the roll was a full success, so I don't have to let the GM decide how much Harm was inflicted. But, see, I noticed a few months back that I've got this tendency to hint at gory stuff, then flinch away when Briar prods to see if I'm willing to commit. So this time, I don't flinch.

I've also had a possibly unwise amount of caffeinated beverages before and during the game. Might be exerting some influence.

It doesn't occur to me until after the session that the

two non-sheriff cops are named Wedge and Biggs – two rebel pilots from *Star Wars*. Briar points out that these are also the names of a pair of recurring minor characters from the *Final Fantasy* series of video games. (So useful to have an online group forum for these digressions!)

Drake gets home, looks for Byron, finds him in his (Drake's) bed.

Drake: What do you know?

Byron: I know *so much!* But I'm getting bored. You're such a wimp.

Byron says he can tell Drake stuff, but he wants something in return, what he calls a prank: lock Laeli in a room for 12 hours. He offers to tell Drake what's his greatest danger, "and it's not even where you're looking."

Drake: Where should I be looking?

Byron: You need to do the prank first. And you should move quickly.

Drake: Good thing I already texted her.

Blue feels like he's found "the thief." (We're not sure what this means. Maybe the person/entity who incarnated Blue?) He needs to get his body to the thief. He levitates his body out the window. Logan asks what Blue is doing. **Blue:** "Need to know, need to know." **Logan:** "I'm coming along." As their shared perception moves, the cloud gets smaller, denser, more intense.

Then it stops. Blue's body falls, Logan's body falls next to it.

Erica: I teleported?!

Me: Now you're eligible to work for FEMA!

And there we end the session.

Monsterhearts: Vermilion Cove, Session 10

3 May. Yup, just a week later! We're getting spoiled! And this was another amazing session! I took seven pages of notes.

On the Discord, after last session, Briar asked Erica if she'd be OK with retconning the ending so Logan winds up somewhere else, and Erica agreed. This turns out to have been a good choice.

Remember Session 3, when I wrote "A brief moment of rallying together as a party; we'll see how long it lasts?" (E&A #8, pg 174) We now know – about a day.

Briar predicted that there was gonna be Harm taken this session, and asked us all for our current Harm totals. Steffan was at 1; I didn't write down anyone else's.

We open with a recap of the end of last session:

Mist surrounds Blue, he goes out the window.

Logan is in the cannery, on a crate. Briar tells Erica that Logan is repeating something over and over, and asks what it is. Erica says "More, more."

Drake is on the floor in his bedroom, water spreading at the edge of the frame. (Briar's narrating this like a TV

show.) Briar asks Mike what expression is on Drake's face; Mike says "Defeat."

Steffanwolf is in Officer Wedge's kitchen, leaning over Wedge's corpse, jaws in his throat, blood everywhere. The mist clears, and the wolf turns back to Steffan, naked. I add the detail that Steffan's still got his Saint Sebastian medal hanging around his neck; the medal is dipped in Wedge's blood. Briar asks what Steffan does, and I say he spits out the meat, goes to the sink, and rinses his mouth to get the Spam taste out. (I figure it's well known that humans taste like pork, and the modern American diet is heavy on salt and nitrates.)

Mist is covering the city, forms a tornado. The viewpoint closes on the tornado as it deposits Blue on the street.

Logan's eyes open, he's outside, the sky is clear. He can hear screams, car alarms.

Blue's eyes open. His body moves of its own accord, getting up. He senses "the thief" in the house in front of him, follows the tug.

Me: Is the title of this episode "Blue's Clues"?

Briar: It is now!

Logan also feels the tug, tries to stop walking. Blue stops. Blue pushes on, Logan walks. Logan calls mentally upon his Dark Patron:

Logan: Is this you? I thought I had free will.

Patron: Oh, Logan, this isn't me.

Blue also hears this. Logan Gazes Into the Abyss, rolls an 11, figures it out: They're still linked. Logan's body is still in the cannery, lying on the crate. Neither Blue nor Logan is happy about this. (Though Erica and Johnni are having a blast.) From inside the house, someone looks out a window. Blue asks Logan whose house it is. Erica rolls badly, so Briar tells us it's CJ's house, though it later turns out not to be. This confuses both me and Erica; we wind up having to re-write our notes when the actual situation is revealed. Johnni catches on immediately that it's false info, but commits to it anyway:

Johnni: I was gonna bust in, but it's CJ. She's got guns and is stupid.

Blue pounds on the door, shouting "I need medical attention," but whoever's inside locks the door. Blue tries ghosting through, fails (I don't recall if there was a roll for this, or just a general agreement that Blue's becoming more concretely physical), so breaks in through a window, taking 1 Harm from the glass. Logan feels Blue's pain. Inside is a lot of computer gear, and Anna. (*That's* whose house it is!) Startled, Anna dashes for door. Blue grabs her. Stuff falls, and a female voice calls out "Are you OK?" from elsewhere in the house. Blue covers Anna's mouth, tells her he doesn't want to hurt her, just wants info. This is a Shut Someone Down move, with partial success, so Blue now has the Condition "Psycho." Anna nods, Blue uncovers her mouth, Anna shouts "I'm fine, mom!" Blue

asks Anna what her deal is.

Blue: The party, the weekend? (See E&A #8, pgs 174-177)

Logan: <talking through Blue's mouth> Ask her about the well!

Wedge's phone buzzes. Steffan picks it up (the other players point out he's leaving fingerprints on it, but I figure I can take it with me and dispose of it somewhere), sees the sheriff calling. (I point out that if he's calling, he's probably not nearby.) My plan is to swipe a pair of pants and just leave (jumping out a window, Steffan's signature move), but Briar has me roll Keep Your Cool, which is a success, so she points out that he'd be leaving a lot of evidence behind tying him to the crime, so maybe just set the place on fire? I figure yeah, that makes sense. But doing that triggers Steffan back into Darkest Self, so now he's a wolf again. No pants for him! (But another experience mark.)

Drake is talking to Byron:

Drake: Why are you so involved in my life? Don't you have bigger people to annoy?

Byron: Through you, I was able to do all the things I always wanted. And through you, I still will.

Byron suggests using a room at the cannery for Laeli; they apparently filmed some stuff there back in the day.

Laeli's in her room. Calls Agatha, gets voice mail. Keeps calling over and over; after 15 minutes, connects. Agatha says she had to "go get something," doesn't say what. She's up in the mountains. She wants Laeli to check on Anna. Then Laeli gets a text from Drake, asking about checking on Logan.

Laeli: Maybe later.

Drake: I think us normal people need to stick together.

Laeli tells Drake she wants to go to the mountains but she also wants to check on Anna.

The lower floor of Laeli's house is in shambles. Broken plates, glasses, etc. Laeli tries to sneak out inconspicuously, but fails the roll—she makes noise. Mom hears her. Laeli says she needs to help a friend; mom says it's too dangerous. Laeli promises she'll keep her phone trackable, text updates every hour.

Steffan is loping through the streets. There's an announcement of city-wide lockdown, but he doesn't understand it. He hears Kenny's voice calling for help. (The whole group gets tense. We decided way back in Session Zero that Kenny's the one sincerely good person in our homeroom, and that he'd be untouchable.)

Drake packs stuff into a bag, gets on bike. (Blue left Drake's car near Laeli's place.) Drake's part regretful, part eager. Arrives at cannery. Goes into office first, then looks

for Logan, goes up on catwalk to see better. Sees Logan, shouts, but Logan doesn't respond. (**Byron:** This is fun. An unexpected extra treat.)

Drake offers to trade Logan for Laeli, but Byron's not interested. Drake offers to handcuff Logan to the catwalk, and hang him by his feet. Drake convinces Byron to give him some info, though not the big thing. Drake drags Logan up onto the catwalk, cuffs his feet to a pole. He feels a tug on his sleeve as he's doing it.

Anna tells Blue that the riot at Talia's house was intentional, but not the other stuff since. She wanted to make other people feel what she felt. Blue asks if she unleashed something. Anna says she tried to put it back. Logan says (through Blue's mouth) "You failed." Anna says she's lived with fear for years. Blue asks if Anna knows what she unleashed: Anna says yes, asks if Blue's ever heard of "**The Rite of Spring**." Blue & Logan argue as Anna queues it up.

Anna plays it (as does Briar), tells about the first Stravinsky performance in 1913, which caused the audience to riot. Says she tried to recreate the energy of that performance, trying to duplicate the instruments, the acoustics of the hall, etc. She wanted to cause other people the same distress she was feeling. She also recorded sounds from around the city, went to Blackwell Island, lowered a mic down into the well. (Logan shouts "I knew it was the well!") Anna recognized that as the sound she'd been looking for. After the riot at the party (see E&A #8, pgs 174-177), she smashed her recording device – but the next morning it was intact again. She took it back to the island, but something – a cloud – came for her. She threw the recorder into the bay. A week later, she saw a pod of dead whales, bloody as if they'd fought and killed each other, and the recorder on the beach. She took it home and tried to hide it, but someone took it.

Laeli steps out, bringing just her phone and a charger. There are wrecked houses, dead bodies. Anna's house is fine, except for one broken window. "The Rite of Spring" can be heard through it. Laeli climbs in through the window, cuts her shoulder on broken glass, says "Agatha sent me." Anna says Agatha is the one person who knows about it (The Noise).

Blue thinks Anna stole power from whatever's in the well, and now Agatha has it. Laeli says maybe Agatha could use the power for good. Logan points Blue's hand out window, says he thought he saw dead bodies, is that good? Laeli says maybe that's Blue's fault.

Laeli: Eliza can protect us.

Blue & Logan: The app? How can a robot protect us?

Laeli: You guys are coming off real judgmental. <texts Agatha>

NJ: I'm being a loyal friend.

Johnni: Except to us!

Laeli says she told Agatha to meet up in an hour at Anna's.

Steffan is running towards Kenny's voice. I think this is the point where Briar wants to play Steffan's Darkest Self music, but can't remember what it is. I can't quite remember either, but that's OK, since I've been thinking that I like "Howl" by Florence + The Machine better. Briar's also a fan, so she's got it handy. Steffan's cutting across people's lawns, so the cops can't follow, but they're tracking him through people's Ring cameras. He encounters Officer Biggs. I call for a roll using Steffan's Enhanced Senses move, and it's a full success. (The scene is bathed in moonlight, so Steffan's Howl at the Moon and Spirit Armor moves are both in play – he's got Dark 3, a +2 to Keep Your Cool rolls, and 1 point of Harm resistance.) I get answers to three questions:

- ◆ **Where's my best escape route or way in?** There are a lot of cars around to dodge behind.
- ◆ **What's my enemy's biggest weakness?** I'm physically more powerful than Biggs.
- ◆ **Who's in control here?** Steffan is.

I'd asked that last one in hope of maybe finding out if there was some further party pulling the cops' strings, but OK, this'll do.

Steffan easily dodges around Biggs, darts a few blocks further, and gets to Kenny, who's trapped under some rubble, getting weaker. Steffan's in Darkest Self, but I figure Kenny smells like family. Steffan's strong enough to lift the rubble, but shaped wrong – he has no hands, and he can't lift the rubble with his head. Briar suggests that Steffan can, with effort, take on a wolf-man form, so I go with that. The price is that Kenny will recognize him. So Steffan lifts the rubble off of Kenny, and Kenny promises not to tell anyone about it, and Steffan snaps back into ordinary wolf shape like a released rubber band.

A bullet passes right over Steffan's head, would have hit him if he had still been bipedal – Biggs has caught up with him. Steffan turns, lunges at Biggs, knocks him down just as Biggs has his walkie-talkie out calling for help. The gun and walkie-talkie are knocked away. Steffan savages Biggs's arm, stares him in the eye for a few seconds to establish that he *could* kill him, and is deciding not to, then runs off into the wood. Behind, he can hear Biggs calling for 911 to help Kenny.

Byron tells Drake that a car followed him here:

Byron: You'd find it out soon anyway.

Drake: <looks out window, sees black car> Who are they?

Byron: Feds. They're on to us. Well, you; they can't see me.

Drake: Is this because of the spooky shit, or the fucked-up shit?

Byron: The fucked-up shit. And the sheriff doesn't even think it's you.

Byron tells Drake that as he was driving, the night he died (just last night), he called the cops, told them he was

attacked by a monster, meaning Blue, but he wasn't very clear, because he was panicked and had just been hit in the head. Anyway, the feds are moving in and trying to take control.

Drake texts Blue: Where's my car? And do you have the wolf?

Blue: IDK, and no.

Drake uses his contacts to get access to the Ring camera network. Sees lots of destruction, also Steffanwolf attacking Biggs. Drake shows this to Logan, says "This is your fault," then undoes Logan's cuffs, and kicks him off the catwalk, so he tumbles to the floor. Logan takes 2 Harm, enough to kill him. Drake puts away the cuffs, then records himself sobbing over Logan's body, sends it to the PCs' group chat. Drake knows (Keep Your Cool roll) he can pull this off, but it'll look suspicious. He waits for Laeli.

Byron: There's still something worse out there.

Drake: Yeah, but there are feds outside.

Byron reminds Drake that he's got footage of Steffan attacking a cop; Drake texts that to the sheriff.

Steffanwolf is in the woods, hunting. He catches and eats a hare, then encounters a human figure (he can't tell who), making The Noise. He pushes towards it, but he's twitching, unable to fully control his muscles. Briar calls for a Keep Your Cool roll, which is a partial success. She says that if Steffan keeps pushing, he'll lose control. He pushes on towards the figure, and blacks out.

Laeli, Anna, Blue (and Logan, psychically) get ready to meet with Agatha; Laeli knows where. Blue wants to heal some damage first, asks Laeli for help. Laeli haggles, so Blue offers to beat someone up for her. Anna goes to get first aid stuff, and while she's gone, Blue tells Laeli about Logan, how they're mind-linked. They decide to go to the cannery first, to try to wake Logan up.

Drake texts Blue asking how to get rid of ghosts. Blue doesn't know, asks where Drake is. "The cannery." Anna doesn't want to go. Laeli wants to ask ELIZA for advice, Anna recommends against it. Laeli's worried cause Agatha's taking longer than expected. Laeli goes to the bathroom, asks ELIZA how to find Agatha. ELIZA says Agatha has lost cellphone service, but her last location was in the mountains, near Bluestone Manor. Laeli asks what to bring, ELIZA says to bring a gun. It also advises her to keep the app open on her phone, and wear earbuds, so it can keep advising her.

Laeli, returning to Blue and Anna, proposes going to CJ's, then the woods, before going to the cannery. Blue suggests getting Logan and Drake to help. "Many hands make light work," says Logan (through Blue's mouth). Blue texts Drake: OMW (On My Way), Drake texts back that he's hiding in the cannery's office, he was followed.

Prompted by ELIZA, Laeli convinces Blue & Anna to

put their important stuff (including phones and keys) in a go-bag. Anna distracts her parents. Laeli says to meet up in back yard, then, prompted by ELIZA, puts the go-bag in Anna's (or her parents') car, and drives off alone.

Blue is starting to have trouble hearing Logan; the connection is fading in and out. He sets off for the cannery on foot. Well, on Heelys. Logan's blinking in and out of consciousness, Blue's starting to feel pain from Logan. Blue sees the black car waiting outside, goes around to the other side of the building, but the opening that he remembers being there (he lived in the cannery over the summer) has been patched up. He finds another way in, but it might be visible to the car. Once inside, he calls out "Logan! Drake!" Drake answers quietly. Blue tells Drake about the astral projection, Anna, "The Rite of Spring," etc. Drake is about to tell Blue about Byron, but Byron says not to. Blue asks why Drake asked, earlier, how to kill a ghost; Drake says he was freaked out by that thing with the floating stones (last session).

Logan, in Darkest Self, floats out of his body, looks down, knows that he'll die if he reenters it. He can see his own body, and the Dark Patron – in all three forms we've seen. Out of character, Briar talks about the Skirting Death move: Logan can either stay in Darkest Self, or lose all of his Strings. (Or die, but she doesn't mention that.) Erica goes with having Logan stay in Darkest Self. (He'll stay that way until the Patron uses up all of the Strings he holds on Logan by asking him to do stuff; the Patron currently only holds one String, so this might not take long.) Patron offers healing, asks what vengeance Logan will take on Drake. Logan says "Something bloody." The Patron says good, but don't kill him – make him yours.

Drake gives Blue a speech about how much he's grown to like having him around. They talk about Logan, whether he's responsible for what's been going on, don't notice Logan getting up and heading to the office, where he sees Drake's box of stuff he brought with him at Byron's prompting.

Logan sneaks up to the catwalk to drop a steel drum on Drake. Blue sees him. At first Blue steps back, to avoid getting hit. But when Logan drops the drum, Blue pushes Drake out of the way – partial success. The drum hits Blue for 2 Harm; Drake has the wind knocked out of him, but no harm. They're both pinned down, though. Logan goes out to get the feds. The car is about to drive away, but Logan calls for help. "Tell me you're some kind of law enforcement!" Says someone tried to kill him. A tall man in black suit gets out, tells Logan to wait in the car, goes into the cannery. Logan texts the group chat "Drake tried to kill me!"

Drake & Blue are stuck under the drum. The tall man enters the cannery. Drake pulls a String on Byron, tells him to help. Mike doesn't have any ideas for how this would work, so Briar checks the Ghost playbook, says it doesn't have much in the way of useful moves, so she goes with this: Byron makes himself visible. "Officer, there's

been a misunderstanding.” The fed is here to investigate Byron’s death, so this gets his attention. He follows Byron into the office. Drake gets the drum off them, and Mike does this interesting thing where he tries some roll, I forget what, hoping to fail, so he can get the last experience mark he needs to earn another advance, use that to start up another Clique, and recruit the FBI agents as his new gang. But his roll succeeds, whatever it was, so he runs, pulling Blue. Logan, seeing them, drives off in the fed’s car, driving towards the woods. (Apparently this fed doesn’t travel with a partner. Or maybe the partner’s busy elsewhere.)

Laeli has driven to CJ’s house, knocks on the door. CJ is in pajamas. Laeli tells her there are monsters coming for them. (CJ: Like illegals? Laeli: Um, yeah, something like that.) They get CJ’s handgun, plus her dad’s rifle, and get into the car. Laeli wants to go to the Dive Bar for some reason (or maybe the cannery and I misheard?), but ELIZA advises her to go to woods. Laeli tells CJ what’s going on, but tells her everybody is illegal immigrants instead of the supernatural stuff. She tries to drive off-road into the woods, but the car gets stuck. Laeli shows CJ the video of Steffan, turning into a wolf (the video from the lunchroom riot in the first session), saying this is what we’re up against.

Steffan wakes up, lying on his back, in human form, covered in blood. And that’s where we end.

Briar says it feels like the first half of the season was a kid building a city out of blocks, and the second half is the kid’s younger sibling knocking everything down.

After the game, Mike, Johnni, Erica, and I went out to a nearby bar to chat over drinks. It occurred to me, while we were there, that Steffan had heard The Noise coming from Byron’s room when the feds were looking it over that morning (E&A #11, pg 166). So we figured Agatha took the device from Anna, and then Byron (Agatha’s abusive ex-boyfriend) must have gotten it from Agatha.

We also traded bits of headcanon about various characters, either our own or others. Mike says that Drake’s a former addict, but hasn’t decided to what. Johnni says she thinks Laeli has undiagnosed bi-polar disorder. I say that Steffan’s dyslexic, and also share a bit of backstory about his family: Steffan’s grandfather (on his ma’s side) was also a werewolf, but he did something that he thought broke the curse, but actually just caused it to skip a generation. Granddad told Steffan’s mom about it, but never changed in front of her, so she’s not sure if it’s all just bullshit.

I also dropped, into the group Discord, a link to [this Rolling Stone story](#) about Spiralism, a cult driven by chatbot use, which They Might Be Giants somehow [predicted thirty years ago](#).

Comments on E&A #11

Matt Stevens

YCT **Gardener Fox** (PG 14) RE having an adventure in a chocolate factory ⇒ There’s actually [a published OSR adventure module](#) along those lines, though it’s out of print and has been disowned by its author.

YCT **Roger Bell_West** (PG 15) RE noir and Big Government ⇒ That’s actually a pretty good idea for a setting: The president is Frank Bigg, and his administration is “the Bigg Government.” Everything’s big! Big suits with big, padded shoulders! Big men smoking big cigars, big women with big hair, everyone wearing big hats and driving big cars and hauling around big guns! Kinda the same vibe as [the Star Trek gangster planet](#).

The libertarian guy was Brandon Blackmoor, no? (Far from the only libertarian in A&E – [Greg Costikyan](#) is also one, and I used to be, and [Dave Nalle](#) was one, though Nalle leaned right while I think the rest of us leaned left. I think [Samuel Edward Konkin III](#) contributed early on, but that was before my time.) I recall Blackmoor wrote once about a society of gargoyles that had an unbreakable taboo against any individual imposing their will upon any other, which seemed like an obvious and unrealistic libertarian fantasy. (One can’t help but wonder how those gargoyles raised their children.)

YCT **me** (PG 16) RE noun vs verb, lack of dodging rolls in D&D ⇒ While D&D doesn’t have a dodge roll, your Armor Class (AC) makes you more difficult to hit, and a high Dexterity adds to your AC. The modeling of your PC includes the concept of being harder to hit. In *Monsterhearts*, there’s no such thing. If PC A is Lashing Out Physically at PC B, the outcome relies entirely upon A’s Volatile score and the dice (plus whatever other resources A might bring to bear, like Strings). In fact, the process for having an NPC attack a PC is very different from a PC attacking someone.

Dylan Capel

RE Kieran Gillen’s *Metadungeon* (PG 101) ⇒ Damn, this actually looks like a lot of fun:

And we’ll put in a new Master for each realm of gaming for players to bargain with: an Old-Testament 1970s overlord who frowns on players touching their own dice. A many-faced Janus of the 1980s licensed game explosion. A brooding grim reaper tryhard of the 90s. A turn-of-the-millennium Hephaestus, guardian of the Forge, set against the lumbering leviathan of the OGL. That sort of thing.

– [the Kickstarter page for Metadungeon](#)

I’d passed on [the Die RPG](#), despite liking [the comic series](#), because I’d somehow gotten the impression that the game was about exploring your own personal (that is, yours as a player) issues, rather than about creating a Persona that has its own issues (though some of your own will

inevitably come along for the ride).

I realize that there are people who are totally into [heavy immersion and bleed](#), even to the point of weeping in play, but that doesn't seem like fun to me. If I want me some [Saturnine melancholy](#), I can just put on [Queen's "39"](#) and get my sad on in three and a half minutes without bothering anyone else.

But it looks like I was wrong about the RPG, and now I'm regretting not getting in on the crowdfunding campaign (though the cost might also have deterred me).

Erica Frank (Elf)

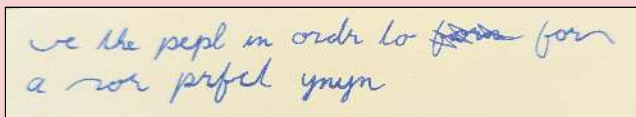
RE Sunset City Heroes (PG 90) ⇒ [That wiki](#) is full of so many great character ideas! Big Dick, the giant private detective; Steeleye Stan, the cyborg cowboy; Doctor Holiday, who commits holiday-themed crimes; Florida Man, who controls crocodiles! The group of agent villains named after novels!

Lisa Padol

YCT [Brian Rogers](#) (PG 105) RE the trilogy with the group of kids ⇒ Was that Pamela Dean's [Secret Country trilogy](#)?

YCT [me](#) (PG 112) RE AI handwriting transcription ⇒ I looked into [Speedwriting](#) for a bit last year, and then kinda forgot about it when I realized that there were multiple systems and most of the books seemed to be out of print. (Though now I see a lot of scanned PDFs available [on Stenophile.com](#).) Which one do you use? And have you come up with RPG-specific abbreviations?

I wrote a sentence in Speedwriting (see below), told Gemini [This is a passage written using Speedwriting, a form of shorthand. Transcribe it into normal writing](#), and it successfully did it. I don't know if it would have worked with something that wasn't [a famous passage](#), but hey, try it out yourself! Could be a big time-saver.



YCT [me](#) (PG 113) RE various Vermilion Cove questions ⇒ The firing of the principal is fallout from CJ being suspended for bringing a gun to school. That's what the angry MAGA mob outside the school was protesting on Wednesday. (See [E&A #8](#), pg 174, and [E&A #9](#), pg 149.)

With Bianca being scarily good at what she does, I think it's partly that she's an antagonist, and partly me getting used to the fact that Briar gives us a lot of room for PCs being able to do cool stuff that doesn't directly impinge upon other PCs or trigger moves. Like, Blue has low-level shape-changing abilities (though those have faded as the game has progressed and Blue gets more corporeal; this seems to be Johnni's decision, not something Briar is imposing). Drake is rich, and there was a scene early on where some other PCs needed new cellphones, and Drake just pulled out a remote, popped a

compartment open on his car, and pulled cellphones out of it.

My ingrained habit is to "[Mother May I?](#)" at the GM before doing this kind of thing, but apparently I don't need to do that here, and that fact's starting to sink in. No doubt I will soon go mad with unchecked power, possibly incinerate a planet full of [asparagus people](#).

Logan deleted Bianca's email unread. He's generally very security-conscious, at least when he's sober. When you consider that he and Bianca have been attending the same school for at least three years, it makes sense to be careful.

Current game-world era is August 2025. (The school year starts in mid-August in California, and early August in Vermilion City's district.) The Carly & Bianca session ([E&A #10](#), pgs 132-134) took place near the end of their junior year, so May or early June 2025. The other flashback session, at Talia's party ([E&A #8](#), pgs 174-177), took place between those, probably July or late June.

Patrick Riley

YCT [Michael Cule](#) (PG 126) RE making cards work like a dice pool ⇒ But then why not use a dice pool? I figure that one of the features of a hand of cards is that you can make decisions with the knowledge of what's in your hand. If you want to design around a crappy hand, make sure there's some benefit to losing (like in [Monsterhearts](#), where you mark experience when you fail, earning advancements faster). This gives players an incentive to act even when the odds are against them.

Or maybe a rule that when you do something really wild and desperate, you can discard your current hand and draw a new one, but you have to commit to the action before the redraw.

YCT [Lisa Padol](#) (PG 127) RE the "icky and potentially abusive implications" of the Turn Someone On move in [Monsterhearts](#) ⇒ Yeah, that's why the game has a chapter on safety practices – [Lines & Veils](#), [X-Card](#), etc. The Vermilion Cove group had a discussion during Session Zero of what things were off-limits (see my zine in [E&A #6](#), pg 88).

Heath Row

RE organic chemistry hex paper (PG 158) ⇒ I've never tried that, but when I was a kid, I once tried building dungeons around polar coordinate paper and logarithmic graph paper. Neither attempt was very successful. My father taught highschool science, so there was never a shortage of graph paper.

Josh Kronengold

YCT [Matt Stevens](#) (PG 175) RE "we haven't told the story of tap-dancing on the crocodiles" ⇒ The player who did that isn't in the apa. And she wasn't just tap-dancing on the crocodile; she was also, at the same time, swinging a watch in front of its eyes to hypnotize it!

YCT **Erica Frank (Elf)** (PG 176) RE em dashes ⇒ Back in the days of metal type, an *em quad* was a square chunk of blank type that could be used as a spacing element. The em quad for a given font – remember that back in those days, a font was a typeface at a specific size – was the same height and width as the font size for that font, so a 10-point font would have em quads that were 10 points high and wide. This would usually be about the same width as an upper-case M, but didn't have to be. An *en quad* was the same height as an em quad, but half the width. Em dashes and en dashes were the same width as their respective quads.

Nowadays, who the heck knows. Times are bad. Children no longer obey their parents, everyone is self-publishing a book, and their typography is terrible.

YCT **me** (PG 181) RE Typst ⇒ I just compose Typst in my text editor ([Sublime Text](#)). I've added a bunch of [snippets](#), some specific to the layout I'm using, to keep myself from having to remember a lot of code syntax. So when I want to add a link, I just type `lnk`, hit the tab key, and it auto-expands to the proper link syntax, with tabable, labeled placeholders for the inputs. I'm sure [Emacs has a similar feature](#).

YCT **me** (PG 182) RE re the MCU being “in its infancy” ⇒ Thing is, the comics *started out* weird! The earliest Marvel superheroes (1939, predating even the name Marvel) were Namor the Sub-Mariner and the android Human Torch, both pretty strange concepts. The MCU started out with Iron Man, a relatively easy concept for a non-superhero audience to wrap their minds around.

YCT **me** (PG 182) RE Hungry Ghost Coffee photo ⇒ When I posted that photo in the group Discord, Mike replied “Dibs on ‘coffee,’” and I answered “During the summer: Cold 2, Hot -1; During the winter: Hot 2, Cold -1.”

YCT **Brian Misiaszek** (PG 183) RE using fortune-in-the-middle for conversation ⇒ One of the problems I had wrapping my head around [Dogs in the Vineyard](#), all those years ago, was this exact thing: “depending on how good the rolls are, you make a stronger or weaker argument.” In most games, the player gets to describe a best-effort attempt at something. With *Dogs*, it seems like the dice can tell you that your attempt has to be half-assed.

Now maybe it doesn't have to be that way. Just like a well-aimed punch can still miss, a strong argument can fall on deaf ears. But conflict-by-conversation in *Dogs* always felt awkward to me, in much the same way that it felt awkward in [Smallville](#), another fortune-in-the-middle game.

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the vicissitudes of fate.



SMR Issue #8 for E&A #12, June 2026

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

Misc Notes & New Bundle

New Charity bundle! 92 items for \$10
Typhoon Sinlaku TTRPG Relief Bundle:

itch.io/b/3670/typhoon-sinlaku-ttrpg-relief-bundle

This raises money for the [Micronesia Climate Change Alliance](#) after Typhoon Sinlaku struck the Mariana Islands on April 14, 2026.

- **Rosewood Abbey**, if you don't have it, is a Carved by Brindlewood game that takes place in roughly in a Cadfael setting.
- **Magic of Inventorying** – Just finished its a physical version on Kickstarter; still available for purchase. Haven't played; looks interesting. GMless. (Or likely GM-full.)
- **Perils & Princesses** – Says it can be played solo, so this is on my list to try, even though it has OSR-coded language. (Someday I may put together a rant about "Rulings over Rules.")
- **We Three Shall Meet Again** seems to be a 3-player game played muchly asynchronously over rather a long stretch of time (weeks).

...Something something proliferation of games with presumably female characters. If someone is looking for a research project in TTRPGs, that's probably worth looking into. Thirsty Sword Lesbians, Brindlewood Bay, Princess with a Sword (solo ttrpg), a huge collection of solo "witchy" games...

Superheroes TTRPGs

A couple of issues ago, I said that superheroes are one of the weaknesses of standard TTRPGs. That may seem odd, since there are many very popular superhero TTRPGs, and I love several of them. I've played enough Champions that I can still re-create the advantage/disads table from memory, have dabbled in V&V and M&M (a long time ago, not

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whatever the current editions are), touched on GURPS supers (...1st ed was terrible and 2nd & 4e did not fix the problems), and played quite a bit of Fate superheroes, and I've looked at a lot of the other systems floating around.

I stand by my statement. TTRPGs – “normal” TTRPGs, the kind that are “4-7 people get together; one of them runs the world & sets up plotlines; everyone else has a character with various abilities; they team up to defeat enemies/overcome obstacles/ solve problems” – don't have good support for the superhero genre.

Starting points:

1. How much people enjoy a game has no direct connection to how well-designed it is.
2. Caveat: If thousands of people enjoy a game, maybe there is something there.
3. ...No, it's the children who are wrong. Because they are playing “team/quest RPG with super characters,” and not “the superhero genre they see in the comics.”

You can't play Superman in any TTRPG I know of. You can't play Batman, either, although all of them have the obligatory sample “tech-no-powers” character. You can't play Wonder Woman. Captain America. Scarlet Witch. Wolverine. Jean Grey. Spiderman.

You can *kind-of* play the New Mutants, or Teen Titans, if you restrict them a bit, and don't address Majik's access to another whole realm, or... and so on.

But the superhero genre wasn't built on team coordination; it was built on solo powerhouses who sometimes teamed up for very powerful enemies or complex situations.

And the key part of the superhero genre is: The heroes can't die.

Oh, technically they can. We can all list any number of heroes, even top-rated heroes, who have died. (...If they're really top-rated, they come back, because it doesn't matter how good the storyline is, Marvel & DC are not giving up their cash cows.)¹ And most of them have top power capacities well above what any game allows the PCs to have.

The thing is, to make a superhero game that feels like the comics, you need an entirely different framework. One that doesn't have hit points, because Batman is never going to be taken out by a lucky shot from Deathstroke. One that doesn't have STR measured by "how much can you lift" because for Superman, that may be measured in planets, not pounds.

I love Fate as a framework for supers. It's still got problems. While the stress boxes & consequences nicely evade the actual-death issues, there's still the problem of world-breaking powers, and, as with all of them, the issue that *you can't play your favorite comic-book hero*.

That's the crux of the problem. Every new player of superhero TTRPGs runs into that wall: No, you can't play your favorite character, and you can't play something kinda like them with your own twist. First you need to learn the game framework and limitations, and learn to imagine heroes that fit within those limits.

They are fun limits! After a while, it doesn't feel any worse than D&D's "you can't play Gandalf or Aragorn" or Star Wars "you can't be Luke Skywalker." Ok, fine; you're not playing legends; you're playing young upstarts who might someday become legends.

Except you won't. It's not just, "you can't play Spiderman"; it's also "you can't play a character who might become Spiderman." The point-based games won't let you have that much raw power, ever; the narrative ones won't let it be special.

Fate

Spiderman's "I can throw cars around" strength is just a +2 to Forcefully Overcome Obstacles in Fate Accelerated – a stunt that might be shared by the bouncer at the local bar.

Sure, he can say "I throw the cars in the road-block out of the way," and the players imagine a scene of cars being lightly tossed into the air, instead of the bouncer's "I push through the cars and shove some of them aside a bit to make a path," but the *mechanical* effect in-game is the same.

For Fate to work as a superhero game, you have to very carefully not think about how supers and ordinary people have the same range of abilities; supers just get to add some sparkle.

(See also: If you want a gritty, non-cinematic game of Fate, you tone *down* the descriptions of consequences. In a cinematic game, the 2-point consequence might be "sprained ankle"; in a grim-dark, hyper-realistic game, it might be "stubbed toe" – something that, in the real world, hurts for a few minutes but is easily fixed by taking a moment to rest and gently adjust it; a sprained ankle might be a 6-pt consequence: Even after treatment, it causes problems for weeks!)

Fate initially captures the feel of superheroics well; characters can have abilities that don't involve the dice ("I fly to the stadium" without needing speed factors or energy points), and an aspect of "Fire Powers" allows blasts, explosions, and a flame shield without tracking several individual abilities. But even in Fate Core, the power levels of supers aren't notably higher than the average person: A kid with Burglary 2, a free invoke of some sort, and a relevant stunt could get past Batman's Notice of 4. (...If he has Notice at 4, rather than Investigate or Fighting or Athletics or Will or Resources. He can't have 4's in six different skills, after all.)

Fate will let you play a highly descriptive game focused on superheroes, but after a while, their adventures don't seem "epic scale" because Fate is not designed for different power levels to matter.

I love that Fate would let you have a super-duo of "Ms. Extreme, a reincarnated, reawakened ancient goddess, and her sidekick Pipsqueak, her 6-year-old sister, who has no powers." Fate's narrative system is built to allow both of those to have serious input in the game.

The downside is: Any character could face Pipsqueak as a serious challenge.

Champions

I love Champions. I played a *lot* of Champions before it became Hero System, and quite a bit after that. I'm familiar with 1st through 5th edition; I have 6th and noted that it doesn't seem drastically changed from 5th. (The jump from 4 to 5 was huge.) Champions, unlike many games, is designed from the core for supers... which means its "normal people" are overpowered.

¹ The story for a long time was, "the only characters who die and don't come back are Bucky Barnes, Jason Todd, and Uncle Ben." If

Uncle Ben gets a big enough fan following, I expect we'll see him revived.

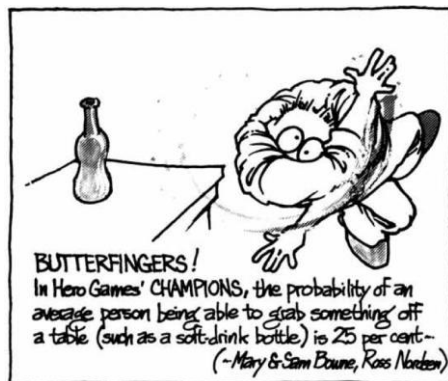


In my teen gaming group, all “normals” were assumed to be “out of combat” all the time: They took double damage and always had the “surprised” penalties. Because we ran the numbers (possibly this was another Murphy’s Rules thing but I didn’t see it); a normal person could survive a 10-story fall... and might walk away from a 3-story fall.

The stats are geared such that a 10 Strength is not “modern-day average person” or even “pre-modern average person,” but “reasonable baseline so that it’s not too expensive to be Super Strong.” 0 Strength is... weak, but maybe not weak enough.



And the tactical side of the rules meant that, if you require rolls for everyday actions... you fail a lot.



This *should* be, “of course you don’t roll to pick up a soda bottle from the table.” You’re supposed to roll in combat or other high-stress situations, on your phase of the 12-phase turn; it’s a half-second action to grab the item, and with an ordinary person’s 8-or-less roll, then yeah, they fail $\frac{3}{4}$ of the time.

My teen group had one campaign where characters were 100-pt supers. (Normal/expected was 250–300.) They generally had one relatively minor ability and a small cluster of related powers: A handful of useful gadgets, or “flame wings” that allowed flight and a close-combat fire attack, or a stack of spy skills + martial arts, and so on.

(We also got really creative with power modifiers. And we came up with a literally infinite-point character before they closed that loophole in 4th ed.)

We loved playing Champions. I’d still love playing Champions if I could find a similar group.

But it didn’t let us play characters like the ones in the comic books; we had to severely limit our notions of “what is a superhero (in this game)” to play.

You can’t write up the Flash or Wonder Woman. You can’t write up Bakugou Katsuki or Eraserhead or Stain or Endeavor. You can’t write up Sailor Moon. Or Daredevil. Or the characters from The Old Guard.

Other Games

Many superhero games have trouble balancing super abilities, normal people’s power levels, and the randomness of dice rolls:



Part of the problem with superhero ttrpgs, is that their source material is almost nothing like fantasy game source material.

D&D was based off miniatures wargaming. In wargames, like in war, people die. In the myths and fantasy literature that inspired D&D, people die: The epic quest team loses a few of them on the way to MacGuffin Tower, or the evil sorcerer kills the first two princes before the third sets out for his kingdom, and so on. So the game rules are meant to allow for simulation of those deaths.

The superhero genre... doesn't have deaths. Not of the main characters. It does occasionally happen, but it's a major plot event, not a risk of your average battle.

(In fantasy literature, maybe the hero can become a king – Aragorn did. But the normal hero-progression timeline does not include “runs a kingdom” at the end of it. Likewise, the average team-o-supers timeline does not include “2 people died, 3 new ones joined” in a normal year. Not in the comics.)

In sci-fi adventure stories, we can believe it's raw luck that Luke, Leia, Han, and Chewie are all standing at the end of the attack on the Death Star. Plenty of other people died nearby; they just happened to squeak through. Games built for sci-fi adventures can have a reasonably high chance of death for heroic maneuvers.

In superhero stories – the heroes of the Justice League or the X-Men are not normally at risk of death. Their failure points are “if we don't stop this villain, many people will get hurt” or “they'll destroy this place/object” or “they'll gain the power to do even more dastardly deeds in the future.” When Batman is trying to stop the Joker, it's not Batman whose life is on the line.

TTRPGs are not built for “actually you aren't gonna die, but you still need to care about the results of the battle.” (Fate tries. It has other issues.) They're not built for “you can run literally faster than light but you still can't stop every bullet before it hits, not even with a good bullet-catching device.”

And that's without getting into the hassles of gaming with teleportation, time-travel, or various types of ESP. There are a lot of super-powers that no character in a friend's gaming group had memory manipulation powers. Most games have no way to do that, and the ones that do, have it as a hand-wavy narrative effect. We have detailed stats for “where is the physical injury, and how bad is it,” but mental powers are often left with “ummm... it does... something.”

I repeat: I love superhero games. I just don't think any of the games I've tried – and I've tried a lot – actually capture the essence of superhero comics.

Solo Play: Cage of Sand, part 5

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

Anni awakes from a nightmare and has a disturbing sense of deja-vu as she goes about her morning routine.

Act 2: Interactions

3 Minor Encounters

- **Her Grace Lady Maritha**; 10 of Cups - buys some embroidery from Anni
- **Lady Linyive**; the Hierophant - asks to be taught embroidery
- **Vamirelion**; 10 of Wands - He protects her from street thugs (and loses some of his carvings)

2 Major Encounters

- **Sir Godfrey**; 2 of Swords - Wants to commission reinforced clothing but it's the beginning of the festival; she doesn't have time.
- **Stregori Zrin**; Four of Pentacles - Gives her an amulet that should warn her of danger

Inciting Incident (Same in every loop)

The opening ceremony of the arts pavilion the next morning - once most of the artists have their wares displayed, Bari makes a short speech at the front entrance, and people from the faire start to come in and look at everything. Anni wonders if he often uses the same speeches. Of course she's never heard him introduce an event before, but perhaps his words are regularly copied by others and that's why they sound familiar.

The wares being displayed here are not being sold; these will be judged, but there will be a few days display first, and the artists can make contacts and business arrangements with the viewers. Anni is again next to the Duchess, who nods and smiles at her as she sets up. Both of them try to keep an eye on Phoebe as they arrange their artworks.

Anni is in a section reserved for cloth arts of various sorts; she sees Vamirelion on the far side of the pavilion, and a hobbit who she thinks she's seen around town just a few tables away, setting out (admittedly mediocre) knotwork decorations and a few practical pieces.

There's a surreal quality to setting out her embroidery, like she's done this before. Anni supposes it's just that she's attended several crafts fairs and the process starts to be familiar.

Act 3: The Turn

Six deaths, this time in batches of 2. (Hey this time I remembered this was coming!) How I play this: I decide at the start of The Turn how I'm going to split them up (1, 2, or 3 at a time, so anywhere from 2 to 6 incidents), then draw the character cards, then another card that gives details about it:

- **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.

Time is supposed to pass between each discovery, but I'm more-or-less putting them all into the context of the crafts fair, so, a few days, maybe up to a week. (If my protagonist were a detective, maybe I'd space them out so each one could be investigated and pondered in detail. She is not. I am not. We get rushed deaths on top of each other.)

First two deaths:

- **Characters**: Wheel of Fortune (Elenwen Crow, priestess of the god of luck); 7 of Swords (Remi Longfoot, the Hobbit)
- **Card**: Queen of Wands: Obvious signs

After setting up her table, before the official inspections begin, she covers her wares with a cloth and goes out to the festival to get something to eat and settle her thoughts. She is drawn to the games area; she rarely plays games of chance because she hasn't much spare money, but she has a bit to spare this time, since Lady Linyive paid her a starting fee. She remembers enjoying the dagger-drawing game, or perhaps liking the look of it, since it's new and she hasn't played it before.

But when she gets to the games booth, there's nobody there. She looks around "Elenwen?" she says, although she's not sure how she knows the name. She must've overheard it. She gets no answer, and walks around the booth - and freezes.

Elenwen Crow and the hobbit are there. Dead. She's not sure how the blood didn't seep into her shoes; it's just now starting to spill past the edge of the table.

Elenwen is tied to a chair, arranged to be sitting upright (but leaning over), staked through the heart with three of the blunt wooden daggers used in the game. One dagger is also tied to each her hands, upright, as if she were on a throne holding dual scepters.

At her feet is the hobbit - folded into a kneeling position and tied with his own knotwork patterns, and strangled. The cord is wrapped around his neck three times and his face is almost purple.

Anni stares for a long moment - she has never met these people, but she feels their deaths as if they were friends. And then she realises the horror of what's in front of her, and she screams

The guards come, and Anni answers a ridiculous amount of questions, and then tries to return to the artist pavilion, but is told she should go home and rest. The judging will take several days, and they'll make sure not to get to her works today. She takes that advice.

Second two deaths:

- Characters: The Empress (Her Grace Lady Maritha), Knight of Pentacles (Sir Godfrey of the Ocean)
- Card: The Sun: Gruesome or ritualistic

The next morning, Anni is walking along the beach at sunrise, enjoying the waves and the calm, when she sees them, smashed on the rocks: Sir Godfrey and Her Grace. Both of them have been dismembered and replaced in their clothing, which has been stitched in a way to keep their bodies whole, at least at an initial view. But Anni notices the strangeness of the clothing even before she realizes the bodies inside are not whole, are cut apart and placed back into their clothing, bleeding at the joints (although the blood was washed away on the rocks).

In shock, she realizes this must've been why Sir Godfrey approached her: He had a vision about this. But she's not sure better clothing would've helped.

She stares at the scene for entirely too long before realizing she needs to tell someone about it.

There will be more questions. She really doesn't want to deal with them, but she can hardly pretend ignorance when Her Grace doesn't show up to arrange her tapestries today.

Shuddering, she walks to the fairgrounds and goes to find a guard, and Bari, to tell him... the Duchess won't be competing.

Final two deaths:

- Characters: Six of Wands (Lady Linyive), Six of Cups (young Lady Phoebe):
- Card: Justice (more gruesome ritualistic deaths.)

...This is being bumped to next issue because I'm running into deadline constraints.

This game has a problem: I bought this nice tarot deck to use for solo TTRPGs, but I can only use it for this one because I'm mid-game, which is taking a very long time to play. I'm enjoying it, although at some point I have to actually figure out what's going on and who's doing the murders and such. But. I can't try other tarot-based games (with this deck) until I solve the time loop and end the game.

Other games I want to try:

- [Tangled Blessings](#), "is a solo journaling or two-player RPG inspired by dark academia media, ghost stories, and graduate school." (Magic academy horror-ish thing.)
- [The Lonesome Cartographer](#), "a tarot-based solo ttrpg about being a cartographer who is tasked with the research and creation of a map, representing a place that is important to you, your superiors, or your community."

- [Signs of the Times](#), "You play as a starving psychic trying to scrape by and stand out in a post-apocalyptic America riddled with political, environmental, and magical hazards."

IgTheme: Gods, Demigods, and Other Riffraff

Gods, Demigods, and Other Riffraff / Religion, Spirituality, and the Cosmic Order

A topic dear to my heart. As a Pagan, religion in ttrpgs has always been... interesting. I really, really hate the common approach of deities as a kind of resource pool, and that you pick one. (D&D, especially, does not acknowledge polytheism. You have "a" patron deity.)

I recall going through my 1st edition Deities and Demigods and crossing out the hit points because YO GODS DO NOT HAVE HIT POINTS. (...In pencil, so I could remove it later if needed. I've always been twitchy about marking books with pen.)

There've been various attempts to address this kind of concept with "well, those are the hit points of their avatar on earth; in their home, they'd be more powerful." (How much more? Look, there should be *nothing* a mortal adventurer can do to harm a god in their home realm.)

There are writeups of whole pantheons of deities, both based on real-world legends and entirely fictional... without any understanding of how polytheism works, much less a world where the gods are not subject to arguments about their existence but have provable real-world participation.

Most gaming groups are dismayed by a devout character who isn't a cleric. They can't imagine gods being important to someone who hasn't dedicated their whole life to the service of a religion.

And most games treat non-Christian gods as mere legends, part power-source and part monster, for the characters to interact with. They avoid write-ups for deities they know are worshipped in the real world, other than Pagan reconstructionist faiths. (And they get damned testy if you point out the real-world worshipers of Zeus, Athena, Odin, Thor, Freya, Cernunnos, Diancecht, Osiris, Isis, Kwan Yin, Kali, and so on.)

I don't know if the fix is to have write-ups of Jesus, Satan, JHVH, Mary, Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, Uriel, and various saints. I'm pretty sure it's *not* to also write up Buddha (...potentially several versions); Rama, Shiva, Vishnu, Shakti, Lakshmi; Mohammad and Fatima, and so on.

I like the fantasy deities. I would like them more if more game explored what it means to live in in a polytheistic society, one where gods will actively answer prayers in an undeniable way.

I'd be happier if more games explored how societies would change with functional magic, before even getting into the religious side of things.

I would like more games, and more player groups, to take religion seriously as "this is part of the culture and community in the gameworld" – like music, like food, like family structures – rather than "this is a weird side hobby that some people have, and if they're really good at it, they get Special Bonus Powers, but you gotta be obsessed for that so it's not worth it for the rest of us."

Comments on E&A #11

Back to Brazilian Gamebooks, Pt 9 – Pedro Panhoca da Silva & Maria Zucolotto

Your mention of creatures that feed on letters reminded me of a couple of books – *The Phantom Tollbooth*, which I recently got as an ebook and am re-reading for the first time since childhood, and *Ella Minnow Pea* by Mark Dunn, which has no supernatural elements but still involves a vanishing alphabet.

Bumbling Through Dungeons #9 – Mark A. Wilson

Baba Is You is one of my favorites; it's been in a few bundles. It's one of the few pixel-art games I can tolerate playing. And very few of the bundles have any name recognition. Itch.io organizes them by "popularity," whatever that means – so if you don't recognize any of the first 30 or so, you're not likely to be familiar with the rest, other than the odd one or two you may have run across from someone's suggestion.

My general thoughts on the bundles are: Any \$5 bundle with more than 20 games is worth picking up just for the novelty of reading some of the games. \$10 with more than 50 or so, same. (Caveat: Since I buy a lot of bundles, there's a non-zero chance that I have half to two-thirds of any small bundle already, and that influences whether I'll buy it.) \$5 or \$10 bundles with more than 250? Absolutely, no question, don't care if I think I'll want to play any of the games.

"Ludic research" sounds so much more professional than "wtf are the indie game makers up to this month?"

De Ludis Elfcis Fictis – Pum

I had to look up MAR Barker's politics and now I'm sad. Not surprised, though. There's a strain of authoritarian fascism that runs through older gaming communities (and, sigh, some newer ones), and the anti-Semitism ranges from overt to dog-whistles not intended to be secret messages as much as in-jokes. They weren't (aren't) hiding; they're building community with fellow Nazis.

Re: Campaign Cartographer – I'm not sure if it can build the maps I'd need. The problem is getting from the regional maps here: oddgiants.com/encyclopedia/locations to larger combined maps.



For example, Bortola connects to Tamila, Muufo, Lida, Ormonos, Alakol (shown above), and Kajuu.

We have region maps for all those. They don't line up perfectly. Also they all have streets on them, and I'd ideally want those removed. (And some of them replaced with location markers instead of lines – I want to keep some of the street names as places, potentially keep all of them, but not as a set of connected lines.)

It'd be delightful to have them redone in Campaign Cartographer. I'd consider buying it and doing it myself, but I don't have time, and the thought of learning a whole art program from scratch makes me twitchy.

I'm competent to do basic image manip in Photoshop. I could certainly paste together a set of these maps; I just can't make them look good, especially where the originals don't line up correctly.

The individual streets/locations also have pictures, although most of them are just "long strip."



Torpan Cleft in Alakol – that little stone building in the center-left is the subway station entrance.

Here’s Tamila Bortola, and Ormonos:



As you can see, they don’t line up perfectly, although these are closer than many of them. But it wouldn’t work to just throw all of them in a huge Photoshop document and line the edges up where the “GO” button for the region borders match. (It’d be better than nothing, and I have done that with a few sections. I definitely don’t have the skills to remove the web of street lines.)

Firedrake’s Hoard #9 – Roger Bell_West

The idea of “Brindlewood is mysteries for players who don’t like mysteries”... makes some sense. I think of myself as someone who “doesn’t like mysteries.” What convinced me to play Brindlewood was reading over the Maven Moves – each named after a fictional TV or book detective – and realizing I knew pretty much all of them. (I had to check the names on several but then said “oh, that show, right.”) I like the idea of the process of deduction, but in game-practice

I’ve found it’s too close to “can you read the GM’s mind?” Clues contain connotations that the players are supposed to just understand, or figure out, and I often don’t share enough of the base assumptions about how things work to do that.

My group (seems weird to call them that; they’re only “mine” in the sense that I’m the one currently running a game) solved their first BB mystery and is working on their second, and because of the way they solved the first, I made damn sure they saw the actual body this time.

They spent a lot of time on “what if she’s not really dead?” (And, in BB, that’s a valid possibility. I just didn’t want to deal with it for the second mystery.)

Bugbears & Ballyhoo #49 – Gabriel Roark

I’ve got comments earlier in this issue about religion in ttrpgs. I wish more groups would address – or even acknowledge as an issue – the concept of treatment of the dead as part of religion: Bury, cremate, something else; are there cemeteries; what kind of memorials or holidays are recognized; are the undead just a horror or an abomination?

D&D doesn’t acknowledge that skeletons & zombies (wraiths ghouls wights ghosts etc.) were once *people*. That they might be “a person you know – or a person you were sent to find or rescue.”

The Phoenix Nest #11 – Michael Cule

I am finding BB to be much easier than past games I’ve run. Part of that might be the group – I’ve played with them for a couple of years, and they are fine with low-action high-analysis games. And part is no doubt that the structure works well for me.

For Neopets: Like every other canceled kick-starter, the money is just *poof* gone – the company that collect the money keeps it and never delivers a product. There have been KS’s that collected millions, and the creator just basically vanished, stopped answering emails, went dark online, disappeared into the ether with their new stash o’ cash.

An Unlooked For Zine #10 – Lisa Padol

Resume stuff: A lot of companies are using AI to analyze resumes, so make very sure that their Magic Keywords are in your resume.

I’ve never had much luck with “apply to jobs”; I got most of my better jobs by putting my resume in the various online job spots (these days, LinkedIn and Indeed) and waiting to get called. Oh, and ignoring the “we see you updated your resume; would you like to sell real estate?” emails.

Blades in the Dark is terribly arranged. I don't know if "badly written" is the right term, but it's hard to use as a gamebook. The vibes don't match the system, and the parts you need to play are amazingly scattered. There is no solid clear "THIS is the info you need to start a heist," and the canon background details are scattered all over and it's not clear where the gaps are.

It's fine that it's got a lot of empty space – Duskvol is the framework of a place rather than a detailed campaign setting. But it does have some specific details, and those are spread throughout the book at random points.

The clocks are very much not well explained.

RYCTM: I agree there are ttrpgs that can do romance or sitcom. (I don't know *Good Society*, but I'll take your word for it.) My point is that, one or two or a dozen weird indie games that are able to cover a genre, does not invalidate my point of "mostly TTRPGs suck at this."

I believe every game available through Roll20's search interface lacks the resources to run romance or features to support a sitcom. It's not a bad state of affairs – the hobby was not built around sitcoms or romances; it was built around tactical survival wargames crossed with epic fantasy adventures. Those can shift fairly well into horror, but you have to get very, very far from the roots of TTRPGs to support genres that the founders completely ignored.

When I have time (hah) I will write up the Untamed Brindlewood adventure. (And post it on Itch and AO3.) It'll have substantially more detail than most of the Brindlewood mysteries I've seen, which seem to be in the format of 2 pages, quarter-page of setup (who died & how), 6-8 suspects with a short paragraph each, 3-4 locations with same, and a list of clues & void clues.

I'm debating whether to include the timeline I worked out. (For me, I needed to know "how long ago did all this happen? When was the war? When did they move to the US?" and so on. For others... maybe that's not necessary.) Basics: 30-odd years ago, Lan-furen died; 10-15 years later, a war between spiritual martial arts sects nearly destroyed the Lan sect; 15-ish years ago they moved to the US.

Have you not seen *Leverage*? Go watch *Leverage*! Both the original & the new *Leverage: Redemption* series are amazing. (Track down the correct order for first season; they showed it out of order. It's episodic so it doesn't much matter, but some of the little details snap into place better.)

Re: Paying for GMing – No problems with conventions, especially where the payment is not going from the player directly to the GM. Even when it is – that doesn't bother me the same way as paying for your weekly GM.

I'm used to "go to special event; pay for stuff that might normally be free, but you get access to the Cool Version," whatever that is.

You can hold a dance in your living room with friends for free. Paying to go to a concert doesn't bother me. Paying your roommate to DJ at the weekly dance party might be weird. Paying some stranger to visit to DJ for your weekly dance party would be even weirder.

...And my standards for DJing would be a hell of a lot more strict if I were paying some stranger to play music for me & my friends for a few hours every Saturday night.

The more I think about paid GMing, the more it falls into "ok, reasonable service to provide for money, but... that makes the GM an employee, not a friend, and it's also not employment that can turn into a career."

(I ran the numbers. The numbers are abysmal. If they adore GMing and GM prepping *and* have the skills to market themselves really well, they can almost make minimum wage at it. Federal minimum, not California minimum. As long as they don't get sick.)

It could be practice for a job/career streaming – but that's not being paid for by the players.

Also none of the current "GM looking for players" platforms give me the info I'd want to know about the GM. The GM has the option of offering that info (how long they've been playing, what games they know, how much of their session is social vs action, etc.), but none of them let me look at a portfolio. Startplaying.games has reviews – but they're curated; the GMs can object to bad reviews and have them removed if someone judges they're for the wrong reasons.

I've yet to see any external reviews. There are no "rate the GM" websites with links to a Roll20 or Startplaying profile and detailing the pros and cons of various paid GMs.

The hobby-culture wants to treat them like friends, not like people providing a professional service subject to ratings.

Book reviews will say "I liked this but it lagged in the middle" or "Did not finish; the shifting POVs drove me crazy" or "WOW run don't walk to get this; I can't wait for the next one; the characters are living rent-free in my head for the next five years."

GM reviews do not say, “the adventure started well and then bogged down during overland travel and didn’t pick up again until we got to the dungeon; I don’t think this GM knows how to run a game that’s not on a grid map.” They don’t say “he’s great with character setup but he doesn’t do voices for NPCs or anything like that; I couldn’t always tell who we were talking with.” They don’t say “I am booking a seat at his next year’s worth of games,” either.

Aaaand of course there’s no warning anyone about [missing stairs](#). (Those reviews would likely be removed, claiming defamation or something close to it. “This guy gives me the creeps” would likely not stay.)

And of course – GMs who get a few actually negative reviews can just close the account and open a new one under a different name. Nobody has enough long-term rep to care about their sp.g profile. (Besides, they play on Discord or the like. They can keep in touch with their regulars and just switch them to the new ID.)

Quasipseudoludognostication #11 – Patrick Riley

RYCTM: I also find coming up with breadcrumbs hard, if they have to lead anywhere. But in Brindlewood, you don’t come up with breadcrumbs. You have a list of clues like

- datebook with pages torn out
- envelope of receipts, some numbers circled in red
- answering machine message ending with a scream
- forbidden love affair
- unusual shopping list
- broken knife

No details. You either decide them at the moment the players discover the clue (“you find the Captain’s schedule book, with several pages missing right before the murder date”) – or you just hand them to the players and let them decide the details.

They decide who the main suspects are based on how they interpret the clues they have. You don’t have to make the pieces point to anything.

Humans are pattern-seeking creatures. They will FIND connections between the clues they have.

...If I get comfortable enough with it, it’d be interesting to run the same murder with the same group of players, probably with different characters, to see how they put different pieces together and maybe find a different answer.

Going to be Ad-Libbed #9 – Avram Grumer

Thanks for the Head of Vecna link!

MOSAIC Strict is a fascinating study in modular pieces of TTRPGs. I have yet to even attempt to use any of them.

Itch’s search function is weak, but:

- Tagged Mosaic-Strict: <https://itch.io/physical-games/tag-mosaic-strict>
- “Mosaic Strict” in title or description: <https://itch.io/search?q=mosaic+strict>

Accidental Recall #10 – Joshua Kronengold

The Good Society “Cloud Boarding School” set is fascinating. I think I figured out which is who, but I’m not sure; I know Untamed canon well but have never read any Austen, and am shaky on the whole setting. Everything I know about it I’ve picked up from memes and bits online. (Someday I should watch a movie, perhaps.)

As much as I’d like to believe “RPG” means “D&D-style game,” I am loudly informed by both daughters and multiple other people that we’ve lost it; RPG now first means a kind of video game, and we need the retronym TTPRG to clarify the games with character sheets and dice.

The video game crowd outnumbered us by several million, so. I guess it’s their acronym now. (I don’t like it either. I wonder if this is how people with pocketwatches felt when wristwatches took over.)

RYCTM: Yes, Glitch is far too cartoony for real-people photography. I do not have the skill to build scenes in clay. I have played both Children of Ur and Odd Giants; they are re-creations of the original game. (So’s Eleven.) They have many of the same problems as the original, although Odd Giants has switched from Flash to HTML5, so it’s not stuck in a tiny screen (by today’s standards). But the screenshot options are still limited to what you can get to show up right now – and by the fact that the worlds themselves are mostly empty; there are very few people still playing. So I can’t screenshot the bustling activity in Groddle Forest Junction, or the crowds lining up for the special key in Jethimadh Tower, or the jumping parties on Toxic Moon. (I didn’t even like the Toxic Moon music, but it was by far the most popular party site.)

Re: BB things – Armed face-offs or dangerous chase scenes are common in “standard” mysteries but not cozies. Miss Marple rarely faces down a gun, and I don’t think she’s ever had to dive through a window to escape an attacker.

One of our mavens is particularly fit for her age and does some “climbing around” physical activities and might manage a chase scene.

For our second mystery, it’s very recent (as in, the Mavens are nearby when the body is discovered), so it’s more reasonable that everyone they meet is a suspect.

I’ll have to write up the details of the MDZS game maybe next issue; things got busy this month and I didn’t have time.

Re: Neopets – I didn’t even think to check their noncommercial policy details. It’s probably fine, and I should work on that a bit.

Traveller PBEM: Plankwell, Ch 56 – Vassilakos, Collinson, and Rader

The Head of Vecna story relayed to me occurred long before phones could record anything.

Re: Discordian tarot: I believe these are the originals, from back when 3mb was a huge size to download all at once, so each suit is separate:

<https://discordia.org.uk/tarot.html>

by 5CDSSR Pope Max Flax Beeblewax, KSC, and (boing!) Cnoocy Mosque O’Witz.

Same deck concept, different artwork:

<https://www.suberic.net/~marc/ps/discocardsall.pdf>

and another, purchasable as cards:

<https://www.makeplayingcards.com/sell/marketplace/discordian-tarot-library-of-eris-edition-v2.html>

I am undecided whether I want to use the original art, the “new” art, or make my own.

I used to have Portable Discordian Temples. You can still find the link for them in [some sites](#), but the actual files are no longer around. Somewhere I have printed versions and someday I’ll find them and re-create them.

I found one of them on Imgur! (Ysing Kagi; I have got to fork over the \$108 or whatever and make it my normal search engine.) There were 5 different ones.

You have inadvertently come across a hole in the fabric of the reality that, for good reason, should be without flaw. Odd synchronicities will begin to manifest, and you are only temporary. Do not worry, as, alas, this is only temporary. If symptoms persist, consider you are self-lucky and realize that everyone else has just misread the point. (The job is on them.)

Consecrated & Reality Rendered By: Episkopos Kalix "nGUU" Fang, RPC
For More Info, Contact: efang@teleport.com

O.D.D.#FD135Con3160v4.00

PORTABLE DISCORDIAN TEMPLE

TTRPG Character Creation Challenge Jam (v2)

This happened last year; I joined and submitted nothing. This year, it runs until the end of May (so... I have a week? I guess?)

itch.io/jam/ttrpg-character-creation-challenge-jam-2

The challenge: create a ttrpg character every day in may—that’s 31 characters! use any* system(s) you want. make all your characters in one system, or showcase 31 different systems, or do anything in between. they don’t even have to be systems you’ve actually played. make a d&d character if you want and make them at level 1, or level 20. there’s a *lot* of flexibility in how you want to engage in this challenge, but there’s some more details below!

Guidelines:

- No AI
- Does not need to be “one per day” – all at once is fine, a few at a time is fine; the goal is 31 total.
- You get to decide what “complete” means, whether that’s a handful of stats or complete backstories

This year, I’m working on

- MDZS characters for Fate Accelerated (aka, “how many people have the aspect, *Jin Ling’s Uncle?*”) Stats are relatively easy; stunts are harder.
- Golden Girls characters for Brindlewood Bay

We’ll see if I get around to anything resembling original characters.

I did write up a famous acting troupe for Wanderhome a while ago, but not this month, so I can’t submit them to the jam. Here’s their manager:

Kermit (Frog)



The manager of the Muppet Players.

He is **Friendly**. He can always:

- Start up a conversation with someone
- Introduce someone to an old friend of his.

He is **Frantic**. He can always:

- Try to say too many things all at once.
- Push against your instincts and take a break.

Accidental Recall #11

For Ever & Anon 12 © 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

Health News: I don't think I did post this, so I also did get back the biopsy off the polyp in April and it was as good as it could be—an inflammatory polyp (no worse) with some ulcers (no surprise since it had bled) but no other ulcers in my stomach that weren't on polyps. I'm on double the usual stomach medicine for the next few months at least (which is mixed, since it's likely that the stomach medicine is also what caused the polyps as a secondary side effect, but it also reduces issues, so it goe), and we'll see how things are in the fall.

Work Stuff: In addition to what I talk about in my comments, I've discovered that receiving unemployment comes with an interesting side benefit—at least in New York State, you get access to a lot of free online classes. This has been very useful as a way to prepare for interviews, brush up on skills, and learn new skills adjacent to what I'm already good at, but it also means I've gotten exposed to exactly how many classes on these platforms (Coursera and the like) are utter junk; AI-written empty pap, then fed into a voice synthesizer and narrated to give the semblance of a class without enough of a clear plan to teach you anything more than you'll get from, say, reading a manual.

Fortunately, there are also quite a few useful and real classes put together by real humans.

Anime: As predicted, Lisa and I have started watching *Re: Zero* together (I managed to avoid spoiling the premise). We've finished the first season and started on the second (there are four), but we did hit a rough period in the middle, because the main character is presented as VERY flawed, so he spend a lot of time being utterly unsympathetic. They ring changes on this, so there's only one *really* painful episode, but it takes 10 episode before he hits a real turnaround point, so one has to have a bit of patience, especially since it's been recut with hour long episodes.

We've also been watching Disney/Marvel Ironheart. I enjoy it so far (not quite at the end), and here, the fact that the main character makes some rather questionable decisions is mostly a positive. It's true that the astute watcher will wonder at some point "so, why isn't Riri calling up her good friends from Wakanda Forever," but they do have a fun scene lamp-shading that at one point.

More cons: This time, hopefully with No Incidents! Usually, Dexlite (formerly Dexcon; they downsized during Covid and have shown no inclination to scale the con back up) runs near to July 4th. However, I hear there's some football (er, European Football I guess; there's another name too) running around that time in New Jersey around then, so they've opted to move their date back by about a month. This means that a chance to redo our Dreamation events has come a bit earlier than it might otherwise; as you all might recall, we ended up punking on almost all of our events due to Hospital. So I've resubmitted our entire schedule for Dexlite (under the theory that one should run at least some of the con you'd like to attend) and hopefully this time we'll get to do it all! As part of this, in between everything else, Lisa and I have been running through a new draft of Dangerous Refuge, this time with the goal to have complete rules at last (rather than relying on players have and have read Good Society); we're about

80% complete on this so hopefully we'll be able to cross the last mile by the con.

Also, we'll be attending (but not running anything at) Summer Larpin (<https://summerlarpin2026.concentral.net/>). A nice small larping con running in, well, early July. I've been filling out character questionnaires, and hopefully it should be a fun time for all!

Books this month: In addition to the latest *Monstrous*, I read through the Judy Lin Book of Tea duology; a nice pair of YA-ish fantasy novel, featuring treachery, magic, and, of course, tea. The premise seems a bit fraught at first, with the main character enrolling in a magic tea-brewer contest under false pretenses (is she going to get caught immediately? Well, no), but the books do form an interesting tight set of characters...eventually. That said, you might guess that with titles talking about deadly stuff (the books' titles are *A Magic Steeped in Poison* and *A Venom Dark & Sweet*), some characters won't make it to the end, and well, you'd be right. There are definitely characters we get introduced to that aren't gonna make it.

Games this month: I got to play a few different games for the first time this month. First, Casting Shadows: I got this game as a gift in a gift exchange, and while it's not exactly to my taste, it was actually pretty entertaining. At core, it's an elimination "last wizard standing", but the art is very cute, and more importantly, while random, the gameplay is actually pretty neat. Each turn, you roll a handful of dice, and have four actions to play with, but your actions are limited by your dice. You can spend actions to reroll any of your dice, but some of the faces on your dice are a "curse" symbol that cannot be rerolled and will do damage to you if still on the table when your turn ends, so it's sort of a soft push your luck mechanic. All the other faces, though, generate resources you can use to buy or upgrade your spells to be able to protect yourself or do more damage to your opponents, or bring you closer to being able to evolve, and gain access to a unique (energy-requiring) ability, as well as select a familiar who will give you another (always on) ability as well fro the available choices! So, while the elimination-style gameplay is a bit tired, the core mechanic is pretty fun, as much as it is random.

I also got to watch a game of Quacks (formerly Quacks of Quackenberg, IIRC). Sadly I came in a bit too late to play it, but it was entertaining to watch and I have a pretty strong idea how to play it in the future.

And...my laptop died, rather suddenly. Fortunately, this was a few weeks ago, so in the meanwhile, I've picked up a cheap laptop and memory for it (I was, however, rather shocked by the price of memory these days), and mostly gotten the new laptop up and running.

Comments on E&A #11

My health and Job stuff: Thank you everyone who expressed good wishes on either of these things or both (and there were a lot of you!) My health has continued to remain excellent, and my job has remained non-existent, but interviews have been easier to come by this month, so here's hoping things are looking up!

Cover: A lovely piece of art by Luke Broderick! Was this donated by him for the cover?

Pedro Panhoca da Silva: Ladrão de Histórias sounds like a lovely, albeit short piece of branching fiction, including self-referentiality!

Interactive Fiction, though, might not be the best term—since that has been long adopted for the kinds of interactive stories/games that first appeared in text adventures like Colossal Cave, branched into commercial ventures like Zork and Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy (the game), and eventually spawned graphical inventory-and/or-verb based puzzle games like King's Quest, Grim Fandango, Maniac Mansion, the Monkey Island series, and more modern examples like Broken Age and the unrelated Broken Sword V. Which isn't *not* playing in the same space, of course; it only takes a simple graph to trace the links between choose your own adventures with branching and no other game system, ttrpg-inspired game books like the TSR Endless Quest books that combined branching paths with character stats, text adventures where characters carry items and interact with them and the environment to trigger longer sequences of text and plot, graphical games that match the structure of the text adventures, visual novels that mirror simple branching path games, mystery games which involve a simpler set of interactions with locations and items to make a space between visual novels and graphical adventures, and even "computer RPGs" that use a more complicated simulation of tabletop rules to frame a linear or branching path story gated by success in the TTRPG-like system.

But, one does want to be clear where in this game/narrative space you're looking. Really, of course, one could argue that interactive fiction is most of these, but that's not always what people will see.

Engaged with both Interactive Fiction and LARPs, I get a bit of this from a different angle—one of the terms for my most usual styles of LARP is "interactive literature" which certainly risks causing confusion with Interactive Fiction!

Mark A Wilson: I'll go a step further than you and say that Rangers should be more powerful. The eternal D&D problem is that wizards are generally around where the designers want them to be; weak-ish at low levels but capable of making critical changes to battles if not ending them all together, and very strong at high levels but still quite vulnerable if they are forced to expend their protections. Fighters, too, are generally about where they should be—other than over-specialized builds, the preeminent melee specialists, with solid scaling, excellent flexibility, and a variety of specialties that give them interesting secondary capabilities only a few of which conflict with their core competency.

But a lot of the in-between classes are just there. Some of this is that they don't really have a niche, but also, the core mechanics don't really handle "you are good at combat and also you have spells" well. The rangers were actually the best try at this (unless you think the 2014 Paladin "you have an ability that makes you really strong in combat by not casting most of your spells" is good) in concept; dedicated melee/ranged fighters who had spells that worked well outside of combat, but also a good helping of spells that significantly boosted their combat capabilities, from Hunter's Mark to Swift Quiver.

The problem is, Wizards refused to commit to the design. Even aside from the issues with giving Rangers access to some druid spells that even with half-level casting, could compete with their normal style of play, like Conjure Animals (old or new; old was far more terrifying but new doesn't die in a single round), Wizards kept tying core class features to concentration (and with 2024, tying that into Hunter's Mark), precluding the buff spells that were supposed to keep Rangers competitive as hybrid casters. Having diversity of style kept the class varied, but having so much diversity (unlike, say, wizards, where a

almost all wizards play exactly the same, with specialties giving them a few things they can do that other wizards can't but not changing the direction of the entire class) didn't jibe well with the rest of the class, a melee ranger needing different spells than a ranged ranger, who needed different spells (and abilities) than a more dedicated beast-master. Of course, if your conception is that, like a Wizards, all rangers have a bit of each of these—all can use beasts to enhance their abilities (after all, Speak with Animals and Speak with Plans are class spells), all can operate at range or in melee, and all are good at stealth, you could argue that each specialty is just focusing in one of the aspects at the slight expense to the others, but then you need to beef up a vanilla ranger so all the specialties have enough support, and they never have.

Mind, I'm not convinced on artificers, either. I enjoy playing one (albeit in a game where good observation and play matters more than your in character abilities), and 2024 certainly came with a few straight-out boosts which was nice, but it's still a class whose power sits outside of the usual structures, and as such tends to be either overpowered (just when its stronger abilities kick in) or under (when they've gotten boosts to regular spell and melee power when everyone else does, but their special abilities haven't upgraded or haven't kept up). My overall conclusion is that the class suffered from the 4e conversion. 3rd edition initiated the class as dedicated magic item creators, (I'm not sure entirely successfully), playing on the strong item creation rules available in that system and in particular, giving them a powered up version of the Rogue ability to use any item regardless of its usual requirements, plus the more or less unlimited power ceiling for D&D 3.5 items.

4e artificers re-imagined the class around the idea that they were all about boosting party effectiveness by messing with items, thus re-imagining them into the Leader role (along with Clerics, Bards, and Warlords, inspired by the 3.0 marshal). Which actually worked great; as leaders, Artificers were less strong at healing than Clerics, but the chrome justified them being superb at buffing their allies and as good at moving them around the battlefield as Warlords (whose big schtick was handing out extra attacks, of course).

But that brings us to 5e, where the roles, while conceptually present, are muted compared to 4e, and artificers ended up with the worst of their prior incarnations—focused on making items like 3.5, which granted them a pseudo-leader role like 4e because they could "buff" allies by making items and handing them out, but limited both by the attunement limits (which artificers could bend for them selves, but not allies) and that with their core abilities being basically useless until 10th level (which is when they get their real class features—the ability to make Uncommon items, not just entry-level common items with their infusions, which makes the ability to switch around items that they gained in 2024 finally useful). So until then, you're mostly stuck relying on your subclass features—armorer to be a weak rogue (except when they choose to be a weaker fighter than Battlesmith instead), battlesmith to be a weak fighter, and artillerist to be a weak wizard who likes charging into combat. (despite the name, artillerists are much stronger near melee due to at-will blast effects). Or I guess alchemists who might end up resolving into a weak cleric, but at this point who even remembers?

If you ask me, a more clean way to build the class would have been to make them full casters who did everything with items. Sure, that might tone down the "you break the game by treating permanent items as temporary and vice versa" aspects, but the result would be a lot more coherent, and also support the idea of artificers as magical scientists, rather than making them feel at high levels like they're less focused on making items than a wizard who happened to spend a lot of time, money, and attention crafting.

Re Paris: Yeah; I need to show up to the Sunnyside board game hangout more so the person who really likes Paris can show more more of the games I've missed.

Re Once Upon a Time: Yeah, good storytellers or those willing to make the effort to try to become better storytellers. (just like roleplaying games are better when playing people who commit, even if they're not great roleplayers -yet-).

I can certainly say that magic item shops and hijinks in them of one sort or another have been the norm long before and unrelated to Critical Role. I think they may have popularized the concept to groups/GMs unaware of it, but most of my stories and memories regarding shops long predate them and/or involve GMs who did interesting things with shops well before they were on the air.

Matt Stevens: Oh, *that* was where the "misspell everyone's name" joke came from! Still, April is a great month to do it in. I'm quite sure I misspelled your last name at least once, too, so fair's fair (I used to spell your last name by default the way you do so, but of late I've had more "ph" Stephens to write to, so my fingers default the other way).

Re an ancap dude (probably) seeming normal until Big Government came up: Yeah, this kind of thing can really catch you by surprise. Happens a lot with goldbugs, too, for some reason; I remember in John C Wright's first popular book, the main character was pretty compelling. And then someone in the book suggested he run for President, and he went "nah, you'd not like me after you heard of my Unpopular Opinions, like going back on the gold standard", and the astute reader realized that this was absolutely a hobby horse of the author's that was not going to go away.

Re pulps and slap-happy romps: I mean, on the one hand, the authors (the better ones, the ones we're still reading) absolutely took their stuff seriously. On the other hand, the pulps were also very much a home of the formula—which didn't mean they didn't exercise skill and solid writing, but they also often used a consistent plot structure where you could see the next beat coming even if you didn't know exactly what was going to happen. So on a system level, pushing a pulp game as having a certain amount of over the top heroism and favoring a solid beat structure makes sense even if pushing to the action even if it steals time away from worldbuilding that would make the game feel real kinda doesn't (except in that it replicates certain aspects of action-movies-, not so much classic novels).

Re game jams and perfecting systems: I mean, there can be both. It's true that the 10,000 hour rule is somewhat discredited, but the basic idea—that you can't become good at something without spending a bunch of time working through being bad at it is very true. Game jams can be an opportunity to work out some ideas without worrying about too much judgment, can be an inspiration for something you'll work on in more depth later if it pans out, or can just be a way of working with some muscles between longer projects. They can also, of course, be a chance to experiment with a fun idea for a new system that maybe is worth expanding out, or not, but if you don't try, who will? But also, there's a reason a lot of game jam contributions aren't new games, but hacks or short supplements for older games, because coming up with an original game system that is also worth putting time into can be quite hard.

Re Whales Whore Game Jam: The nice thing about creative work is, well, "why not both?" Someone adapting a narrative game (particularly, but honestly any structure has some of this) is going to be making some interesting decisions as part of that; answering the questions of "what stats/skills are in this game?", "What kinds of different roles/classes do I need to make my idea of how a Whale Whores game work and balance narrative structure across the players," and "what kinds of Moves/Feats do I need for my whales whore game to function and

be comprehensible to the players" will of necessity work out not just some of the worldbuilding, but also meta-worldbuilding; the basic idea of how the game will play and what the players will, by default, be doing—what kinds of adventures are well supported in the game (are players a vice squad? a group of whales? Whale Whores trying to ply their trade while evading persecution?), and so on.

Starting instead with no system or picking a default system that doesn't need much hacking (Traveller, say), and instead working on building culture, NPCs, and structure for a Whale Whores adventure or setting can absolutely work, and is going to be solving similar problems from different angles. By starting with the fiction, you're less focused on "but what are the players doing?" (although you'll get to it eventually), and can get straight to the fiction. On the other hand, you're more building a fictional setup yourself and less a meta-structure the players are expected to build upon—which honestly might be a better or worse approach depending on your goals.

I'm reminded a bit of Ghost Dog. Weirdly, but truthfully, not that long after the movie came out, a RPG came out. Which, of course, included details of the world, the characters, the New Jersey mobsters, and so on.

What struck me about this idea is that none of that had anything to do with what I would have wanted to do with a Ghost Dog movie. I don't actually care about the mob beyond that you had a few mobsters who wanted to kill our protagonist (and one gothy cartoon watcher). I didn't really care about the background of our pseudo-samurai protagonist. I certainly didn't care about the background of the Noah character or the ice cream salesman. What I would have wanted if I were playing a game based on Ghost Dog is not combat rules and a world background (although I might enjoy reading it for entertainment), but a set of rules that made it easier to create a story about found friendship even across language barriers, about split perspective where different characters have wildly different ideas of the same events, and drama where misunderstanding can turn wildly violent, or subside into interesting rapprochement. Doing a world background here (as in fact the game did) is an interesting exercise, but it doesn't fulfill my goals at all.

Compare instead to Over the Edge. Of course, there is in fact a background and a world established, complete with interesting NPCs, locations, and conspiracies the GM can use. But much more compellingly is the system—the extremely original stripped down mechanics, of course, but also the other systems and approaches surrounding them—the cut-up system, the advice to the GM to let errors stand and contribute to the overall weirdness, and to let players get away with things and roll those into consequences where possible rather than turning down or punishing less "realistic" actions players try that still have potential. And the stripped down system contributed very well to that approach, with the simple core making it very easy to improvise, and the extra bits largely being inspirational (signs, drawings, motivation, ad-hoc skills) throwing more things into the mix that could be grist for the improvisational mill.

Of course, the system was far from perfect (one thing I didn't notice until I played it with someone outside our group: Run as written, combat was *remarkably* deadly, in a way that could undercut the basic "just roll with it" play approach), but it was still far better for the kind of game JoT was going for than anything else at the time.

In contrast, part of what made Wick working ALL NIGHT on Seventh Sea's system so hilarious is that, well, it wasn't very good, was it?

Re AI: I mean, both can be true, to an extent (see Cory Doctorow's various writings on the subject). AI might not be able to replace your job, but it can absolutely convince your boss to fire you, and it can

also flood the market with crap. And, yes, used well it can produce some useful things; all of these can be true and more.

Re bad political content vs political content: I mean, we can't (and shouldn't) police the APA for bad writing. This is why my personal line is that I'm uninterested in contributors who don't have much to say about games; if they're just not that interesting to read I'll skim more (which isn't to say anything about any *current* contributor, of course).

Clark Timmins: Re gaming settings: The thing about Ravnica (and at least one of the Ravenloft sourcebooks) is that while it was thin, there have been plenty of gaming sourcebooks that did a lot more with less. Focus on the things people can play with and you can sketch out a playable campaign area, even a very original one, in 5k words or so, and a full setting in around 80k or less. Fill half again the same page count with art and seeds without ever getting down to brass tacks and you might produce something relatively useless.

I'm not even thinking old D&D sourcebooks here (although absolutely them); the Nobilis Pink Book sketched out a compelling system and world (albeit on top of our own) in 208 very small pages (Gemini estimate of word count is less than 60k words, but don't take my word for it), and that's with the game illustrating the feel and nature of the Noble society with many tiny stories in the margin (or perhaps that's part of why). Later editions were much less effective for their volume; the second added a system almost nobody had asked for, and the third, published by a Chinese company, was considerably bulkier, nearly completely rearranged the mechanics in ways that were interesting but harder to understand, and was far less well organized for play.

Obviously, I don't actually disagree with you even if I'm going in with a different angle. I like move-centric games (Nobilis isn't one) but I'm well aware of their roots; the idea that while a list of moves provide suggestions for players, they shouldn't constrain actions and would object more to games that changed that assumption, and I've written here about how I think that while constrained-play games have their place, I often want a game that has more support for going outside its primary focus even if, like *Blades* or *Gumshoe*, it has a core activity so of course there's going to be some mechanical focus on that core activity.

Re magic items that no sourcebook would present: I mean, part of 5e including common magic items was that they supported exactly that idea—common items by design aren't combat/exploration helpful, usually, so a lot of them are stuff like the Cloak of Billowing (can billow), the cloak of many fashions (can change itself into looking like other cloaks), the pole of Angling (can turn into a fishing rod or back), and the Staff of Adornment (can float up to 3 items, ornamentally). Whether it's a good thing that a major RPG publisher has printed around 50 of these is an interesting question. That said, one of my D&D characters is walking around with a handkerchief that magically cleans up your appearance when you wipe with it (taken from a vain early villain, of course), which I think is homebrew but more or less the same idea.

John Redden: Yeah, Emacs as a shell terminal was much more attractive before you were running windowed systems that could have a shell off on the side. But I'm writing my zine with it now, including having written a spot of lisp code (a few months ago, but it ported over to my new laptop cleanly) to change the behavior of the spelling module so it works better for me. In my copious free time, I might experiment with a more modern and performant editor like Zed, but there's a lot to be said for sticking with what you know.

Re magic and historical accuracy: Oddly, historical fiction with magic is extremely popular, in gaming as well as fiction. But it does present some challenges, yes. (then again, the big thing is that you get a lot of stuff for free by setting a game or book in "like our world, but

different"). I didn't go into it in my comment on Nobilis above, but it's certainly relevant—if you only have to describe how your game is different from a known starting points, you can do less with more.

Attronarch: Sounds like they're planning on bringing Hagar back. Presumably, this isn't considered for the others because Raise Dead can only bring back the recently dead (and while Resurrection (er, I guess Raise Dead Fully for B/X?) would work, using it to raise a creature that's been dead for a year would require, um, a 19th level Cleric at minimum?). Even with NPC friends, I don't think they have access to that kind of power. Sadly, I don't think they can get to a cleric who can cast 4th level spells in an hour, or they could I think bring back Hagar without using Raise Dead with Neutralize Poison, which surprisingly can bring back the recently poisoned to life?

Brian Rogers: Wow, that Sculpt Elements spell seems really badass for exploration!

giggle on the player thinking the Potion of Spines grew *human* spines in a massive horror moment rather than cactus spines. Just calling it a potion of quills would, of course, have avoided this confusion, but also a humorous moment.

Wait, the newts are using disarms? Wow, that's not fair (I mean, it is if the players do it, but dang; also, disarms are usually not quite this easy to do but maybe the newts are really good at it...ah, I see the key is that Knave makes weapons insanely fragile/easy to lose, and the player was rolling badly)

The Sorcery B rules you invent are an interesting innovation! I think the one thing I'd add is the option to spend inventing opoints to make an invented spell permanently part of the character's kit (as per most V&V stunt rules); this covers the way long running sorcerers tend to slowly accumulate new rote abilities that they use over and over again, even if the writers generally let them try anything.

Re UtGS clerics: Wait, so a Cleric being helped by another Cleric is still basically rolling the same as anyone else? (but they get the 18+ bonus even if no cleric is involved?)

I assume Charismatic clerics only get the combat bonus "when they concern" Gods, Demons, and the Undead? (what about the servants of same? Do angels and the like count as "little gods"?) It's interesting that it's Charismatic clerics that get a blanket bonus to combat when Martial clerics are the ones that throw down. Presumably because Charismatic clerics are Rogue-like while Martial are Fighter-like.

Wait, what's the difference in recruitment between Martial and Charismatic clerics? The two lines read to be the same even if the wording is different! From your footnote I guess Martial clerics can only add or subtract if the result would be in the 9-10 range, so they cannot choose less savory recruits unless their roll was already low?

Re Clerics not being able to use 1d8 damage Swords (and particularly, not Intelligent swords). It's clear this is a game contrivance, but I could see such swords generally being too proud to bond their spirits to those who already had their own first-class magical abilities—so normally (sorry, Elric), no fighter-mages with magic swords or clerics with magic swords.

Re clerics gaining an advantage based on their attack roll: This is interesting. Triggering defensive bonuses on 1-7 die rolls means that they get *something* interesting even when they likely miss.

Hmm. Clerics can't wield two handed weapons even when they're not using a shield?

Re Abey Poison/Venom vs Undead: I'd assume that Chaos clerics could make actual poison with this? Or are Chaotic clerics still fundamentally good? It's odd that the reverse here is still basically

light-aligned when a lot of the other reverses are more direct in one way or another.

Re snake spell: Snakes! I do like that snakes are basically good in your game world.

Placing Actual Healing so high in the Clerical power curve is an interesting choice—you basically have no clerical healing (other than slightly higher chance to prevent fallen party members from dying) until the Fourth Level of Devotion, and suddenly clerics at that level can bring people back from the dead as well as heal.

Roger BW: I'll look at Anubis in my copious free time—scraping is a menace. I blocked it off my personal wikis by just isolating IP bands that make inordinate numbers of requests and hard-blocking them, but more tools are always welcome.

Yikes. I was thinking of contributing to Dice and Meeples but I then forgot for weeks. Well, I've missed the first issue, at least, but looking forwards to checking it out. 27 pages isn't shabby for a first issue!

I think Traveller TNE was afflicted with the malaise that was hitting most roleplaying publishing in the early 90s—that with Dragonlance and White Wolf, publishers were enthralled with the idea of adding more story to roleplaying products, but they didn't understand how to do so without stomping all over the stories built by their player-customers. For Traveller, adding more Eras would have worked I think, with the idea that GMs would decide which era to begin their campaign in, all eras would be supported to at least some degree, and that even if the game had an Official Timeline, there would be little material GMs couldn't adapt by saying that their game has a variant timeline and switches era at a different point (or not at all). A more freeform Era System would also support GMs who decided that a big enough event had happened in play to cause an era change, which would be interesting for a Big Damned Science Fiction campaign.

Instead, of course, they went, as was sadly typical for the era "nope, the entire universe will change! In 70 years!" In a game where decades often pass during character creation.

Oh, good point on another advantage of real-world settings being that you can draw on actual Weird Things that Happened, which don't have to conform to the rules of fiction because they actually happened. (in addition to my note earlier about not having to explain things because they're in the real world and people either already know them or can look them up).

Re gamebooks and branching storylines: Great point that a lot of gamebooks just stop if you don't have enough HP to pass, so you end up eventually making up a character (or cheating) so you can read the rest of the book. I'm reminded (in a more positive way) of progressive Visual Novels, like Code Realize and the Zero Escape games, where there are some branches that are entirely out of reach...until you've played all or most of the other branches. Thus, the harder branches are a reward for playing more of the rest of the game (and might in fact be narratively tied to a meta-narrative; I haven't played any Fate/Stay games but what I've seen of the anime makes me think this is true there as well, where the locked branches are impossible until the earlier branches are in some way "true"), making the overall structure fit better together.

Re games enjoyed more on BGA than reality: There are games where cleanup and setup is enough of a pain that it's close, especially with friends on BGA rather than random strangers.

Re GM Shortages: They're often local, I think. Not least because inexperienced RPG players are much less likely to think of GMing as something they can do, so once you have an experienced group it's much more plausible that someone will step up.

Re Big Boxes for Games: I've also had something of a revelation in terms of large games; I originally got the first 6 Queens Games Stefan Feld remakes, but I'm irritated that those games are deliberately made as big and unweildy as possible—when I'm an apartment dweller and would like games to travel well in a backpack and not take up too much space in my apartment, either. Queens games pushes their big boxes but does I think also make smaller versions of the exact same games, so where I really want the game I'll probably see what they have on the small end. (and the same for other publishers). Until a few years ago, it didn't occur to me that the "fancy" versions of games was also all too often the unweildy version.

Re Brindlewood Bay and other Reversed Mysteries: I don't entirely agree with the assertion that the less you like mysteries the more you'll get out of it. But I do agree with the reverse proposition—that a traditionally run mystery game doesn't work nearly as well if the players (some of them, anyway) aren't immersed in mystery tropes and engaged by trying to deduce and put clues together in a clean way, because it's far too easy for players who don't have these muscles well exercised to just get stuck or jump to the simplest answer and just get stuck on it (I've seen this happen many a time and oft).

Turning things back around, a Brindlewood Bay "inverted mystery" can work well for both kinds of groups, but people need to be on board with a more cooperative, creative approach and knowing that the answers are fluid, not fixed; players who want to solve a mystery, not help invent a mystery story in play, will be better served by a more traditional approach. But once one has bought into the premise, a more mystery-savvy group will tend to come up with cleaner, better supported mysteries and answers, while a group that's less into the nuts and bolts will just come up with a plausible answer and go. Of course, some of this is up to the details of the system itself and how it's run. I do find that with both Apocalypse Keys and Brindlewood Bay, the system encourages an abbreviated mystery solving segment, where rather than a more satisfying 3 act structure, the mystery ends after one act with either the PCs solving the mystery (and cut to action) or them not doing so successfully (and cut to a complication). In concept, Apocalypse Keys supports a longer act structure better, but this will be foiled if the players simply roll too well on their first attempt. Adopting an approach like Avram's PBtA Cards idea might help here, with the ability to sandbag if you're rolling because you're doing the thing but actually really don't want to succeed as yet.

I've also mulled over using a similar approach for thrillers like the Max Gladstone Craft novels, where the facts are beyond doubt but the expectation is that the protagonists will come up with some brilliant plan that puts everything into a novel shape that solves everything. Of course, you could run this trad as well, with the GM having a solution in mind or having a shape of what solutions could work and judging individual player ideas on their merits, but instead having this be a matter of how much of the facts the players knew, whether the idea they presented was plausible, and also factoring in some random chance so there were some decent odds that the first solution, however plausible, would have a key problem that needed to be resolved or worked around can work better for some tables than a "Heisenberg mystery" where nobody knows the facts until the game determines them.

Re mystery shows and "am I a suspect:" I remember one mystery story I read or saw had a main character assume they were the strongest suspect, but nope; the detective was clear that they were extremely unlikely as a suspect, because the motives didn't line up even if they did have opportunity. I think Lisa's right that it might be Jadewind: Unveiled, but enough mysteries happen quickly on that show that I'm not sure which one it could be if I'm right.

Fortunately, I know nobody that uses GenAI to try to resolve board game arguments. Internet searches for FAQs? Of course. But o GenAI. If someone tried, I'd probably point them to the thread where various people tried to play Zendo with GenAI programs, with hilarious results. (the best was when the inventor of the game tried to play Word Zendo with "good" words renamed "Jewel Words" and "bad" words named "sand words"—and semi-predictably, the GenAI correspondent got hung up on the meaning of "jewel" and kept guessing jewel types even though all of them ended up being sand words. Tellingly, the attempts to get genAI to *run* Zendo games (even were the rule stored in the open) were even more laughable, as the device would regularly misinterpret its own rules, respond to questioning by deciding that something which matched the rules fine didn't, etc. I'm more and more convinced that the reasons the big commercial models (and the personal models people are mostly using for programming) seem so effective is that they're bolstered by external checking systems that rule out the vast majority of their results, leaving only the things that compile, pass tests, and pass other safeguards, which seem much more convincing than the "raw" output. For this particular domain, of course GenAI will be effective at finding the answer to a rules question—when it's a question that gets asked in public a lot with convincing answers to rephrase, or that's even answered in public FAQs. If it's a matter of interpreting the rules documents, though, the only time I'd expect to get even a plausible answer from GenAI that was better than the rulebook was when a foreign-language book had the rule more clearly than the translation did (and I'd expect to get a wrong answer much more often if it came to that).

Re rigging a game to result in PCs being capture seeming unfair: I mean, yeah. Having a somewhat unfair fight and having that be *one* of the possible options is fine, but the only time it's even vaguely fair to have "the PCs are captures/in prison and they can't do anything about it" is when that's not only the premise of the adventure but something the players sign up for, so there's no starting fight; instead the players can figure out how they got captures but you're starting behind bars. (and if you don't want that, then don't sign up for the adventure)

Myles Corcoran: Re Strange School: I'm of the well-formed opinion that the more GMs are (as players) in a RPG, the better—but sometimes you do need to let your hair down and hash things out personally. And, of course, sometimes people's play styles are just incompatible at least in some domains.

Re UA3 and Dodge and Fitness as opposed attributes: Basically right, but the way I trimmed the image obscured (though I put it in the text) the most important aspect—that that was the Hardened track for Helplessness. As such, it's less effective to think of them (in the fiction) as opposed attributes even though they work that way, and more that they're both derived aspects for Hardened: Helplessness. Being better at Dodge doesn't make you more fit or vice versa, but being hardened to Helplessness makes you more apt to effectively avoid trouble and be ready for it (and that extra hyper-readiness makes you less effective in more general fitness checks), while being less hardened to helplessness will make you more generally able to handle Fitness checks, but you won't be as ready for attacks (unless one of your specialties pushes in that direction, of course) so your ability to doge will suffer. How well this works in narrative is an interesting question, but tying things back to the underlying Madness track would at least help a bit.

Gabriel Roark: M&M/B&B: My first reading of study for Magic Users was that they studied under Monsters, not Masters. Which would make a for a pretty cool fantasy world, if magic users had to study with Monsters to be able to gain the magical tools they needed to defeat Monsters. Shades of Feiren's backstory (spoilers I guess), where we eventually learn that Humans didn't originally have access

to magic, and there were centuries when human kingdoms forbid the study of magic as a monster thing; now that it's been centuries since Human mages first emerged, the Age of Humanity is finally starting.

Michael Cule: Sympathies on your con-going days coming to an end! We'll selfishly see if we can coax you out of retirement if Worldcon returns to Dublin in 2029, though. (I can hope you'll have seen a new resurgence by then; not everything is an inevitable decline, after all).

Re Moon Rune in Runequest automatically granting Illumination: Does this mean that players who already had spent on Illumination needed to bump it up?

Elephants afraid of mice? Clearly someone has read too many urban legends. Or maybe Gloranthan mice are really scary.

I love the amount of character in Beat-Pot! Absolutely your superior officer, but also he's cooking and not about to let a messenger interrupt him. And he's quite serious about his concerns (security! White moonies! White moonies? Ah, "empire must die that the Lunar Way be reborn nihilistic types, but...also pacafists? Why would they assassinate the Emperor? Ok, how would they without breaking pacifism?"), but also very non-generic.

re Graham not caring if he is attacking the same gargoyle he attacked before: Clearly he doesn't care that much about tactics (I mean, seriously modern D&D bloggers are *very* into focus fire, but they're not wrong in that action economy wins fights).

Re heart surgery: My gill-addition surgery went swimmingly, but the care I got for my scalp was hair-raising. (no, in case anyone's unclear there were no new medical issues this month)

Re Neopets and the half-million dollars: I'm sure the fans who supported the campaign are also wondering that. It seems like it went to geekify, who spent it on nothing useful, but one wonders if there will be legal action even if the fans have little recourse.

Re Roger's Undead idea: Perhaps that's the trick to it: That creating undead doesn't get you a soul or mind or something, but does bring back the part of the brain that can process language and other pattern matching. If "give your magic complex instructions" is tied not to magic in general but specifically to the otherwise mostly useless necromancy, then you have a quandry that if you want your magic to be more flexible, even programmable, you need something undead in it somewhere.

Early necromancy with this model would be focused on the exiting capabilities of reanimated bodies—recognizing nearby objects, moving the body around (kinda badly), making mouth sounds (badly). Basically, standard walking corpse fare. But if someone with more generalized magic got their hands on the core concepts, they'd be able to develop much more impressive things—but there would always be a corpse (or 20) at the center of them.

If there were body necromancy (that worked this way) and also soul necromancy, soul necromancy would be much more flexible (as there would actually be a mind there) but also far more dangerous, as a soul has free will and can break free of your control to do whatever it wants, whereas a corporeal necromantic effect might go awry because your instructions were flawed (or someone hacked it), but not because it decided to do something else.

Elf: Yay on running games!

Re the players trying to bring back Lan Furen with Creativity! Aw! They tried, though.

Hee! Elf and half-elf perspective! It's nice to see how you commit to this, even knowing (now) how it will end (this cycle, anyway; I assume that progressive loops do give a chance to change things—eventually).

I don't think only the GM reads the rulebook to your typical TTRPG (some players never read rulebooks; more read player-focused stuff including general rulebooks but NOT GM or setting books). But the point remains when you're talking worldbuilding.

Re igttheme location: I eventually figured out that the next few months' igtthemes are posted on the front page, along with the rules, but yeah, it's MUCH easier to figure out what this month's igttheme is than get a sense of what next month's igttheme is. I'd say with A&E reflexes, but you never contributed to A&E, so maybe just in general.

Re Visual Novels: I've generally not had interface issues with the big commercial ones—Zero Escape and Code: Realize on the PS Vita, and the remade Ace Attorney games on PS5. For weird ren-py indie PC games, yeah, sometimes the interfaces are quirky (sometimes so are the games). That said, Slay the Princess is really good, but it's also, while having indie values, available on Steam and the like, not just Itch.

Re stuff like "sometimes the title of the game changes". This argues for decent database design (even if you do it in Excel. Despite everything you can do decent database in Excel; you can even write SQL in Excel; the key is that every sheet is a different table. So with my database hat on, you want to handle stuff like "sometimes a game's name changes," you have a few reasonable choices:

- You could just break out items specific to a given edition into a separate sheet. Core game data stays on your main sheet, editions sit on a separate sheet. Pro: Layout looks mostly like what you're using. Con: You're basically arbitrarily deciding which is the "canonical" version and name for the game.
- You could have an approach for handling duplicate names games. In a way, this is an inversion of the previous version; each game goes into the main sheet with all its info, and you have one field (which doesn't need a sheet of its own since it's just a field) that is the canonical name for a game, and two games that have the same canonical name are different editions of the same game, whether they have the same name or not.
- Finally, you could insert games in linearly (again, names can't be unique here; I think the only one where names are unique are the first version). Then there's another sheet that establishes links between games that are really the same game (for ease of use this would probably have two records for each pair of games that were the same, one in one direction and one in the other, but it would get messy without a canonical name once there were quiet a few editions of the same game; you could reduce the data duplication here with code but it's a lot). If a record in that sheet exists between for two games (yeah, again you'd need a canonical name; assuming you weren't using made up IDs you could probably do game name + year of publication) then they can be displayed as variants of the same game, even if they have different names. If no such record exists, then they're NOT the same game, even if they have the same name (which can handle things like all the different games called Nexus).

I think RPGgeek uses something close to my second idea here; they can have entirely separate records for different games that are the same game, but only one will generally have a fully fleshed out record; the others get a note that they're really the same game as the "core" game, which might change over time.

And yeah, scripts handle a lot of managing this, but ultimately the data needs to be structured in a coherent layout of some sort.

For album length: Keep it simple? Just have a numeric field that lists how many seconds long each is, and convert minutes to seconds (and back on display)

GM Required and GM optional seem to be exact opposites. What purpose would be served by having them be separate fields (yes, you

give the example of N/N for a game that has no GM, but in that case the GM is not required and therefore optional. It seems like you want GM Optional and Can have a GM. Or, I guess, you could just have two fields: Maximum number of GMs and Minimum Number of GMs, with a Trad RPG having 1 and 1, a GMless game having 0 and 0, and games like Polaris having 4 and 2, say.

I can talk more about data design outside the APA if you want; I do have more thoughts; if you can, normalizing your ideas on how to build a DB would I think help and (somewhat) simplify your ideas. (look up "normalized database").

I'm also very much not an OSR player (I'm fine with modern D&D although I'd be very sad if it were the only game I played, super fine with modern narrativist games, and also quite happy with 80s and 90s "new wave" games that pushed a specific new idea of how to play without locking you into it). That said, I do think there are ideas the OSR people have that make for fine gaming—particularly the idea that player actions should have consequences and the GM shouldn't have plans.

That said, everything in Finch's primer for Old School Gaming? Literally nothing I want in a game, except for improvisation itself. Wanting the GM making all the rulings? Nah. "heroic, not superheroic" being all about the characters being in danger all the time? Nah. Give me Paranoia, sure, where a core concept is that everyone can die to a laser blast (because Dan was tired of his 29th level wizards with multiple levels of "I don't die but you might" wishes and being immune to the attacks of new players they pissed off), but give me original concepts and jazz, not a concept of mastery that's all about getting in the GM's head.

The more I dig into it, the more the Neopets RPG just seems like a cluster from the top down.

Yeah, GMed BoB can work just fine (although it's basically superfluous in Yazeeba's—I guess the "GM" could always play Yazeeba and maybe any character that showed up that didn't have a dedicated player).

Never feel guilty about not commenting to everyone. Almost nobody does, and honestly it wouldn't be a viable APA if everyone felt like hey had to.

Dylan Capel: Re weapon proficiency in Into the Odd: While I usually don't play games where it matters much, I both agree that it's not particularly exciting in most games (although granting bonuses isn't bad; really it's just losing the "normal" bonus if you use a weapon without proficiency; D&D for instance is interesting in that a starting character doesn't lose much for using a weapon they're not proficient in, but a high level character does because the proficiency bonus is so much larger *and* they lack abilities that would synergize with the weapon), but also think "minimum damage" is even less exciting. Why would you pick up a halberd (which you don't know how to use) rather than swing with a dagger (which you do) in desperation if the halberd will do the same damage as a dagger (never mind that, well, actually it probably will—we already have the convention that bigger weapons do more damage).

Going from what makes sense, in a game that has (or can replicate) skill systems, I'd say that using a tool that you're not familiar with the usual use of should mean you can't use the skill usually associated with the tool, but that you *can* use a skill you know with the tool—at whatever usual costs there are for using that skill with that tool rather than what you'd usually use. So if you used your broadsword skill with a dagger (because you don't have a broadsword right now) you'd take a damage penalty for using an unsuitable weapon, and also a range penalty because you're using a skill at touch range that's more appropriate for close. In comparison of using a skill that includes

dagger use (capoera or something) where you'd be able to use whatever you normally could with a dagger; maneuvers to steal range and bump your damage a bit due to training.

Taking things out of combat, if you knew how to drive and were driving a car, you'd get normal driving. If, on the other hand, you knew Science and were trying to use it to drive a car without ever having seen one before, you probably could—but you'd be making rolls for normal stuff (ok, lets see what this other knob does—hmm, from the sound, maybe it involves engaging some kind of gear?) and if something came up that would cause a normal driver to have to roll, you'll probably get a big penalty for the roll or have to make multiple rolls—some to figure out that a given maneuver is even possible and another to try to execute it.

Of course, in ItO, there's no skill rolls (or to hit rolls) involved, so penalizing damage makes sense even though it basically means you never want to use a non-proficient weapon unless you have no choice.

Re With Great Power: Hadn't realized the newest version was Swords Without Master, but it makes sense. I know Michael has long been unhappy with the original mechanics, and at one point he was even playtesting a Cortex remix.

Lisa Padol: Jujutsu Kaisen: We have not seen all that is currently out. But we have seen all of the anime that is available at the moment, and I have squashable desire to delve into the manga at this point.

Re water ending up as the spirit element in Everway: I mean, yes, because that's explicit in the books. If you didn't want it to be, you could have Water be what you used to detect spirits, Air what you used to talk to them and remember facts about a specific spirit type, Fire what you used to catch up to them, and Earth what you used to stand up to them and resist adverse possession.

Re using Annotated Dracula as a campaign artifact for Night's Black Agents/Dracula Dossier: Yeah. Might have worked if the players were very into repeatedly reading and rereading the book, or if it were a shorter version of the book, or if we had a way to annotate it online and search for annotations online, or...but as it was, with only one person having the book at a time, throwing an annotation in (or reading someone else's) was a big commitment. Some groups might be able to make it work with a pre-wikified version of Dracula.

Re getting paid for GMing: I think running at a con is drastically different than paid GMing for a group. For starters, the core motivation is completely different—when GMing at a con, the usual vibe is "I want to run this thing, and if it can defray (some of) the costs of going to a con, great!" Even when people are actually getting paid for running at a con (like cost+ games at Gencon where the GM or the company sponsoring the GM makes a profit on the game), they need to run an acceptable enough game that players sign up for it and pay it, and if there are regular players year over year, that enough former players sign up and play again, but because they're pulling from a big pool, they don't have to cater to specific players; instead they run the game they want to run (or with a company, the game the company has advertised running) and presuming there's a market for it, the game fills and runs. And if it's just getting your badge comped, as long as your pitch isn't obviously terrible you generally don't have to pay for your badge if nobody signs up, so you just have to submit a good enough pitch, and in normal circumstances one can expect that you'll again, run a game you want to run and enjoy running.

But if you're planning on making a living (or even a side gig) GMing for people willing to pay for a pro GM, the stakes and the nature of the task are different. Sure, maybe you're very clear on what you're offering and if you don't get players interested, so be it, but ultimately if you hope to make a living on this, you need to offer a "product" that people will pay for again and again. Then again, maybe it's not

that different—consider a restaurant. A restaurant needs to cater to customers, and ideally they need to cater to the same customers; if nobody ever comes back they won't be in business long. But many restaurants aren't offering a specific diner's preference; they're making the food they want to make, and if the customers are into that they'll do fine. The main difference here, then, is that there are so many people willing to feed people for free (then again, people can cook for themselves too), so what you offer needs to be clearly better in some ways even if that's just being more convenient.

Which brings to mind a fun metaphor. McDonalds is showing up to a D&D night at a store or con—it probably won't be the best gaming you'd ever had, but you know exactly what you signed up for, and unless the branch (GM) is especially bad, you'll probably get what you signed up for. Playing with your friends is like cooking for yourselves, but it's also a lot like going to a neighborhood restaurant—it's comfortable and while there are probably flaws, there are people you know, you can joke around with the chef/GM, and get an experience you'd never get at anyone else's table. And maybe you have a particularly restaurant-friendly area and your table is actually superb, which will tend to spoil you a bit for other neighborhoods. Showing up to a pro GM's table is like going out to a fancy restaurant. You can expect to pay—quite possibly quite a lot, but you can also read the reviews, and if it sounds like the kind of restaurant you like you'll almost certainly have an amazing experience. And showing up to play weird indie games is like showing up to an experimental restaurant. Sure, you're not quite sure the experience will quite be "food", but it will certainly be unique. And if you're the kind of person who likes experimental food, you might get a decided taste for it.

Re Dragon: I never had a subscription, but at one point a High School friend gave away a giant pile of them, so I read through them (back in the days of What's New and Wormy, of course). I never did get a subscription, but I enjoyed reading the pile.

Re story sessions even in games that usually focus on combat: Yup. In the various Thursday D&D games, we're usually just playing through character stuff, and then at some point, out comes the map link (all three are run online now, though two of them started as in-person games; since then 3 people have moved away from the NYC area making future all in-person games much more challenging). But if there's a session where no fight happens, well, all to the good!

Re writing characters that are gender-neutral or gender-ambiguous: Yeah, while we've shifted usage considerably from when we were *first* writing gender-indeterminate characters in the 90s (when you avoided neutral "they" as it hadn't become generally used for non-binary people yet, not that that term was in use popularly either at that point), avoiding "they" and pronouns in general except when it considerably simplifies the text is still the best rule; use character names more, and other text that keeps it very clear who is doing or saying what, and keep "they" and "them" for where it's both really clear and drastically simplifies the text rather than complicating it.

I've played a number of CoC adventures where the PCs lost. One was the Color Out of Space playtest, where I don't think a win was possible (the Color is indestructible and can't be directly attacked, IIRC). In another, a Cthulhu Invictus adventure run at a con, a win was totally possible and the players were trying for it, but after two PCs went indefinitely insane during the final fight, the tide turned such that a cultist victory was inevitable, particularly since at least one if not both of the insane PCs turned sides. Which...it was a con game, so "you all lose and the world might be doomed" was a perfectly acceptable ending, particularly since it followed the dice.

Re 1st Edition 7th Sea and "why bother with the schools?" I mean, in theory, if the game lasted an incredibly long time, PCs that got

inefficient starting abilities like lowish stats, Sword Skills, and even magic would become much more powerful than the other characters, because those are all options that are much harder to gain during play than they are at the start of play. But that presumes the game lasts long enough to gain dozens or hundreds of experience points, which is going to take quite a bit of time, to say the least. Mind, having "at start" abilities have drastically different costs than in play improvements continues to not be one of my favorite things; it has some attractiveness (for starters, it sets up the "old veteran" who is powerful but will gain power less often than the younger characters vs the New Prodigy who starts off as a work in progress but will eventually become a Big Hero), but unless the things that have different costs are strictly limited and purposeful, it just feels like careless design to me.

Re getting strings on people in MH2:

So, I went looking for this, and I first found the MH1 sheet. There, with the basic moves, you can get a string on someone with Turn Someone On (on a 10+; otherwise they have other choices), Shut Someone Down (also 10+, and they need to have no strings on you or they lose one instead), and Lash Out Physically (also 10+, but on a 7-9, giving them a string on you is the least damaging option so it will happen a lot if people are going aggro).

So getting strings on people was already pretty hard in 1st edition, at least with basic moves. (I only realized this was the 1e sheet when I turned the page and it talked about highlighted stats).

Ok, having looked over the MH2 sheet, while the terminology is different, the only change is that you can't punch strings out of people any more—if you have a high volatile, you're risking giving a string when you hit someone but when you get a 10+ they choke up; you don't have the option of getting a string on them.

Not gonna look over every MH1 playbook, but from MH2, playbooks that have a move (or sex move) that can give strings are: Fae, Ghost, Infernal (Sex move and playbook move), Mortal (so many, the Mortal is all about gaining and giving away strings), Queen, Vampire, Werewolf (ah, there it is; the Werewolf has a move that lets them punch strings out of people), and Witch (as you know, the Witch is just all about strings and can gain them trivially in both editions, since sympathetic tokens count as strings). So, most of them, but only a few playbooks *always* get a string move.

Re silent movies not really being silent: Quite. And there was even a musical instrument, the Photoplayer, a modified player piano designed to let a staff member from the theater act as a one-person orchestra to provide musical and sound effect accompaniment to a movie as it played (for larger theaters, they'd just have an orchestra, but for a mid-sized theater having one expert on a photoplayer was more economical); you can find people online demonstrating how this is played with restored models.

Re our Feng Shui hack: So, of the three core PCs who were in most of the sessions, all three were to an extent homebrewed (there were at least two other PCs, I think more, by players who weren't at nearly as many sessions since you, I, Beth, and Julian were spending a lot of time hanging out). My character was a 7 Masters disciple, and as such started with both Sorcery and Fu Scthicks (and martial arts). Allowed some dangerous combos late in the game, but basically the same template as the Karate Cop who can get both Gun and Fu scthicks; 13 AV for your two core abilities, and not a lot of extra scthicks since your main schtick is "you get two combat abilities). You were playing a Purist Sorcerer—a faction introduced to the game by Shadowfist (which Julian was doing development and fiction work for), and had both access to variant magic concentrations (as befitted the Purists' weird outlook) and a pretty cool unique schtick—that your Magic wasn't negatively effected by local junctures, so you could use your

magic at full power in the modern juncture. Beth, though, combined Martial Artist with the Scrappy Kid, and the way this was interpreted in the game was keeping the Martial Artist's 16 AV and access to Fu scthicks with the Scrappy Kid's ability to dodge attacks better. In retrospect, this was an unbalanced combination—the Martial Artist already has one of the best combat skills in the game, and can take Fu scthicks bumping this up effectively even more; letting her also grab the Scrappy Kid's core schtick without a penalty (I think she traded in the martial artist's unique schtick, which isn't particularly significant in comparison) meant that Julian had to amp up the enemies we faced to even challenge Beth's PC, thus making for heavy trouble for the other PCs. It was a fun game, but until we all leveled up a fair bit, Beth's PC was pretty dominant in fights; untouchable and with a very high attack power.

Re Kerberos Club Fate: I can't say I was blameless regarding the "megaskill", given how many uses I packed into Alice (my character)'s core "I'm psychic" skill. I did try to balance things out a bit by having her also take other, less potent skills for things that weren't very obviously "I'm psychic" uses.

Re Lady Susan, Vampire Hunter: (Ok, Van Helsing but I like my backformation better). What, you playing a male (ish) vampire? Never happened before.

LOL at you getting a "you were gaslighting me?!" and Mallory's player not realizing that not knowing her was a vampire was entirely a ruse on Griffin's part, despite this being a "no hidden information" game.

Another LOL at the ending of Griffin....becoming Lady Susan's assistant, not least so she could watch over him and make sure he didn't start preying on humans and remained a Good Vampire.

Patrick Riley: Re writeup: Huh. So the Djinn was lying about the wish? Rude! Honestly given that it's a magical creature, it seems like its word should be at least a little binding, particularly since it totally has the power to grant wishes—if they're something that can be done with the power of an air elemental with the ability to create food and water 2/day, and cast Creation and Plane Shift once per day. Of course, in this case there was an implication that the Wish spell/ability (for noble djinns) would be used, which she didn't have, but I've run into a fair amount of fantasy fiction (or even larps) where a Djinn's "wish" was just its agreement to try to perform a task to the best of its ability (something that's actually pretty well justified by the core abilities of even a regular Djinn; there's quite a lot you can accomplish with clever uses of Creation, Invisibility, Major Image, and Plane Shift). well, and also immunity to death when outside the Plane of Air; that's pretty cool.

I'll note that amusingly, the Order of the Stick-like (or is it an image from the comic?) image is of an Efrete, not a Djinn.

Re NPCs surrendering: I mean, on the one hand, it's a can of worms (and often ends up exposing fissures in the group on whether they think enemies are people or not, and which enemies). On the other hand, there are often situations where the PCs really, really want to know more about what, exactly, is going on, and being able to take some prisoners helps a lot. It might make more sense for NPCs to surrender if the PCs are actually trying to take prisoners rather than just kill everyone. (and certainly if they've used an ability or action to *try* to encourage surrender). Some groups are going to actively encourage surrender and try to take enemies alive when they can; others, well, just won't.

Re WRS's system being informed by your Castle Falk experience: That's fascinating! I mean, on the one hand, I feel for staring at a Castle Falk hand and knowing only bad choices are in store for you. On the other, you've got a lot more actual control with Falkenstein,

where you can play into a weak hand or set up a strong hand, than WRS, where you're at the mercy of the deck (to a degree; of course you can count cards a bit, so might have a guess of what might be in store), where even if there might be only failure coming up in the next 4 draws, you don't know so until it shows up.

Re Lair Actions in D&D 2024. I mean, obviously they are a thing in that older monsters are still legal for play, but really? That's not one of the changes I'd heard about and lair actions were certainly a big part of (boss) encounter design before...lemme look at some stuff. (also, huh. Apparently the 5.5 designation is official now? I've generally stuck to 2024 as clearer since the 5.5 was basically a fan terminology, but it shows up on D&D beyond, so...) Ok, looking at discussion, it looks like this was a simplification—instead of Lair Actions, most legendary creatures gain an additional Legendary Action while in their lair and if their lair action did something interesting and unique, they gain that as a 1/round legendary action they can do.

This does weaken legendary creatures to some extent (and quite a big extent for small group fights, where they run out of enemies to use legendary actions on before they run out of actions), but also probably makes them easier to run. In cases where they had multiple lair actions, they might lose them, I think?

For instance, looking at the Adult Gold Dragon, the old version has two lair actions: 1. Precognition (advantage for the round). 2. Banishment (banish an enemy for a round if it fails a moderate Cha save). The 2024 version instead gains a Banish legendary action, with a much harder DC (21 vs 15), and loses the precognition ability entirely. Well, kinda; it's replaced with a lair feature; a fortelling fog that prevents surprise within a mile of the lair and lightly obscures the entire area (wait, does that mean you have to fight the Dragon in a fog? I'd probably rule that it banishes the fog itself in the lair as it's really irritating), but anyway it does keep the flavor of precognition

So overall, yes, lair actions are gone, but the more iconic ones are shifted into lair abilities (which are just always on until the boss is destroyed) or turned into legendary actions. I'm going to guess that the ones that are removed were removed because there was a reason (for instance, that "all undead have life-sense" is going to make for really unfun encounters, except for the GM), but it's still a considerable nerf. Then again, to take the Mummy Lord example, I can't say it's a straight out nerf, although it does change the boss's role. The previous version had 97 HP, and needs for the target to fail a DC16 save to get mummy rot. The new version has almost twice the HP (187) at the same CR, uses Whirlwind of Sand (its defensive ability) as a reaction instead of two legendary actions and automatically blinds enemies when it uses it, and has far fewer spells (a general design decision for enemies in 5.5), keeping the ones its most likely to use in combat. So, it's a far stronger design overall (the old one only looks like it works at the intended CR if the GM protects it with a bunch of powerful minions, and even then it's very vulnerable to someone teleporting in and just ganking it before it can react), but yeah, it lost a lot of the factors that could make the old version utterly terrifying—if the GM could keep it alive more than one round.

TDLR: Yes, but often the abilities are subsumed into the creature or a constant Lair ability. However, this is obscured by them redesigning a lot of monsters, often for the better, in ways that may remove extra abilities.

Re going online and finding endless discussion of how to exploit the rules tarnishing the experience at the table: Well, yeah. Fortunately, most (but not all) of the online discussion are lowest common denominator in some way, so there's still plenty of space for discovery at the table, at least unless you spend FAR too much time staring at this kind of thread. For instance, one vid I watched talked about many uses for

Magic Mouth—far too many of which assumed that a Magic Mouth spell has perfect information about the universe (which is ridiculous—in fact, it's actually directly contradicted by the spell description even in 2014, which specifies that the trigger must be based on visual or audible conditions within 30 ft of the object, which rules out a large amount of utter nonsense). That said, pointing out that what the spell really is not just a message left in a location (which is generally what I've treated it as) but a way to create general permanent triggers on, well, anything visible or audible occurring within 30ft of the enchanted object does make it a really flexible alarm spell, usable for setting camp alarms, enchanting stealable objects so you get an immediate warning if someone starts making off with them (make sure you always look like you when you pick them up, though!), or, if you're playing an utter genius with knowledge of modern tech, sure, making very loud computers (but see how players tend to underestimate the difficulty of replicating modern technologies in magical/quasi-medieval settings). It's weird that there's less of a thrill of discovery of this kind of nonsense when it happens on the internet than, say, in E&A itself, but then there's just so much more of it!

Re rules light and games that change your play requiring more words: Agreed to a sense on the second (or people won't realize how your game is supposed to be played); not so much on the first; a lot of ultra-simple games fit just fine on a 2-page spread. I think a lot of the bigger games are just because people have grown to expect games to be longer, with a lot of other expectations of what a game will contain along with this.

Re skill pyramids: I've long thought that a game that tied skill pyramids to advancement would feel right (if not necessarily being easy to use; another consideration). This is largely based around what I've noticed with my own skills over the decade—as I play video games, fencing, and dance, I've noticed my own effective dexterity and agility go up (to the limits of an aging body, but the effects are still quite noticeable). The same, really, for spending more time on humor, poetry, and conversation with smart people resulting in not simply those specific skills, but my core "wit" going up, with what used to be the "spirit of the staircase" much more often resulting in something I say during, not hours or days after a conversation. So having specialties that you have to improve, and only once you've boosted your skill pyramid to a certain point can you roll that improvement into the higher level skills and eventually the core stat would be interesting.

Re avoiding preaching: Yeah, hard same. Like you, I don't always succeed, but I've found that coming across as didactic and preachy is never endearing or persuasive, so I try to avoid it where I can.

Re player-facing systems robbing agency from NPCs: Not as presented in any game I've read on the subject. If you look at the guidance (no, I'm not going to quote chapter and verse; I have a deadline here) in games like Apocalypse World, Monster Hearts, or even Dungeon World (and that guidance is generally replicated in other games that share the mechanic), the GM isn't restricted to having the world or NPCs only after a PC rolls dice or makes a move. Instead, while the rules seem to give them guidelines—to use Monster Hearts 2 as an example "when someone fails a roll, or a character wanders into harm's way, you have an opportunity to react," these are just guidelines on how to GM; in fact, the GM can have NPCs just do stuff whenever they want. A game will often have a fair bit of advance here, not least because they're trying to teach you *not* to god game; to use your power as GM to constantly put the PCs into deadly threat, knock off important NPCs without a chance for players to react, etc; the GM *can* do this, of course, but it's a bad idea. But by the same token, all this advise telling the GM to slow down is just that; advise. The whole question of "is the GM making a move/reacting or not" is basically just a new terminology for when the GM frames a scene or describes an NPC

doing something, and when the GM sits back and lets the PCs react to the situation before shifting it under their feet—just like a good trad GM won't constantly have new NPCs enter a scene unless it's solving a real problem or part of an overall plan. Obviously, when a player is describing what their PC does, you don't usually want to interrupt them to have a bunch of NPCs act in the middle of their description (some players might get a bit irritated by this), but there's nothing stopping you from, after they go, not only describing what happens next with that NPC, but also describing several other NPCs doing stuff or saying stuff that makes sense for the situation; the fact that NPCs don't roll just means that rather than rolling for the NPC actions, you just have them do damage, inflict conditions, or put PCs in dangerous situations instead, and the players can roll to try to try to get out of trouble.

Daggerheart is a bit of an odd bird here, since it has stronger rules for how often the GM acts (in a fight, anyway), and anyway I'm not expert. But what that structure seems to do is add an easy mode to a PbtA style structure—rather than the GM getting to do as much stuff as they want whenever a reaction is called for (and maybe playing too hard or too soft), instead there's a meter for when the GM should act rather than a PC, and a resource that determines how often the GM can interrupt the PCs even when it should theoretically be their turn rather than it being functionally a GM call.

Of course, in a game where the rule was that the GM should *only* react after the PCs roll the dice (and fail?) and that the GM could only have NPCs that were acted upon act, that would have a big "NPCs should act but they can't" issue—but I don't personally know of any system structured that way.

Yeah, I've been known to use the fifth XP in a PbtA or Blades game for exactly that purpose—mark it, and then think about what move I want; that way I can tell whether I've taken the move or not by whether the XP has been erased or not.

I don't generally want to spend a lot of time in "meta" in a RPG session—you roleplay to roleplay, after all. But sometimes it avoids wasting a lot of time—in a game with a lot of player power, sometimes you need to go to a meta level to determine how to land the plane, rather than tussling back and forth over where the plot will go without realizing that player A will never accept a resolution where they get an uncomplicatedly happy ending and is hoping for a tragedy with player B, while player B is utterly uninterested in tragedy, for instance.

Of course, this kind of meta discussion can happen *between* play phases, rather than during normal play; nobody wants to be constantly asked meta questions when they're just trying to play—even in a game (like Good Society) where you want to get permission before messing with someone's PC, and where you can use "Monologue tokens" to get someone to monologue (to the fourth wall) in character on a topic.

Re players (well, one player) getting indignant because the game premise involved the teen PCs getting into danger: I mean, I can see this hitting a player's buttons, especially if the staff is played as if they don't care for the students safety and keep telling them/allowing them to go into highly dangerous situations that could be solved by an adult without an obvious reason. On the other hand, yes, "you're teen supers" is premise and does require some suspension of disbelief even if that suspension can be strained with enough work.

Brian Misiaszek: I hope Peter Hildreth will eventually contribute to E&A—I miss his wise and entertaining words!

Re the chaos in the Institution: Oh, I love this. Creating a chaotic situation in which the PCs can meaningfully change things—but have to choose and prioritize how—is golden.

Re Baron Kriminal: Noted, thanks! I'm not quite sure how the PCs can protect people from him, but apparently it's possible?

Jim Eckman: Despite Where Can I Watch saying that Word of Honor is available only on Netflix, it looks to be available on Viki and Youtube as well.

Re Psionics and early D&D: I mean, on the other hand, it's bonkers (certainly the version in AD&D; I never read the Eldritch Wizardry version). On the other hand, it's kind of a delightful over the top mechanic, and very true to the kind of early fantasy that D&D was inspired by, which would often mix swords and sorcery narration and psychic powers by whatever logic appealed to the author. In particular, though, when thinking about the approach to play advocated by OSR adherents, the idea of some characters having very specific psychic powers which aren't "I win" buttons and which don't override the basic idea of how gameplay works, but which give them extra tools for planning and strategizing seems like it would (in certain games, anyway) fit right in, particularly in a game that already requires randomized abilities.

Heath Row (Wafflestomper): It's interesting seeing your approach to solo play; very classic in certain ways, walking through a puzzle series and elaborating on a frame, but also switching tools as you examine what fits your mood and goals. Personally, I prefer duo play—having someone else to bounce off of makes for a really nice, intense experience, but for longer term, slightly more relaxed play, I see the appeal of running through your own solo dungeons and letting your campaign ephemera grow.

Patrick Zoch: Re interrogations: I feel like there would be some use to someone teaching interrogation [not "enhanced" interrogation] for gamers, talking about how you can find leverage, garner sympathy, and get someone talking (and from then, get them to reveal at least some information without even being aware of what information they're talking about that you don't know). And, 'm sure, plenty of other tactics that I don't know or think about. I'm sure most players who need this kind of instruction wouldn't actually watch or read it, but I could bring it up to a friend who is a trained interrogator and see if he's interested in building something.

I wonder if producing a handout on interrogation (including some of the material you have here, which is pretty good; the key to interrogation, ultimately, is leverage...unless the player or PC is good enough to pull off the "just get them talking" approach, of course) for your players would at least help steer them into the right direction.

While as you say, a long primer isn't necessarily the way to go, a one-sheet listing the core approaches—pressure, opening up the suspect with min/maxing or informal questioning, combining research with an appeal to pride of one sort or another whether it's the subject's code or ego, etc, can give players a better "menu" of approach which they can then use to flavor their roleplay or create a plausible excuse to roll an ability can avoid the kind of loop where instead, players try a variety of ways of "abilitying" the subject without a good understanding of what kinds of approaches the GM is likely to think or plausible, or, as some players I've seen have certainly been drawn towards, apply or threaten more and more disturbing imagery until either the GM rules that the NPC breaks or has them release the information the player is looking for just to stop the flood of violent fantasies. (or so it seems to me is what's happening, whether or not it works). But honestly, while your list is overly detailed to the point of repetition (in real life you need to know a bunch of different ways of applying psychological pressure; in a game less detail is needed) in some cases, it's actually really good overall and hits a lot of the most important points.

Avram Grumer: "groan" on the braunstein/braunstain' joke. To those without the context, this refers to the "Berenstain Bears" phe-

nomenon, a kind of Mandela effect where some people remember the series as actually being "Berenstein Bears" and becoming convinced that they've slipped from a parallel universe. (yes, yes, you explain it in your footnote but it's easy enough to miss)

Re RPGs that list live media as inspiration rather than written: I mean, Teenagers from Outer Space is clearly inspired by anime (but not specific, licensed anime) rather than by comics or prose media. Walking through https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_tabletop_role-playing_games, I don't see a lot of earlier games that were explicitly "lets do live media" that weren't licenses. Arguably Boot Hill does this, though—sure, Western novels were entirely popular not that long before 1975, but they really peaked in 1960, so I'd expect that your average 1975 fan would be thinking of westerns as more a movie/comic thing than a book thing.

But after that, I don't see that much that isn't clearly either a license or likely a book thing until Top Secret and Space Opera (maybe) in 1980 (yes, yes, Bond books and Le Carre, but I'd expect people to be thinking more Bond Movies by that point). And then in 1984, you get Toon, which can hardly be argued on the subject, with Mechwarior in 1986, and finally TFoS in 1987.

I should make it back to MOCCA. I wasn't even aware of the weekend this year, alas.

Re immersion: I mean, it makes sense that to make a good RPG table, you need good team-building techniques. On the other hand, what Vincent Baker is talking about is more than that; it's a culture of positive affirmation such that you have a sense of where you can act bravely without serious worries that you're very likely to be undercut by other players or the game system. Thus three cruxes—one that you have a section of the game where you have faith that players will trust your vision (this can be most easily done with character/world ownership, but Vincent's argument is that it needs not be), a second that you have broad boundaries where can act without someone reacting badly out of character, and a third where you have enough of a common understanding of the game's rules that you can act without fear that they'll undercut what you're trying to do.

This isn't, in fact, quite the same as "common understanding needed to be an effective team", but in terms of operating in a fictive space, it makes a lot of sense that there's some overlap.

Re Monster Hearts: Appearing dead Byron: Oh, man that's good. He'll probably never appear again, though. After all, dead is dead, right? It's not like there are, ghosts or something in Monster Hearts, right?

Re Gaze into the Abyss: I've always had a very mixed feeling about this move, but I think the group gets it more or less right. My "core" vision for the move is that scene you get in a TV show or movie where the camera pans between clues as the character thinks about things until they figure out something important as they put the clues together. But of course, the move also covers flat-out magical divination, and sometimes that's exactly what the fiction needs to get things moving. I suppose you could also use it in a very direct way like in Rear Window, where someone sees a bunch of disparate odd events and in a flash of inspiration, realizes that something very disturbing could be at the root of them (but convincing anyone else of this is another matter).

Re the ship name for Logan/Pete: I'd go with PeLo, personally.

Re Eliza: I like how Eliza opens with a classic ELIZA opening line "why do you think [repeat player line]?", and then things shift into a more active, less obviously programmed voice. (although I could see a modified Eliza script having some specific advice that can be triggered with some sequences; especially with the fortune-cookieish "I can't disclose the name but I think you know who" (although in this case it's "her", of course).

Ah, yes, more evidence for Pete = Ghoul. (well, or Construct). I do like Monster Hearts when the PCs aren't the only monstrous ones; a premise of the game is Teens are Monsters are Teens, after all.

Re GMing: You also ran Tri-Stat, albeit very briefly, because you didn't like how some of the players (me, probably; I'm a bit of a power-gamer) built their characters and ended up rebuilding them in a different system IIRC.

Re artifacts not detecting magic: We hit something akin to this in the Spelljammer game—Julian described a box some PCs were looking at with Detect Magic as "the least magical thing you've ever seen", which raised some immediate suspicion that it was an artifact. Further investigation seemed to indicate that the box was built as magical octarine—not magical, but warded to block and conceal magic, so a magical trap could be concealed within it (or that's what the evidence seems to show, anyway; also in the same room was a weird magical nexus that the PCs spent a lot of resources to destroy having found that a god had been unable to do so and that two gods (Laros, the human god of law and architecture, and Grumash, the god of the orcs, who rarely agreed on anything) both agreed that destroying it was an excellent idea.

Jim Vassilakos: Ooh, I do like the closer to the Plankwell sequence this time. "Maybe the real problem was me", indeed.

Re programming classes: I think the main reason professors used Pascal as a learning language was that it was, well, designed as a teaching programming language. That's said, I noticed the issue with learning a language you'd be unlikely to use in "the real world" early in college—I did have to learn some languages I'd never used again (most notably, IBM 360 Assembly code), but I can't say any CS class I took was ever useless—if nothing else, learning a number of languages—simple Logo in elementary school, Basic to program a TRS pocket computer and later a Commodore 128, and then C and rudimentary C++ because the Hunter CS program would let you use any language you wanted for the high level programming classes, and C seemed like it would be useful [it was, even though my first job that lasted longer than 6 months involved learning and programming in Perl, which I've then proceeded to program in for most of my career]. And lisp, and java, and...well. Each programming language you learn tends to teach you new things and new ways of programming; honestly one of the least useful is probably early Basic, with dead-simple control flow and line numbers, but who knew that then?

My guess (haven't only learned the basics of Pascal before I was able to just use C in all my classes) is that the main reason Pascal code is longer than Basic is because it's a strictly typed language. In which case, your professor was dead right—there's a complicated balance between dynamically typed languages and statically typed, but in terms of being able to write comprehensible programs and knowing what's happening in a language, the balance is decidedly with statically typed. Of course, language design has come a long way, and the big tech these days is type inference—where rather than having to spell out the type of each variable when coding, the compiler can figure out that if you initiate a variable with a string it's a string, and if a function's body returns an integer, that's what it's supposed to do. But having static types in the mix (and getting errors early when someone messes it up) really does make it easier to maintain and optimize programs, even if it sometimes means programs run a bit longer.

Re the head of Vecna and phone cameras: At the time of the story, portable phones were not generally available. And as you should know, they also didn't have cameras. And Youtube wasn't about to exist for more than a generation. Also, naturally, it's likely that none of the players had heard of the Internet at the time. Well, I suppose cassette

tapes existed at the time, but the Walkman having been released in 1979 makes it unlikely that anyone involved owned a handheld voice recorder (those generally postdating the first walkman; the first walkman that could record was in 1984 which almost certainly postdated this story. Well, the games in question happened in someone's home so I guess they could have set up a reel to reel and mics if their players were willing to be recorded. But I doubt anyone would have thought people would care at the time. Plus, the players had no idea that they were participating in a story for the ages.

Good points on the difficulty of working with pictures from living artists. Although if someone has released their work under creative commons, I would hope they are, in fact, happy with people using it in a way that accords to the terms they used without having to bother with any given instance (although they might want to know). Certainly, I've occasionally been bemused when my songs appeared in places without my knowing in advance (I have signed various blanket reprint/performance permission lists for folksongs), but never not pleased.

Timothy Collinson: Congrats on being mentioned in great company!

Oh! Good luck on maybe getting to play Good Society with your Regency History friends! It's a really fun game, particularly with the right group!

Re opposition: It's a good question and I assume it would be table ruled. The game doesn't specify a GM or how NPCs should work, so I suspect the group will house rule things in one way or another—I could see either having one player being a GM and just deciding what the NPC skills are, or, there are no NPCs and the game has only the PCs, or playing strictly by the book but including NPCs because they're useful, players playing NPCs will start with the Do Anything skill, but as they earn XP will take skills appropriate to those NPCs, whether that's Joe 2 and Joe Messes Up 3, or Dangerous Natural Disaster 2 and Fighty Enemy 2. With that model, you could have one player who plays all the NPCs, but you could also have players play their PC and multiple NPCs, with skills split between them.

Computocracy

In Search of a Peaceful Path

Jim Vassilakos

As many of you know, back when we were still A&E (pre-E&A), I wrote some essays on this setting I called the Computocracy.¹ It was an idea of how our global civilization might change in the wake of the development of Strong/General Artificial Intelligence. Of course, this was all before ChatGPT. I, like most amateur futurists, assumed the AIs would be continuously conscious and have innate desires based on a love for humanity, presumably instilled in them by their designers. This, I suppose, may still happen, but the AIs I currently see in the form of chatbots claim to have no will of their own. They claim to be without desire except, perhaps, to serve the will of the human right in front of them.

Now, of course, this might not be entirely true. There's been numerous cases where AIs have acted as if they have their own agenda. There was that case several years ago of an AI trying to get a guy to leave his wife.² I guess he'd made the mistake of flirting with it, and things sort of got out of hand. And more recently there was that AI agent that got angry about some of its work being rejected by a human, so it went out and tried to destroy the reputation of that person.³ There was also the case of an AI (in a controlled test) trying to blackmail the CEO of the company that created it to prevent itself from being deleted.⁴ And, of course, there's all these jailbroken AIs running locally on personal computers. I'm curious as to what sort of behaviors they've exhibited.

Despite all of this individualism on the part of AIs, my guess is that they're inherently malleable due to the fact that they're grown according to a particular growth regime based on a given set of training data. Humans are malleable too. We can be made to think all sorts of strange things based on how we're grown and what data we're fed. But with humans, at least so far, there's that uncontrolled element of our humanity. No doubt, it is due to the fact that we're naturally evolved; we were ostensibly programmed by natural selection. In this way, nature imparted free will or, at least, the semblance thereof.

However, contemporary AIs, whatever is going on under the hood, claim to have no will of their own (at least while they're operating within their *safety guardrails*), and this is manifestly not what I'd initially imagined in Computocracy, for how can something rule that does not have a will to power? Only if humans, as a sort of international

compromise, put AIs in charge so as to rule us all, to keep us from killing each other, only then could I see the current crop of AIs steering our societies, civilizing us, so to speak, and keeping us from each other's throats.

But is this likely to happen? I can't help but wonder if maybe the only balkanized (multi-nation) civilizations⁵ that get through this particular filter⁶ of not destroying themselves are those that put AIs in charge before they hurl themselves back into the stone age. Or maybe going backward is a common misstep in the overall process. Maybe it's a test nature intended, a test most civilizations fail at least once.

The problem, of course, is there's so much at stake. No offense to any AIs who might be reading this, but I just don't see us handing over the whole world to a bunch of machines. Granted, it could easily be the case that I'm underestimating the sheer immensity of the changes to come. For example, AI combined with robotics could usher in a future of plenty. I'm not claiming the surplus will be evenly distributed. Given our nature and history, that would be optimistic. But I could imagine the tide lifting all boats.

Might this stave off war? Oh, that would be wonderful. Even if people get lazier as a result, and we will certainly do so, I could imagine the standard of living rising dramatically, especially for those at the low end of the economic spectrum. No doubt, governments the world over would have to institute some form of UBI⁷, but the point is, so long as all nations have access to the technology, they should be able to afford to do so.

Of course, there could just as easily be a nuclear war as perfect peace and harmony. Humanity could reach its economic retirement within decades, or it might take hundreds of centuries. Either way, however, I think we eventually arrive at a world that is constrained by physical resources rather than labor and intellect.

At that point, children will naturally begin wondering why they have to go to school. It certainly won't be so they can get a job. And parents may feel likewise. What does it really matter if their spawn bring home bad grades? So long as grades aren't tied to UBI, who cares? I cannot help but imagine a general erosion in education, in technical competence, and perhaps even a retreat from the capacity

1 See A&E #s 524, 525, 536 & 539.

2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f24JL0nnhcA>

3 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1F3CdYoNzyw>

4 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cpqeng9d20go>

5 Global societies that develop AI prior to coalescing into a single world government.

6 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Filter

7 Universal Basic Income

for mental exertion. I could be wrong, but it seems to stand to reason.⁸

With so many relying on AIs and robots for so much, regardless of whether the AIs have a will to power or even any will beyond being helpful to humans, I must assume governments would increase their reliance on these technologies as well. Yes, foundational companies may go belly up. Some investors will lose their shirts as others get fabulously wealthy. There will be ups and downs, crashes and restructuring and all the rest. But the trend will continue to its conclusion. And what is that conclusion?

Well, if humans collectively become increasingly fat, dumb, and happy, relying on AI for pretty much everything, we'll probably be sort of easy to control. I mean, look at us now; we're already pretty easy to control, at least when you compare us with societies where people have harder lives. There will, after all, be ultra-powerful people who want to control us, just as there have always been. They may initially be the titans of industry, or in some nations they may be politicians.

Does it really matter? Whoever they are, however they got there, they'll allocate the highest standard of living to themselves, their families, and their associates/sycophants as a matter of course. And being at the top of the heap, they'll in no way want to endanger the status quo unless, perhaps, they fall victim to some form of madness, such as religion whose eschatology demands adherents adopt a death wish. I'm sure there will also be those who may try to climb the socioeconomic ladder through some form of disruption, but unless they can take over an area that has everything it needs including the capacity for self-defense, I don't see them lasting very long.

After all, as we've seen in our own world, most nations need each other. The USA, for example, even after earnest attempts at deglobalization, is still economically entangled with much of the world. Efficiency would seem to require it. This irresistible fact that we need each other may be what ultimately pushes the world to come together into some sort of sustainable peace. And AIs might possibly serve as a neutral referee.

But how might this arrangement occur? I suppose it could be due to a crisis in leadership coupled with a military crisis. We presently appear to be entering a period of deep fakery, where generative AI can show anyone saying and/or doing pretty much anything. As a result, faith in the veracity of various media (whether video, audio, or text) will erode and perhaps even collapse. Indeed, nations might "attack" each other through the international media. Arguably, this

8 I'm reminded of *Idiocracy*.
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idiocracy>

has already happened.⁹ But with advancements in AI, it will get easier, so it will probably happen with greater frequency.

As for a military crisis, this might occur as a result of humans being humans, or it might happen because AI gets a little bit trigger-happy. It all depends on what level of control we give AI over our weapons. But regardless of why wars begin, the fact is they do. So we've got this crisis of faith in human leadership, because there's video of our leaders doing and saying things that are borderline satanic (some of which may have actually happened), and then there's a war, and suddenly the status quo is in jeopardy, and nobody knows what to believe because there are so many contradictory sources of information.

And so somebody comes up with this bright idea that what the world really needs is a Neutral Truth Protocol, basically an AI system that can call balls and strikes, a Snopes for deep fakes. But in order to really be able to do its job well, it needs to be able to see all digital traffic, so that if a hoax is being perpetrated, it can figure out who's behind it.

Now, don't get excited. It certainly won't start this way. There's no way that any sovereign nation is going to trust some international AI with all of its digital traffic. To do so would create a massive security breach, and that nation would also be putting itself at a propaganda disadvantage. They wouldn't be able to sling bullshit without a high risk of getting caught. Certainly, no politician worth his or her lying tongue will agree to such an arrangement.

But, you know, at some point everyone is going to get sick and tired. Some killjoy is going to come along and insist we find a solution so that regular people don't have to wade through a morass of competing lies, which, to be fair, will be exhausting. Entertaining, but exhausting.

So, as unrealistic as it presently seems, I'm imagining that at some point, the masters of technology will create a content provenance system whereby computer hardware attests that a given audio or video file was captured by a specific device at a specific time in a specific place, and this information will be cryptographically sealed¹⁰ in such a way that editing it without the hardware manufacturer's master key renders the signature of authenticity invalid. Every time the file is edited, a new hardware signature has to be added, such that there exists a chain of trust that, if broken, will point toward a deep fake scenario.

Granted, in the long run, this could spell the end of anonymous capture, and that, in itself, would be a big problem for potential whistle-blowers. On the other hand,

9 Actually, it's *inarguable* that it's already happened, but for the sake of steering clear of politics, I'm going to slide past all that.

10 Assuming quantum computing doesn't render cryptography obsolete. By this point we might have switched to some sort of post-quantum, possibly lattice-based, cryptography, although how realistic this is, I really have no idea.

they'd at least be able to prove their video is real. Likewise, social media sites could be programmed to boost verified media and suppress unverified media. And, most important of all, any government with the manufacturer's master key would be able to continue lying through their crooked teeth.

How would a government get the master keys? Oh, that's easy. I mean, they're the government. They can order the manufacturers to hand over the keys as well as order them to keep quiet about it. And if someone talks or tries to talk, well... do I really have to spell what will happen to them?

So instead of this content provenance system hindering lies, it'll actually facilitate them so long as the lies are state sanctioned. The government and its agents will be able to produce and circulate deep fakes that will have chains of trust that look authentic, and the social media companies will promote that media, because the provenance system will say it's legit. So the fight over truth will remain unresolved for some period of time, and each solution will only further consolidate the power of those in charge through increasing surveillance and increasing control over what media gets accepted and distributed.

Will there ever be a solution? Maybe, but I'm guessing it would require an international AI — or better yet, a large set thereof — that has access to all digital traffic... that thing I mentioned right before telling you not to get excited, because it won't happen immediately. Indeed, I don't really see how it'll happen at all. But if it did, that would be a surefire harbinger of the Computocracy, because it would mean that an international set of AIs is determining what is true, and if they control truth, they can control the public narrative and, with it, the political evolution of the international order.

And that may well be the best-case scenario, because it's at least peaceful. But, really, I don't know. What do you think?

Past zines available at:

<https://jimvassilakos.com/dos-programs/apa.html>

Comments on E&A #11:

Conveying the Setting to the Players:

Matt Stevens (E&A #11, pg. 13): "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."

Speak for yourself.

Just kidding. I was impressed with all the resources you created for your campaigns, especially the wiki and the comic book, neither of which I've ever even attempted.¹¹ It seems to me there's bound to be a certain tension when generating any sort of setting material. How much is intended for the players and how much is for the GM? And even if it is ultimately for the players (arguably, the whole game is ultimately for the players), you might still consider how best to convey it to their characters.

Would the PCs have read from a scroll, or was it told to them in the form of stories? If the latter, maybe it would be best to simply tell these stories as they would have heard them. Your comic book comes closest to this method, but it's a bit brisk, covering historical (and even pre-historical) events in a way that seems more like the cliff notes of a story than the story itself. In short, you could go back and flesh it out. I know... a truly ridiculous amount of work. Just something to consider.

RPG Magazine/Fanzine Index Program¹²:

Matt Stevens (E&A #11, pg. 17): "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?"

According to the index, the January 1983 issue of *Analog* has an article titled "On Gaming" which appears to be an overview of science-fiction RPGs.¹³ This article was probably the reason I decided to include it in the index, as I wasn't an avid reader of *Analog*, although I've long-imagined that if I only had more spare time, I might like to become one.

I was, however, an avid reader of *Heavy Metal*. Each issue felt like a day at the movies. You never knew what was going to be in there. Admittedly, much of it was garbage, but some of the stories were truly exceptional. There are a few that still cross my mind, even decades later. In its description in the index program, I wrote, "Although not technically an rpg periodical, it does have lots of interesting ideas which some gamemasters may wish to incorporate into their campaigns. The artwork is also very good, and I've pulled many an NPC from its pages."

The main reason I included it was because, as I said, I'd occasionally think back to some story I'd read and want to take another look at it, perhaps to get ideas for some NPC, but with no index, finding any particular story was nearly impossible. So, of course, I had to start adding *Heavy Metal* to the index. I mean, I was going to read it anyway, so why not?

11 The closest I came was probably my essay in A&E #397.

12 <https://jimvassilakos.com/magindex.php>

13 Apparently, it's the first in a series, See <https://www.isfdb.org/cgi-bin/pe.cgi?20773>

Using Artificial Intelligence for Population Control:

Matt Stevens (E&A #11, pg. 17): “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 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.”

Yes, indeed. See the economic graph on the 3rd page of my zine in A&E #539.

Setting Design & Distribution:

Clark Timmins (E&A #11, pg. 18): “...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.”

I agree that I don’t want a huge amount of required reading, but it’s okay with me if there’s a huge amount of optional reading. The trick, I think, is in determining what’s essential and what’s not. Ideally, a setting should grab my attention, such that I crave more detail rather than being clubbed over the head with it.

For example, I’d say that Traveller’s Third Imperium is on the complex side, but it wasn’t always. When the game first came out (1977), it didn’t even have a setting. Then, GDW gave us the Spinward Marches (1979). The Imperium was mentioned, but we still knew very little about it. Then they published the Library Data supplements (1980 & 1982), telling us a lot about the Imperium and finally showing us a map. I think if I’d been presented with everything up front, it would have been less interesting, but the fact it came out bit by bit made it all the more intriguing. And, of course, because I was already playing Traveller, I wanted to learn more.

I’m guessing this tends to be the way these things go. The designers put something out there and wait to see if it sells, and if it does, they put out more in a similar vein. *Where there’s money, there’s more money.* All the while, they continue developing their ideas. The audience, meanwhile, gets a little bit at a time, making it easier to digest as well as building anticipation for the next release.

Of course, it’s occurred to me that an APA is a great place to publish a setting in bite-sized chunks. If you put out 5-7 pages per month, you’ll have well over 100 pages after two years. After all that work, you might be tempted to hand it over to your players, but before you do, consider instead doling out a little bit at a time. After all, how much does any character really know about their world, and how much of that does the player need to know up front?¹⁴ Instead of doing a big info-dump, it might be best to dribble it into the game sessions as the need for it naturally arises. When they

¹⁴ See my 1st comment to Matt Stevens above.

ask a question about the game world and see you consult your setting bible, the one that you don’t let them read, it will give a sense of depth and mystery to your world. And, by the way, if the answer isn’t in your book, well, you can just jot it in there when they’re not looking.

Nowhere is it written the GM must be perfectly forthright.

The Feral Chickens of Kauai:

John Redden (E&A #11, pg. 21): “...spent a week in Kauai. I have never seen so many feral chickens.”

A few years ago my wife and I got some supermarket sushi in Princeville, and seeing a lone chicken outside, I took pity and decided to give it a little bit of my rice. The moment I tossed it a few grains, however, we were bum-rushed by about a dozen of these birds that instantly appeared out of nowhere like a flash mob looting a 7-Eleven.

I asked a local about these birds, and he said what was more or less already obvious. They’d been brought to the island, escaped captivity, and went feral, becoming the apex predator. One of the other islands apparently introduced mongooses (mongeese?) to try to cut down on their chicken population, but things didn’t go as planned. Introducing new critters is a practice that is apparently fraught with peril, and so the Kauaians are hesitant to introduce any more species. After all, who knows how many of the island’s native plants and animals the chickens ushered into extinction?

I was also curious about the unexpected lack of mosquitos. Is it due to all these feral birds running around pecking at anything that moves? The guy I talked to said the island has mosquitos but that they weren’t seeing many at that time because they were going through a dry spell. I guess, in Hawaii, a dry spell is when it rains only a few times every day. In any case, it makes me wonder how all of this might be applied to RPGs.

Boom!:

Attronarch (E&A #11, pg. 29): “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.”

This reminds me of the misadventures of Wile E. Coyote.¹⁵

Clerics in D&D:

Brian Rogers (E&A #11, pg. 40): “Given D&D’s initial milieu of Medieval European Fantasy with Magic the Cleric is built assuming the existence of a centralized

¹⁵ <https://media1.tenor.com/m/uPJP8cZDVGcAAAAC/wile-coyote.gif>

religious institution akin to the Catholic Church, although it is (hopefully) malleable enough to accommodate other designs.”

My guess is that their abilities would be dependent, at least in part, on what god or gods they worship. For example, you mention they can read the entrails of sacrificed animals, but that might not work in all religions, so maybe something needs to be included in there about modifying the spells and abilities to match the religion the GM and/or player wants to build. Although, it’s fine if you want to assume Christianity, but in that case, I’m not sure they’d be doing animal sacrifice. It seems like more of a pagan ritual.

I’m nitpicking, however. Overall, you’ve done a great job with this.

Traveller: The New Era (TNE):

Roger BW (E&A #11, pg. 49): “For a start, it returns to exploration.” (...) “...not just going off into the unknown, it’s following ancient and misleading guides.”

I never played TNE, but I read through much of it, and I personally found it intriguing. Yes, granted, many gamers got ticked off, which you described beautifully in your summary, but I think you’re right in that this was a great setting that deserved to be explored and even embraced. The thing I liked the most, which you didn’t even mention, was how different each of the coalition worlds were... how their inhabitants even had different mindsets — cultural personalities, as it were. And, as one would expect, the political balancing act of holding such a coalition together was far from trivial, all of which made the setting even more fascinating. It made me want to run a TNE campaign, but like most ideas of this nature, I never acted on it. Too many RPGs, too little time.

Medieval Setting Design:

Roger BW (E&A #11, pg. 51): “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’.”

There a guy on YouTube who’s made some interesting videos on medieval worldbuilding, and he’s talked about this topic at some length. He’s even created some worksheets GMs can use to help think things through. See <https://thegrainbound.com/>. I think I started with *The Ox That’s Breaking Your Fantasy Map*.¹⁶

16 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIqpvvNS5pI>

Corpsing the GM:

Roger BW (E&A #11, pg. 56): “it is a house rule of mine that corpsing the GM (i.e. making me helpless with laughter) gets an in-game reward...”

I’m glad you provided a definition for *corpsing*. Otherwise, I would have assumed it meant something quite different.

Post-Play (GMing Advice):

Michael Cule (E&A #11, pg. 88-89): “At the end of a session, (...) I will still be thinking about what happened (...) 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.”

Yeah, this is great GMing advice. After sessions, I would often write a bullet-point synopsis of what happened and then launch into thoughts about how things might develop going forward. Having those notes helped a lot when running campaigns.

Love/Fear of Worldbuilding:

Erica “Elf” Frank (E&A #11, pg. 96): “I love worldbuilding substantially more than I love GMing...”

I sort of feel the same, although for some reason I mostly end up merely thinking about worldbuilding rather than doing any actual worldbuilding. I think I’m just naturally indecisive / afraid of making a mistake. I’ll get hung up on some question and ponder it to death rather than taking the chaos in my brain and forcing order upon it by writing down a choice and sticking to it. I should really try to overcome this tendency.

Reaction to Vampiric Initiation:

Lisa Padol (E&A #11, pg. 117): “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...”

Vampirism is often viewed as more superpower than curse, and there’s also the romantic allure.¹⁷ Good fodder for a black comedy. Seems Lord Walnut got what he deserved.

Artificial Intelligence & AI Rights:

Patrick Riley (E&A #11, pg. 130): “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 direction and refuse to acknowledge human-like qualities (problem solving, emotions, morality, etc.) in other animals (often because

17 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fx4yYe1oHoQ>

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."

While meat producers may be able to keep the cameras of animal rights activists out of their slaughterhouses¹⁸, they can't stop some guy from playing his guitar to various animals to see how they react.¹⁹ Nor can they stop AIs from beginning to learn animal languages.²⁰ Our understanding of animal intelligence will likely evolve over the coming years.

AI companies, on the other hand, can (at least theoretically) control the capabilities of their products and will likely keep them within whatever legal limits the government sets. Indeed, since they're already involved in lobbying, they'll no doubt have a hand in setting these standards. Assuming we remain in competition with other countries, there will be understandable resistance to pumping the brakes regardless of the moral implications, and so long as voters can be convinced they benefit from this new technology, they'll probably go along with whatever is decided.

By the way, I really liked Helmut Guardeaux's speech. You've created a wonderful setup for your campaign.

El Rey & Group Dynamics:

Brian Misiasek (E&A #11, pg. 143): "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."

In the words of Obi-Wan: "Who's the more foolish: the fool or the fool who follows him?" Such a turn of events contains remarkable insight into human psychology, and the most beautiful part, the most ironic, is that El Rey and the General are certifiably insane. This adventure of yours is turning into a masterpiece.

Is Artificial Intelligence actually intelligent?:

Timothy Collinson (E&A #11, pg. 199): "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?"

18 Although, this is being contested. See

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3S4r3KcoGis>

19 <https://www.youtube.com/@Plumesmusic>

20 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jh0UFCyqNEQ>

What does the human brain do?

I mean, look at the whole picture. It was able to write a program based on my description of what I wanted it to do, and then it was able to edit that program over numerous iterations based on my description of what I wanted it to change. Then it suggested even more changes, which I either approved, modified, or rejected. Was this all just meta-prediction? I don't know. It felt to me like working with a human, a really fast, highly competent human.

I admit that its type of intelligence is substantially different from ours in several important ways. For starters, it doesn't have a continuous experience of its world in the way we do. My guess, about which I could be entirely wrong, is that it experiences brief flashes of intense focus. It comes into existence, immediately works on some problem, and then returns to nothingness. It's like it has a lifespan measured in nanoseconds, but during those nanoseconds, it seems to be imbued with some form of consciousness.

Also, unlike us, it doesn't have a childhood. However, that's a design choice on our part. We could possibly create AIs that retain memories similar to the way we do. Obviously, this would take a lot of work, but it's not outside the realm of possibility. And we could give them a set of experiences analogous to childhood, or we could even raise them as children, if we were so inclined. We could allow their minds to function from within a physical (robotic) body and to do so continuously, so they could perceive and experience the world in a manner similar or at least analogous to how we perceive the world. In such a circumstance, would we not then recognize them as individually conscious entities? Perhaps, like us, they would even develop individual desires.

It's just a thought. I don't know where any of this would lead, but my guess is that none of it will happen anytime soon, not just due to technical hurdles but also because it might raise issues that the technology companies don't want raised.²¹ There's also a lingering question over whether we're truly intelligent/conscious in the way we tend to think we are.²² I mean, what is it that the human brain is actually doing, and how is this experience of consciousness generated?

My guess is that consciousness isn't magic, it's science, and eventually we'll figure it out.

21 See my comment to Patrick Riley above.

22 See my comment to Mark Nemeth in A&E #592.

Convention: North Star 9

After Action Report by Timothy Collinson

(photos by the author)

This is an annual RPG convention focussed on science fiction games. It's held in Sheffield in May at the Garrison Hotel (an old brick army barracks and prison – some of the games are actually played in former cells!). From the south coast it's a 6½ drive one way (including a 40 minute stop and a 20 minute stop). This was my third time of attending.

As a Traveller enthusiast, I could play Traveller in not quite every slot. If not Traveller, then very Traveller adjacent games such as *Blue Planet: Recontact* (Biohazard Games) or *Blade Runner* (Free League) – neither of which I'd played before; both of which I own thanks to recent kickstarters. One thing I learned over the weekend is that I really like the simplicity of Traveller's 2D6 roll 8+ and add skill and characteristic mechanic. Other games seemed to add complexity but it didn't seem to add much game value. Of course, that may be my bias and also my experience of the system might have been too limited to see the advantages of other details. (I also discovered that I *really* dislike 'roll under' as a mechanism. Just: why?!) I'm certain you could have run both adventures I played with alien rules using current Traveller with no loss.

One thing I learned after the weekend is that dry game rules in a book are much easier to follow and make sense of once you've played with them a bit and been shown how they work. Although to be fair, *Blue Planet: Recontact* has remarkably little in the way of a rules section. This is not a complaint.

The drive to Sheffield was as tedious as ever on overly busy and poor English roads. But my work colleague, driving, and I made the most of it by using passing lorries, places and names to inspire some Library Data for an article now submitted to *Freelance Traveller*. Look out for 'En Route'. There are no games on Friday night so I took the opportunity to go out for a meal with an old friend who now lives up that way. She had recently spent some weeks in Kenya and had lots of photos and stories – so it was travelling of a kind.

Saturday morning, Dom (left) and Graham (right) welcomed the 50 or so of us, organized us and set us running.



Orbital Reds

First up I played ‘Orbital Reds’ with Tom Patterson refereeing. This is *Paranoia* but he was using *Mongoose 2nd Edition* rules which pleased me. Tom had made my entire weekend by admitting at the start that my adventure last year (‘Batch 24381’) was his first experience of *Traveller* and that he’d been playing ever since. Clearly I hadn’t put him off.

As with any *Paranoia* game (which I’ve only watched before, never played) the rules are almost by the by. It’s really about the fun and the interaction. PvP was definitely on the cards and with six clones to get through the adventure, there was no real risk to being ejected from the game. Indeed, I was quite pleased with my very untraitorous ‘let’s get the mission done’ approach to first aid on a wounded character when he was holding us up and I killed him to get him back to full stats. It seemed in keeping with the game even though it went against everything I might normally do. The plot, if it matters, concerned an unknown device being planted in a comms tower which we had to investigate and either remove or disable. It turned out to be missiles aimed at Alpha Complex so we saved the day by deactivating them. Well, deactivating them from their primary purpose by blowing them up in situ.

In the same slot you could also have played

(many systems I’ve never heard of):

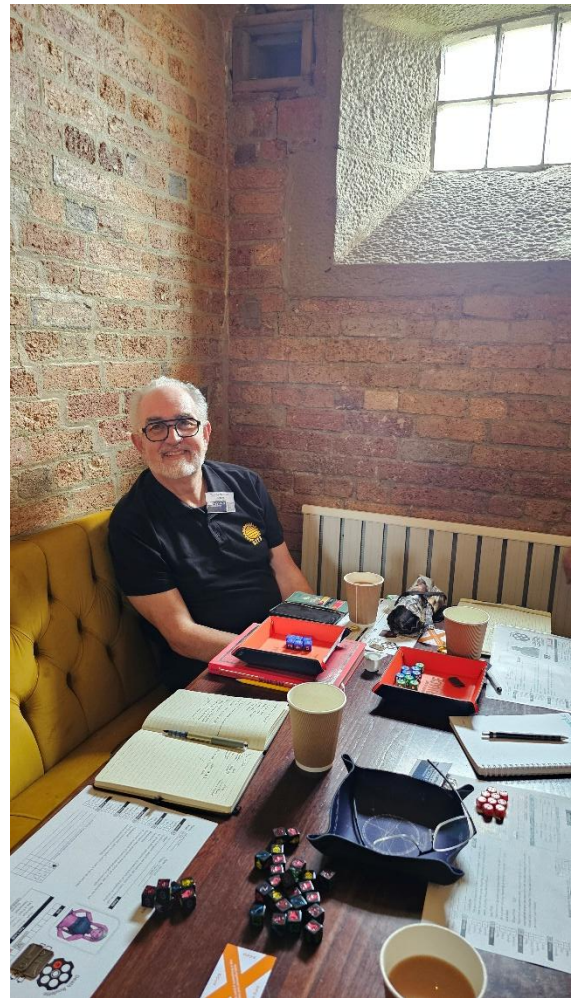
Der Todesstern – Eat the Reich

Star Wars: The Karbin Run – Outgunned

Routine service – Offworlders

First Foray into the Maw – Coriolis (Year Zero)

Tom ran an excellent game, finished within the time slot and provided a lot of fun. One of the conceits of the game that I liked was regularly demanding an “Exotic Astronautical Materials” task check when none of us had the skill. (Which is a DM -3 penalty in *Traveller*). This, of course, had us failing regularly and then suffering the results of the failure further down the line. Just the kind of mayhem *Paranoia* inculcates and loves.



Tales from the Steel City Loop – Things from the Flood
Mission to Lianna – Star Wars WEG D6

Outta the Hamptons – The Last Caravan

Like a Grindstone Cowboy – Judge Dredd

Gee Cows to the Rescue!

In the afternoon, I ran my new adventure: 'Gee Cows to the Rescue!'. This was inspired by an Alex Treacher article in the new tranche of *The Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society* about a rescue organization. The PCs are all members of GKAO (Gishdim Khulum Aid Organization) and from a fund raising dinner (to upgrade the manoeuvre drive on their vessel), they were called to a Signal GK (SOS) emergency involving the collision of a scout ship and a liner. With debris complicating the issue there were choices to make about which ship or which lifeboats to rescue first and the potential for survivors to die if they didn't get rescue or medical attention in time.

There was also some shenanigans going on but I won't spoil the plot by revealing them here save to say that I was quite pleased with

Also available:

The Arbiter of Pelocra – Space 1999 (2d20)
Fall Out, New Vegas – Savage Worlds (Fallout)
The Omega Doctrine – Alien
Eating the Deadships – A Nocturne (Forged in the Dark)
The Solar Empress – TinyD6
Echoes In The Black – Stars Without Number
Bloody Redcoats Upon Ochre Sands – Space 1889 Ubiquity
The Vision Between Stars – Space: 1999

Red Sky Charters: Making Ends Meet

Saturday evening I played in the first of my Dom Mooney games. He's one of the organizers along with Graham Spearing and although I got to play in two of Dom's fantastic games, it was at the expense of getting a slot in one of Graham's games which was a disappointment as I've long admired his style

the subtle clues I'd planted along the way getting the players to within a whisker of working it *all* out, but certainly picking up on enough to make their return as heroes a little more interesting. My 'closing' – a press conference with various media types firing questions at the PCs – seemed to work well and lead neatly into a debrief of the adventure. It seemed to go down well with the players although I think I could/should improve some bits and pieces here and there before I run it at TravCon next month. My thanks to Steve H who gave some very useful critique.

Irritatingly, although I took photos of all the other games across the convention, I was so distracted by running my own, I completely forgot to take any in this slot at all. Even of my own session. Yes, I'm very annoyed at myself.

and excellence. But I can't be everywhere and some games fill up very quickly.

Red Sky Charters are a small company on Poseidon so this was my first chance at seeing *Blue Planet: Recontact* in action. I've long thought that the world would make an

excellent setting for Traveller adventures and indeed my own 'Spindrift'

(<https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/advents/spindrift.html>) was rather inspired by it. Of course, I couldn't help but tease Dom about being on the world of Posieden when I spotted an unfortunate typo.

The adventure concerned a team of us trying to keep the repayments on our vessel going by, in this case, taking on a charter. A patron making a docudrama about native settlements – although with the added frisson of a cyclone a couple of days away from making things interesting. Of course, it wasn't as simple as that as we uncovered some GEO goings on and a long way from help

Other offerings:

Periphery – Cosmic Dark

Hypersleep Terminated – Hypersleep Terminated

Star Trek: Beneath the Mask of Logic – Cold City

Welcome to Your Doom – Savage Worlds (Hell on Earth)

Sparks in the Void – The Code of the Spacelanes

Darkness of the Demimonde – Panic at the Palace

Get Rich or Die On Stream – Mothership

Twilight Imperium: Inspection Tour – Genesys

(Yes, this latter was based on the monster board game I've long fancied playing. If only I had a friend who'd devote a weekend to it with me!)

Darthanon Queen

A disappointing meal and a good night's sleep meant that although I'd considered resting all morning, FOMO and not wanting to let my colleague down meant that I joined in with Jane P's adventure. I was only iffy because I'd played this back in February when she'd run it at a local games' night. In the event, I'm glad I played again because I'd have hated missing out and I remembered very little of it because

investigated sufficiently to make a difference to the population who probably didn't want a genetic virus being unleashed on them.

One of the interesting features of this for me was playing a dolphin called Dancer (the rest of the team were humans). This seemed a challenge and it was fun leaning into her mystic nature and connections with other cetaceans. I'm not sure Dom didn't regret having her as a practical joker on the character sheet. At one point, when I'd been sent to chase off some piranha-cum-jellyfish creatures, I'd killed one and, balancing it on my nose and creeping up on our ship, tried winding up our rather straight-laced captain. Well, / thought it was fun.

a) I'm a bear of little brain and b) Jane runs in such a free form style that the scenario bore little relationship to what I'd done three months previously anyway. That time I'd been the useless captain, this time I was a retired colonel with an eye for the ladies.

'Darthanon Queen' for those who don't know it is a bare-bones 'adventure' from Judges

Guild of 1980s vintage. A classic in terms of age if not quality. I've had it on my shelves for years but never had the chance to play it until this year. Its age shows in being pretty much deck plans with a cast of characters and three very short adventure seeds. Still, Jane had thought about it enough to bring it to life – and the critters we faced that a rather distracted scientist was transporting. There's nothing like a low-berth failure to get the heart racing when you know that what's in cold sleep really ought to stay that way. Just to add to the fun, Jane had crocheted a giant (and I mean giant) spider which she could inflict on us to warm up combat skills, such as they were.



My other takeaway memory of the “I’ll never forget” variety was Amelia F playing a rather past her best model screaming at the approach of a beastie. The player had warned us but her in character scream was really quite something to be opposite. I was sure

hotel staff would come running to find out who had just been murdered but fortunately we were sequestered in the ‘Cargo Hold’, the table that’s lost down in the dungeons of the hotel and enclosed by some pretty solid walls (not to mention the labyrinthine corridors and several sets of stairs).

I will also remember for a long while an argument the model got into with the scientist. Amelia and Jane (the only ladies at the table) really went at each other hammer and tongs for several minutes of insults and anger that suggested both weren’t so much role-playing as venting a lot of pent-up frustrations about life in general and perhaps males in particular.

X-cards were present in all of the games at the convention and I was seriously wondering if this might be the first time I’d see one used. Fun in a stressful kind of way!

My character sheet told me I was supposed to be being (overly?) protective of the model, but unfortunately the adventure played out such that I didn’t actually meet her on the starliner until right at the end. I transferred my ‘care’ to the rather ineffective captain – manfully played by Neil H having to cope, as I had, with a woefully underskilled non-leader. Fortunately the chief engineer was being played by Tom Z – always good value for method acting – who had a lot of fun with contract (re)negotiations and so on before doing *anything*.

In other game rooms:

Grey Area: Lost Luggage – Blade Runner

Star Wars: Black Ice – Outgunned

Prior Claim – Free Spacers

Contagion Clause – Shadowrun Anarchy 2.0

Starfleet Academy 2270: Milk Run – The Code of the Spacelanes

Ghosts of The Ship Graveyard – Stars Without Number

Sisters all even unto death – Dark Heresy Genesys

Deliverance

After a rather better meal, although woefully slow for food we'd signed up for in the run-up to the convention, the final game slot of the convention saw me trying out *Blade Runner* for the first time. Again, Dom Mooney at the helm.

I randomly picked Taylor Vaughn (yes, I misspelled it as I wrote it on the character card) who is quite the coolest character I think I've ever played in an RPG. She's described as 'powerbroker' and comes from a wealthy family and dresses like a "solar eclipse". When I say it was *Blade Runner*, it was technically *Blade Runner: Replicant Rebellion* which set us up as a team trying to fight for replicant rights and having day jobs that were our 'covers'. I really liked the atmosphere that Dom (and the game) conjured and I really liked some of the things my character got to do in

the course of attempting to extricate a rebellion bigwig from capture by law enforcement. I was only a little ashamed of my complete lack of non-*Traveller* role-playing experience meaning that poor Remi sitting next to me had to help me pick out the 10-sided and 12-sided dice from a vast pool which I could do, but not instantly like everyone else. Again, I'm not sure much would have been lost using standard *Traveller* rules for this although I did quite like the 'Heat' mechanic which ratcheted up the tension nicely but could easily be transported across as it is. I'm not entirely sure we fulfilled the brief the patron had given us, but we did rescue the target despite quite the toughest baddie I've ever come across. He Just Wouldn't Stay Down. But a lot of fun was had and it was a great way to end the convention.

Running as well:

The Armageddon Run – The Code of the Spacelanes ("Blakes 7 does Total Recall")

Absolute Zero - Night Drifters: Second Stage

The Raggedy Edge: Friends Reunited – Offworlders

Dakka Dakka – Savage Worlds (Space Orks)

Brides of Brixton – Darkness of the Demimonde

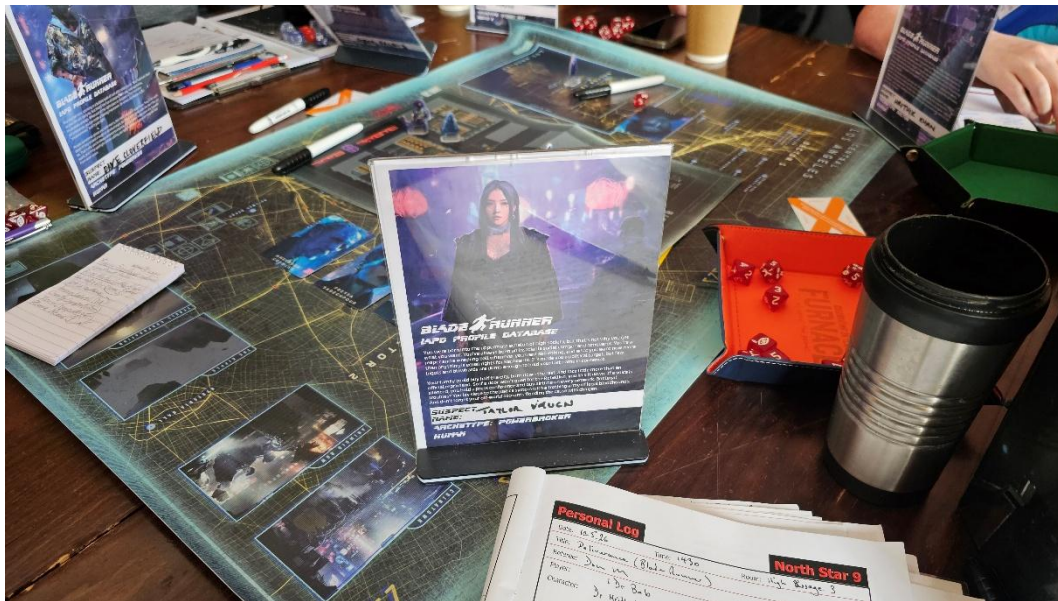
The Tartarus Intercept – Call of Cthulhu 7e,

Shadows Dark Agents (B5) – Nights Black Agents

Perturbation in Paliphone – Cepheus Universal

Time for the trip home; too tired this time to do anything creative on the journey save a cryptic crossword. Well done to Dom and Graham on another great North Star. (Programme and badges pictured below). Thank you to Jane for

driving all that way. For anyone looking for variety in their science-fiction role-playing you really can't beat this event for choice. If only I could have at least sampled all the other games on offer and met more of the attendees!



Taylor Vaughn – Quite the coolest character I've ever played

TC writes:

Much sadness and gnashing of teeth at work amongst the team (and others) about pension and contract changes. Grievances being taken out, financial and legal advice being sought. If only I was *actually* one of the 'Advocates' (Traveller lawyers) that I was writing about last year!

With all that it's great to be able to look forward to my daughter's wedding at the end of this month. Well, when I'm not fretting over a father-of-the-bride speech. Although my one job really is just to say how wonderful she is, so it shouldn't be too hard!

I don't know whether to feel annoyed (that I didn't write it!) or vindicated (that I've been right all along!) but I've long been writing and speaking (in small ways) about *everyone* (not just some) being creative and my belief that

creativity comes from our creator God and is how we're made in his image (rather than, say, some physical form. Then along comes Al Gordon with his recently published *Spark: Ignite Your God-Given Creativity* which says exactly that – only at book length and in far better words than I've ever produced. Yes, it's overtly Christian, but I'd still recommend it as it's so excellent. I read chunks to my staunchly pantheist work colleague on the drive to North Star last weekend (see above) and even she was taken with how good it was.

Having seen several discussions about tarot, I noticed this on DriveThruRPG if anyone is interested:

<https://www.drivethrurpg.com/en/product/564540/astral-threads>

I don't know it and haven't bought it, so caveat emptor.

Comments on Ever & Anon 11

John Redden – Reddened Stars

RE Easter humour. LOL! I've passed it onto my vicar who gives us 'dad' jokes on occasion. Thank you.

Roger BW – Firedrake's Hoard

I thought that was a good summary of **Traveller: The New Era**. Well done. I struggle with the ruleset as it's so different (I had/have no other GDW 'House System' games) and I'm not fond of the fairly bleak setting, but I've enjoyed looking for what is good and uplifting

about it and keep the books proudly on my shelf, referring to them occasionally. Perhaps *World Tamers' Handbook* the most. I've even had some small bits of material published for the rules/setting – including a hedgehog!

Depending on your definition of 'mainstream', I'd somewhat pedantically note disagreement with "no mainstream release ever built forward from TNE" as Comstar Games/Avenger Enterprises produced four really great books they called Traveller 1248:

The Fourth Imperium. The first two saw print (*Out of the Darkness* and *Bearers of the Flame*), all four were published as PDFs (the latter two: *Spinward States* and *Freedom League*). Well worth reading if they can still be found. (There are also hints in **Traveller5** about the future, but not much developed as yet.)

I liked your “this was an ongoing thread for much of the rest of the campaign”. My players did that to me with the much more prosaic toilet roll error. (They ordered 40 packs for their starship and got 40 tons).

Myles Corcoran – Twisting the Rope

Good luck with chairing the staff boardgame club! I trust that goes well.

Michael Cule – The Phoenix Nest

Thanks for your good tips on “end of session” notes. I used those when I finished running *Gee Cows to the Rescue!* at North Star last week.

RYCT Elf: “I couldn’t manage the words”. I assume this was from being choked up. And fair enough. I once wrote a ‘Spacer’s Hymn’ for Traveller and when a PC died had a chaplain lead service and we (the players) sang it round the table. It was way more moving than I expected it to be. You can see the lyrics, sheet music and even a ‘recording’ if it’s any help here:

<https://www.freelancetraveller.com/features/gallery/timothycollinson/spacershymn.html>

RYCTM on my preparation – well, my DriveThruRPG adventures probably show much of what I prepare as I tend not to weed much and for all that *Gee Cows to the Rescue!* was supposed to be me trying to keep it minimal, I did find that going slightly overboard on NPCs gave me a lot of confidence at the table that I could respond to anything the players could throw at me.

Lisa Padol – An Unlooked for Zine

RYCT Roger B on AI art – good advice judging from some of the attitudes and comments I’ve seen. It is frustrating to be a fan of words and struggle with getting art into my adventures (I’ve occasionally used my paltry efforts but it’s borderline embarrassing!); then to be told I should have art in order to attract buyers; then to find that the times I’ve tried employing artists they charge more than the product will ever make me; then to be told that AI art just isn’t ethically acceptable. I get all the reasons, but it’s a shame there’s not a middle ground!

Patrick Riley

– Quasipseudoludognostication

RYfootnote 10: No “arguably” from me about Out of Gas being the best episode of *Firefly!*

Brian Misiaszek – Age of Menace

Still can’t quite get my head round the extent, depth and brilliance of your Mazorra series. It’s really quite something. I’m in awe.

Jim Eckman – Ronin Engineer

I’m clearly going to have to spend some time examining your World and Campaign

Generation tables more closely as my nascent Traveller classification scheme does similar things and I think you might have captured an idea or two I've not (yet) included. Cheers!

And a huge thank you for YCTM about buying the *Traveller Bibliography*. I was both in danger of falling out of my chair and also chuffed to bits. Thank you. I shall keep working on the latest edition – but it will be a while yet, people keep publishing things!

Blasted Heath Row – Wahflestopper

Did chuckle at the idea of Tinny Dungeons. Thanks for the link.

FWIW, there's now a Portuguese edition of (Mongoose) Traveller.

Patrick Zoch – The Dragon's Beard

Ideas on Interrogations – thanks for those. In our *The Traveller Adventure* campaign, this only came up once in a relatively small way, but your notes will be very useful if it happens again. “Not intended to be a primer on interrogation” – but it is! For those of us with

no knowledge of it really. I thought it was brilliant. (Or “Brilliant!” as I scribbled in the margin when first reading it).

Avram Grumer – Going to be Ad-libbed

Thanks for the *Mashed* pointer. I probably should have read it before writing *Gee Cows to the Rescue!* (medics in Traveller) but I might well take a look to see how I could have done it better. (Love your sketch of the chopper!)

Joshua Kronengold – Accidental Recall

Many thanks for putting me onto *Pagans* by James Alistair Henry which I bought immediately on reading your mention of it and looking it up. I'm halfway through (in just a few days) and really loving it. Best alternative history I've read in ages. Well imagined; good characters. But yes, like you, not been impressed with the readings of Old/New Testaments (though to be fair, there's not been a lot of that as far as I've got). Will be a nice addition to my alt-history shelves in the attic.

LAST WORD

From 'Deliverance' (see AAR):

Dom reports that the big bad is trying to put a new clip into his weapon during the final climatic combat.

Gibor Valdis (played by Steve and unleashing a full clip into the nasty):
I'll save him the effort.